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'#WakingTheFeminists' set hearts on fire at the Abbey Theatre

November 12, 2015

9:09 PM MST



#WakingTheFeminists at The Abbey Theatre

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Many of Irish theatre's best and brightest were visible today at the Abbey Theatre, and not just on its main stage. Visibility, or the lack of, for women writers on the Abbey's main stage was the catalyst for this historic gathering, which began two weeks ago when set designer, Lian Bell decided to press send on her computer and launch "#WakingTheFeminists" in response to the Abbey's pitiful representation of women playwrights in their 2016 "Waking The Nation" programme. Two weeks on and that spark has become a flame, with "#WakingTheFeminists" garnering both national and international support for the cause of gender equality for women working in theatre and the arts in Ireland.

The jubilant, almost exuberant atmosphere in the packed auditorium was coupled with a palpable sense of disbelief that this was actually happening, and that amidst the many messages of support internationally, Meryl Streep had added her voice that morning. Yet beneath the pride and excitement and sense of solidarity other emotions prodded at the surface. Feelings of fury, of loss, of spirits broken and humiliations endured. Feelings that prompted one woman to action, and

many more to join her, channeled into a demand for change.

Hosted by Labour Senator, Ivana Bacik and producer, Sarah Durcan, women practitioners from the world of theatre took to the Abbey stage one by one to share their thoughts, experiences and aspirations for the future, with first speaker, Lian Bell, walking onstage to rapturous applause and a standing ovation. Visibly moved, she reminded the audience why she began "WakingTheFeminists," speaking of the national theatre as "our theatre," and of how it had overlooked women of talent. Over the next two hours as each woman spoke, a powerful picture emerged of the life of a woman working in theatre.

Derbhle Crotty and Erica Murray spoke of the predominately female students enrolled in The Lir's MFA Playwrighting Programme, who set out ready to set the world on fire. A fire often snuffed out quickly as they find themselves facing closed doors, relegated to the corner of the room or having to peer in through the window on a world where their plays might get commissioned but rarely produced. Plays that writer Nancy Harris says are dismissed because women are seen to write small, domestic, relational works deemed to have less value than the historical and political, big themed works of their male counterparts. Actresses, too, are confined and defined by their femininity. Janet Moran spoke about how her characters are often little more than male appendages, being wives, girlfriends, mothers with no real sense of agency or self-determination. Costume designer Joan O'Clery questioned if her craft was deemed as having less worth or financial value simply because it was seen as a feminine craft.

Always there was the sense of an insidious voice telling women you are less simply because you are a woman. Quoting Marina Carr, Maeve Stone highlighted the impact of this in a world where powerful men are seen as leaders and powerful women are seen as an anomaly; "rage in women is terrifying. The rage doesn't come out of nowhere. The rage comes out of being said no to just one time too many, where you should have been said yes to." Yet Gina Moxley made clear that protests might get you completely left out of the picture by having you dismissed as trouble, another form of silencing to ensure compliance. Many echoed the soul destroying experience of frustration, shattered confidence, of learning to never expect to have their voice heard and of either falling away from theatre or having to set off on their own. Eleanor Methven of Charabanc Theatre Company and Ionia Ní Chróinín of Moonfish Theatre Company both spoke of the need to set up their own companies in order to tell their own stories, companies whose works never felt welcome at the national theatre yet have achieved incredible success nationally and internationally. But there was a cautionary note sounded with the realisation that both companies were founded thirty-two years apart. Nothing had changed in the interim. In what Laura Bowler described as a culture where dead men take preference over living women, the silencing and dismissing of women's voices has sustained an incalculable loss, both personally, historically, artistically and socially on Ireland as a nation.

During audience feedback, which echoed all that was said, performance artist, Amanda Coogan, one of two signers at the event, reminded the audience that theatre needn't be literary and this should be considered going forward. Abbey Theatre Director, Fiach MacConghail then responded, praising the actions and solidarity of "#WakingTheFeminists" and recognizing the event as historic,

moving and humbling. Speaking on events of the past few weeks he acknowledged they had made him question and check his own privilege and that there cannot be true art without gender equality. Going forward he promised The Abbey would address gender equality, asking if a 50/50 gender balance was enough or if more women playwrights needed to be programmed to go some way to redressing the imbalance of the past. Revisiting the canon, commissioning and producing more women playwrights, he promised the Abbey would engage with the challenge and that he himself would not be found wanting. Lucy Kerbel of UK based, Tonic Theatre then spoke on their efforts to address gender equality, not by addressing the work but the platforms on which it is performed. After closing addresses by the event's co-hosts, the last word was left to Aretha Franklin, whose voice filled the auditorium calling for "Respect" and all joined in the celebration.

November 12th, 2015, will be remembered as the day when "#WakingTheFeminists" rallied Irish women working in theatre to demand change. It cannot be undone, cannot be unseen and cannot be unheard. But it can, over time, be ignored and forgotten. If intentionally, or through procrastination, resistance or dilution the sweeping changes needed to include all our artists are not actively addressed, Ireland may find itself in the same place in fifty years. Like Moonfish Theatre Company, Irish women may again need to cover the same ground others covered decades before. The rollercoaster ride may be over, but the journey is just starting for "#WakingTheFeminists" and all those seeking gender equality. And it will involve some hard work and hard choices. The sight of a vindicated, but visibly tired Lian Bell, served as a reminder that these celebrations did not come easy. They were hard earned. But they made people listen. That spark that became a flame can only continue to burn brightly when everyone recognizes that, with gender equality, there is no privilege, no them and us. There's just us. Just our national theatre, where all our artist's voices deserve to be heard equally. Women cannot be rendered invisible or silent any longer.

For more information visit [#WakingTheFeminists](#)



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