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# 'Waking The Nation' is 'Waking The Feminists'

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*With kind permission Lisa Tierney-Keogh*

Here's a simple test. Think of five composers, five painters, five writers and playwrights, pre twentieth century. Now ask yourself: how many were women? For centuries, indeed probably until the twentieth century, the lived experience of women, their thoughts, feeling, ideas, whether through music, theatre, literature, fine art or film, have been predominantly mediated and represented through the voice of men. But all that changed in the twentieth century, right? And it couldn't possibly be the case in a gender equal, twenty first century?

Only moments after the Abbey Theatre had announced their "Waking The Nation" programme for 2016 on October 28th, posts across Facebook and Twitter immediately expressed outrage that only one female playwright had been included in next year's 1916 commemorative celebrations at Ireland's national theatre. At first Abbey Theatre director, Fiach Mac Chonghail responded to the backlash by trying to defend the indefensible, generating an even bigger backlash. Twitter page "#WakingTheFeminists," which kicked off on Halloween, quickly became the focal point for much of the outrage, as well as a focal point for support for women in the arts and their call for action. Set designer and project manager Lian Bell, who has become the spokesperson for

"#WakingTheFeminists," has respectively, yet passionately, called for a public meeting on Thursday November 12th at 1.00 p.m., as well as organising an online petition, to request the board of The Abbey Theatre to lead the way in establishing equality for women artists:

"On Wednesday 28 October, the Abbey Theatre, Ireland's National Theatre, launched its programme to mark the centenary of the 1916 Rising – an event that ultimately led to the founding of the Irish State. The Abbey Theatre and its members were actively involved in both the Rising itself and the debates around the founding of the Republic. 1 out of the 10 plays programmed in the 2016 programme are written by a woman – 3 out of 10 are directed by women. This is a campaign by Irish artists to demand change of the systems that allow for such chronic under-representation of the work of women artists at the Abbey, and by extension in the Irish arts industry. There is consensus that the problem is bigger than any one organisation or individual, and so rigorous discussion and action is needed to realise a new artistic landscape that reflects Irish society, and represents 'all the children of the nation equally.'"

In fairness, Mac Chonghail has since held up his hands and expressed his regret, endeavouring to engage with the debate and offering use of the Abbey Theatre as a venue. In an open letter he states:

"I regret the gender imbalance in our "Waking The Nation" programme for the significant year ahead. The fact that I haven't programmed a new play by a female playwright is not something I can defend. This experience has presented a professional challenge to me as a programmer and has made me question the filters and factors that influence my decision-making. I believe we have made improvements in advocating for and promoting female artists of all disciplines at the Abbey Theatre since 2005 but there is still a long way to go. I welcome the vigorous debate that has ensued since the announcement of the "WakingThe Nation" programme. I look forward to participating in an open and frank dialogue and offer the Abbey Theatre as a venue for this discussion. Our challenge now is how to address this imbalance both here at the Abbey Theatre and nationally in the arts community and beyond."

Matters took another turn when it was confirmed that "#WakingThe Feminists" had accepted the Abbey Theatre's offer to host their meeting on Thursday, November 12th, in response to a statement issued by the Board of The Abbey Theatre:

"November 9th

The Board and Director of the Abbey Theatre acknowledge that the 2016 programme does not represent gender equality.

The Board commits to work with the Director and new incoming Directors to develop a comprehensive policy and detailed plan to help address gender equality with the cooperation and input of the wider Irish theatre community.

The Board and Director of the Abbey Theatre have acknowledged and approved requests received for the Abbey auditorium to host a #WakingTheFeminists debate on Thursday 12 November at 1pm."

Reactions online and throughout the media in the past week have made clear than when it comes to the Pandora's Box of gender inequality in the arts in Ireland, the lid has most certainly been blown right off. Deeper issues, old wounds and deeper feelings have begun to emerge, moving the debate beyond just the exclusion of female playwrights. Economic parity and equality in advancement for all women artists, among other issues, have also come to the fore.

While The Abbey Theatre as Ireland's national theatre has a particular responsibility others do not share, many recognise the importance of widening the debate to include all bodies engaged in theatre and the arts. Equally, many recognise the importance of recognising best practice, both nationally and internationally, that currently exist for gender equality going forward. One local example is The New Theatre, who deliberately ensured that their New Writers Showcase, which runs this week, features an even balance of male and female writers and whose current writer and director in residence, Lauren-Shannon Jones and Nora Kelly-Lester, are both female.

To some the call for equal inclusiveness for female playwrights is seen as a call for positive discrimination. But this misses a crucial point at the heart of this debate. When someone else speaks for you, even with the best of intentions, they set the scope and parameters for what you can say, and for how you can say it. Yet men and women can experience the world differently, and with women making up at least half of the population, having their voice reduced to a tokenistic representation means the rich experiences of a vital part of our humanity are never fully shared, and the arts, and us all, are poorer as a result.

With "Waking The Nation" the Abbey Theatre has given rise to "#WakingThe Feminists" who, in turn, hope to close the circle by waking the nation into engaging in the debate on women artists working in the arts in Ireland. It begins this coming Thursday in The Abbey Theatre. All genders are invited to attend.

A public meeting for "#WakingTheFeminists" will take place on Thursday, November 12th at 1.00 pm at The Abbey Theatre.

Women working in Irish theatre are invited to take part at a photo-call at 12.15 pm.

Parents without childcare on the day are welcome to bring young children.

This is open event for people of all genders working in Irish theatre.

For further information visit **[WakingTheFeminists](#)** or on Twitter at **#WakingThe Feminists**



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