



## FROM BABBLE TO SPEECH

Ireland begins to talk about  
Early Years Arts policy



## BABBLE

### The idea of an early years arts policy for Ireland

Ireland has one of the highest birth rates in Europe. Between 2002 and 2007, the figures rose by over 10,000 from 60,503 to 70,620. (CSO registered births figures). These seventy thousand plus citizens are our captive 3-6 year old audience today. Many of whom will have younger siblings by now, giving us the 0-3 age range also.

With the launch of AISTEAR, the NCCA Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, Ireland has a great opportunity to become a leader in the area of childcare and development born out of necessity and commitment to our youngest citizens, and in particular, we have an opportunity to support the development of creativity through an early years arts policy.

This type of engagement can begin in the home by giving parents opportunities and guidance to use their own creativity and from this first step, we can then consider the community; local crèches, community centres, art centres, childcare training centres, artists, teachers, parent groups etc.

An early years arts policy would ensure that local artists could share their talents with early childhood institutions; local venues could host performances and family events, and local childcare training colleges could facilitate arts training on their courses for future childcare workers and managers.

Since approaching the Arts Council in September 2008 with the Rainbow's Gold project, Acting Up! has been actively fostering a network of organisations that can be relied upon to develop an informed and supportive role in sustaining a long-term plan for early years arts development in Ireland.

This would not have been possible without the constant support and advice from Lali Morris and Teenagh Cunningham of Baboró International Arts Festival for Children in Galway and most recently, Emelie FitzGibbon of Graffiti Theatre in Cork. From a childcare perspective, Acting Up! could not have achieved so much so soon in Cork without the vision and assistance of Ken Whyte and Barbara O'Meara of Cork College of Commerce. The progression of events has been documented over the past 12 months with the support of The Irish Arts Council, An Chomhairle Ealaíon.

# FIRST WORDS

## Events and Partners to date

### October 2008

Cork College of Commerce and Baboró International Arts Festival for Children supported a performance of La Baracca's The Colours of Water at South Parish Community Centre, Cork. The performance was open to the children attending the VEC crèches. Cork City Arts office provided accommodation for the visiting artists at the Jack Lynch House in Shandon. One early years arts event thus involved at least 4 partners.

Following the performance, Valeria Frabetti gave a workshop on movement and body language for working with early years children. This workshop was attended by Cork crèche workers and artists alike. In the training offered for early years programmes the mix of artists and crèche workers is essential for understanding both sides of the reality of being with the 0-3 and 3-6 age-group from an audience and a work/care perspective.

Acting Up! early years arts consultancy produced a document, Rainbow's Gold, and a DVD which aimed to introduce the concept of early years arts in Ireland.

Children have two gifts when it comes to theatre – honesty and spotting a good show!

Deirdre O'Reilly, WOW, Evening Echo, Cork



**Sticky Fingers**  
Arts for Young Children

### May 2009

Sticky Fingers Early Years Arts Festival in Newry hosted La Baracca's Looking at the Sky as part of their programme. Through kind assistance from Cork City Partnership Childcare Committee, The Arts Council, Cork City Arts Office, Baboró International Arts Festival for Children, Graffiti Theatre and Cork College of Commerce Childcare Department, La Baracca performed in Cork before returning to Italy. As a direct consequence of the workshop with Valeria Frabetti the previous October, Emelie FitzGibbon of Graffiti offered to host the performance followed by a workshop for actors/directors/crèche workers on this occasion and by attending the day-long seminar, the network of early years establishments expressing an interest in this programme grew substantially. The event attracted both local and national interest with one representative also from abroad. (Rhona Matheson of Starcatchers, Edinburgh).

They not alone connected with the child, they connected with the child within everyone there.

Deirdre O'Reilly, WOW, Evening Echo, Cork

Early years theatre, I learned, is very physical, with the nimble actors splashing with imaginary water, climbing imaginary mountains and flying. The actors jumped between Italian and English, but in a vivid illustration of toddlers' ability to absorb language, the children didn't bat an eyelid. Looking at the Sky was one of the gentlest pieces of abstract theatre; ... The children were mesmerised and I found myself delighting in watching Danny's reactions.

Claire O'Sullivan, The Examiner





## SENTENCES

**Songs From Above**  
at Graffiti Theatre, Cork

**Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> October 2009**

With the success of the previous 2 projects, a brochure and press articles to hand, Acting Up! went in search of a new partner to assist in bringing a third performance for early years children to Cork. The outstanding performance of Songs from Above by Teater Refleksion and Teater My from Denmark, en route to the Baboró International Arts Festival for Children was fully supported by the HSE office in Cork on this occasion. 9 different crèches sent children and carers to the performance from all areas of the city.

The event was opened by the Lord Mayor of Cork, Cllr. Dara Murphy.

What threads (these) performances together is that their approach to children's theatre is not just about entertaining. It's about performing on a learning level that children can relate to. The audience were totally enthralled by the white tent used as the stage, the stars that had hidden surprises and the only noises to be heard were gasps of delight from the three-year-old critics.

Deirdre O'Reilly, WOW, Evening Echo, Cork

## LEARNING TO SPEAK

Baboró International Arts Festival for Children -  
**'Natural Born Artists'** Conference, Galway

**October 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> 2009**

The nation begins to talk  
**Quotes**

**Baboró**  
International Arts Festival for Children

**Michael D. Higgins TD**

A child is not precluded from imagining a world that is different. Dignity. Wonder. Discovery.

**Emelie FitzGibbon Artistic Director Graffiti Theatre**

The Conference Natural Born Artists in Galway reinforced for me both the essential value of arts for very early years and the democratic deficit there is in this country in providing appropriate arts experiences for young citizens. Companies like Teater Refleksion, La Baracca, Introdans and Branar boosted my own long-standing commitment to tailored, high-quality work for the young, not just as audiences for the future, but as audiences for the 'now' of their lives.

**Barbara O'Meara Tutor, Cork College of Commerce**

Throughout the 2 days we networked with lots of early years people from across Europe. It was so refreshing to hear people talking with such conviction about an ideology that is as yet fragile and in its infancy in Ireland. This conference hosted by Baboró is a landmark in bringing together so many people to discuss, perform and exhibit their understanding of the cultivation of "Natural Born Artists".

**Martin Drury, Arts Director The Arts Council, Ireland**

Arts and young people are a distinctive tapestry but with independent threads. A child has only 365 days to be 5 years old. A bridge needs to be established, and strategies shared between the arts, culture, children and youth services. "Arts are the blossom in the crevice not a hothouse specimen".

**David Coleman, Clinical Psychologist, Broadcaster and Author**

Early years performances offer the parent/carer and child an opportunity to engage in attachment, which is essential to their stage of development. Secure babies explore their environment and learn from confident reliable adults around them.



# A LANGUAGE EMERGES

Models for the future of early years arts activity in Ireland



## { CHILDCARE }

Training for educators/  
crèche workers in conjunction with  
local professionals

Training for Trainers (attendance  
at international festivals to gain  
the widest possible spectrum of  
experience)

Courses in early years arts modules for  
parents/carers under Adult Education  
programmes. Elements of the course can  
be lead by local artists who have attended  
training sessions in early years practice.

The introduction of specific arts modules on  
the third level early childcare certificate and  
degree programmes.

## { FAMILIES & LOCAL COMMUNITIES }

Family days at local venues to include  
performances, workshops and other  
interactive events.

Parent and toddler group arts activities

Training for childminders in arts activities

Workshops in play and creativity for childminders  
to reinforce and expand their own methods of  
creative engagement.

NOTE: All training encompasses the arts in general.  
Puppetry, storytelling, music, dance, painting, etc.

## { THE ARTS }

Festival performances

Workshops for  
professional artists

Development of a core  
of professional Irish practitioners  
for early years performances

Development of new writing and  
arts research for this age-group

Meetings, sharing opportunities and  
networking opportunities for artists and  
practitioners

Website to share contacts,  
experiences and schedules

Implementation of best practice  
Artists and Schools model developed by the  
Arts Council

## { POSSIBLE PARTNERS }

Local VEC offices

Local HSE offices

Local performance venues

Local arts offices

Local childcare committees

Private sponsors

Community venues and voluntary groups

**EARLY  
YEARS  
ARTS**

## [ Training ]

When you are in touch with your own creativity, a child can learn it from you. To keep in touch with your creativity as a childcare professional or as a working actor, musician, artist etc., continuous and further training opportunities are necessary throughout your career.

In my opinion it is absolutely essential that a performance for early years is not an isolated event in Ireland. By this I mean that whenever we have the good fortune to be in a position to invite an international early years performance to our stages, we should ensure that it is accompanied by a workshop or information training session for artists and childcare workers alike. By doing this, we ensure the dissemination of an understanding of the whole picture and not just the perspective of an actor or an audience member at a once-off performance.

Early years arts festivals are also appearing all over Europe and beyond. Every festival hosts examples of excellence in the field of performance for the early years along with a comprehensive training programme of workshops for the arts and the childcare communities. We should ensure that our artists and childcare representatives are attending some of these festivals and disseminating their expertise. Part of the application process may entail a plan for leading a workshop with carers or artists on their return.

## [ Transport ]

Another suggestion based on the Italian model in operation in Bologna is the provision of a bus for early years children which could take them to a performance venue on rotation and on a regular basis. One of the biggest issues facing Irish crèches who would love to attend performances or early years arts events is precisely the lack of insured transport for the children and their carers.

## [ Residencies ]

Yet another suggestion for the development of Irish performances would be the idea of artists residencies in community or arts venues where there is early years activity. The artist could work closely with a mother and toddler group, or a community crèche for example, with a view to developing research and ideas for future performances. This is a model engaged by the Starcatchers project in Edinburgh and has proven a huge success.

Naturally the residency must also be in partnership with a performance venue and a team of practitioners who can then facilitate the development of a performance from an artistic point of view. (technicians, directors, choreographers, musicians etc.)

## [ Partnership ]

Working for this age-group as an artist provides the challenge of understanding the enjoyment of a toddler without copying its behaviour as an adult. It is essential that ideas form through observation sessions with this very young audience. Performances for 0-3 years in particular are a dynamic concept. We must remember to always return to the children for confirmation and inspiration. To this effect, one model of partnership used in Italy and in Belgium, is where the artists observe and lead play sessions with a group of early years children on a regular basis when devising new performances. They take the seeds of what works and return to the theatre to shape it into a performance. The crèche group is invited back to the theatre to attend the new piece and the cycle continues. Sometimes it is also recommended to work with a child psychologist to ensure that the performance is suited to a particular stage of development. Partnership between the artists and the childcare community is the key to the success of these initiatives.

One thing is clear – we all agree that the arts are an essential part of a child's education and development from the earliest age. We need to tap into the resources that are still available in Ireland, despite cutbacks, pool them and share them among ourselves in order to provide a long-term sustainable and feasible early years arts policy that can be put into practice in the lives of the youngest members of our population. And we can have fun ourselves along the way!

## Special thanks to

Lali Morris and Teenagh Cunningham of **Baboró International Arts Festival for Children**  
Barbara O'Meara and Ken Whyte of **Cork College of Commerce**  
Aidan Warner of **Cork HSE**  
Gaye Tanham and Audrey Keane of **The Arts Council, An Chomhairle Ealaíon**  
Emelie FitzGibbon of **Graffiti Theatre Company**  
**Teater Refleksion** and **Teater My**, Denmark  
Andrea Buzzetti and Carlotta Zini of **La Baracca**, Italy  
Rhona Matheson of **Starcatchers**, Scotland

## Credits



GRAFFITI



teater refleksjon



STARCATCHERS  
[www.starcatchers.org.uk](http://www.starcatchers.org.uk)

TEATER REFLEKSJON  
[www.refleksjon.de](http://www.refleksjon.de)

LA BARACCA  
[www.testoniragazzi.it](http://www.testoniragazzi.it)



JENNY HUTTON, Galway



BARRY MCCARTHY, Cork  
[www.barrymccarthyvisuals.com](http://www.barrymccarthyvisuals.com)

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