



**Creative Places,
Edenderry**



Looking after the Artist/Facilitator

Four Artists/Facilitators in Conversation with Creative Places, Edenderry Coordinator, Seonaid Murray



Comhairle Chontae Uíbh Fhailí
Offaly County Council



A Unique Snapshot from Four Different Practices/Perspectives

Grab a comfy chair and a cup of tea and have a read!

Welcome to our 4th Community Toolkit. Our Creative Places, Edenderry Coordinator, Seonaid Murray sat down to talk to four experienced Artists & Facilitators about their practice. The following includes their thoughts, advice for best preparing for, delivering and post facilitation of an Arts based workshop; how to 'ground' yourself in order to move on to the next workshop/event or to head home to decompress!

Conversation One:

Stephen Beggs, Theatre Maker based in Belfast talks to Seonaid at the MAC, Belfast:

Seonaid: Hello Stephen, how are you?

Stephen: I'm very well thank you - lovely day!

Seonaid: Would you like to tell us who you are and what you do?

Stephen: I work mainly in theatre, so a drama background, I am an actor, director, writer and workshop facilitator, a Theatre Maker seems to be the expression most people use these days and it covers a lot of ground - I am freelance, I have been fully freelance since 2013.

Seonaid: We have worked together in many different contexts, from the Alzheimer's Society, to Northern Ireland Chest, Heart and Stroke and The Black Box.....that is a lot of different types of groups and I know you work with many more - so how do you prepare for facilitating a Drama workshop when you don't always know everyone in the room?

Stephen: I have been working in the industry now for 30 years and I still get nervous before every single session, there is never a time when I don't sit in the car and I don't feel like having a bit of a boke before before I go into somewhere!

Even though I could probably do this stuff standing on my head now - But to me, I want every workshop, every rehearsal every performance or whatever to be as good - the best as what I have done before - which I suppose is a bit unrealistic but I think, you know - if you stop feeling nervous there is probably something wrong, you know?

Seonaid: When I was still working in Belfast and when we had booked you for a session I felt more relaxed, reassured that the workshop would go well...

Stephen: Laughs! Yes - well you know, a safe pair of hands - which can sometimes sound a bit dull - but I have come to realise over the years that a safe pair of hands is vital - I'm not sure that my work would ever be described as cutting edge - but what I do is, I have a very high (says me!) success rate at delivering successful projects, managing budgets well and people coming away having had a really good, creative experience. And I think that's pretty vital, isn't it?

Seonaid: It is extremely vital.

And in the contexts we have worked in together, you are always invited back...

Seonaid: You don't know what you are going into and then maybe it takes you to have a few situations in a workshop and then you learn from that - so going back to that question - how do you prepare for that?

Stephen: Well, I go into every session as a friendly, warm, welcoming person and I try to foster an atmosphere in which anyone can say what they want, there are no silly questions, there is no right or wrong way of doing things, I also say to people that they don't have to be an active participant, if I see someone who clearly wants to have a little quiet time that's ok and I have some workshops where I know that I am going to get the mickey taken out of me for an hour and that's lovely, they love when I arrive and it's pure raking! From the minute I walk through the door and that's gorgeous! Equally I know there will be some workshops that are much more formal too - and that's the thing - and that's what I find most scary I think!

Not knowing how a session is going to go. So there is that constant fear of having put yourself in a room, making yourself vulnerable, you know. I think that happens a lot with any kind of freelance work, but also particularly in the Arts because it is something where you have to open yourself up emotionally, and to certain situations and that makes you vulnerable and we have talked before, about that idea that you absorb all this emotion and this energy and then suddenly you are back in the car. Driving back, with your mind racing, so you are anxious beforehand and then you are kind of all over the shop afterwards. In a good way or a bad way - you could be triumphant thinking, this is the best thing ever but you are still processing all this emotion by yourself, and it is, it's a tricky thing you know?

Seonaid: I have been present when you have been performing something like a show, and I have seen you working in other pieces of theatre, we have maybe never had a detailed conversation like this so I have maybe presumed that you were ok or maybe vice versa - so how do you look after yourself - do you make sure you have eaten something - drink plenty of water etc?

If it was a workshop situation I would make sure I had plenty of water and lip balm (because I play Saxophone!)

Stephen: Oh yes of course, that's true! I drink a lot of tea! But when I am out and about I drink quite a lot of coffee - I don't drink much coffee at home - I would drink quite a lot of coffee on an empty stomach and I have learnt from that - so I try not to automatically go and get an Americano!

Water, yes and also when I am in the car before a session I do try and have a chat with myself! And I say - you have got this you know! I know it's such a cliché isn't it but you know how to do this - you're good at it - and that's something that In the Arts, we've got a triple whammy haven't we? It's like - we're in the Arts, we're in Northern Ireland and we're probably quite emotional people - so all 3 of those things tend to lend themselves to us not being massively confident because Northern Irish people are always doing themselves down - and finding it hard to say positive things about each other - or about themselves particularly - we're quite good at saying positive things about other people I think but sometimes - I would sit in the car and say - you know - in your career how many workshops have you left going

that was appalling? Very few! And quite often it's to do with things that are beyond your control - and also ultimately in an hour you'll be back in the car! *Laughs!*

Seonaid: Talking to yourself is a really good one - I do that most days but I kind of say to myself, 'Come on Murray' - do you find you use those facilitation skills in other parts of your life?! I know I do -

Stephen: Well, what I do is I break my life into chunks! Because if you took it all in one go it would be overwhelming and so I look at a week in the diary and I think oh my word - how am I going to cope with this? And then I think - well actually let's think about tomorrow - You're making sure that prep is getting done I try and apply the same structures that I would do when running workshops or rehearsals to everything in bite-sized chunks.

Seonaid: Yeah I definitely do that - as a Community Musician - the beauty of the workshop - sometimes I feel myself doing that - right ok, 15 minutes of a warm up - 15 minutes of something new, even in a meeting where there is no musicking happening!

I remember someone saying to me it is hard to capture everyone in a room and that it's ok - someone might just be having a bad day -

Stephen: That took me a long time to get my head around - I remember someone saying to me at one point 'don't feel you have to get that person' and in actual fact it could be counter productive to be dragging that person in that doesn't want to but maybe next time they will feel confident enough - they might just say something and maybe the one after that they will get involved. The idea is that you give opportunities for everyone to

take part but don't fret too much about it - you've done your job there.....

I think as well - when I get overwhelmed I have maybe packed too much in - my diary is so full that there is no time to process one thing before moving on to the next - so you find yourself in that odd situation where everything feels current in your head all at once - and you just think - it's too much - so to try and find a way of finishing something - I think in your head before racing on to the next thing - some days that is not possible - some days you are running from one thing to next - yesterday for example - yesterday was manic for me - and so today I didn't get up until 10 o'clock - it took me a while to not feel guilty about that - I worked until 11pm last night and so there is absolutely no reason that I should get up early today! Make sure that you are rested.

Have a little talk with yourself afterwards - again I remember my Mum saying to me - you will be endlessly replaying what that person has said back in your mind and that person has probably forgotten about it - do not go home fixating on a conversation that you think could have gone slightly better and if the person is really bothered then they will probably talk to you about it at some point - but it is much more likely that you are exploding it in your head.

Seonaid: Everyone is Creative but do you think there is something about working with Creativity all the time that effects us?

Stephen: Yes - you start expanding the scenarios! You're imagining - because we are all hard wired to be storytellers aren't we so we make connections between everything and we start kind of racing ahead with scenarios

I would love to be able to let things go more but....

Seonaid: I have definitely walked into a room where I am working but in my head it is like an episode of EastEnders or something and I am so worried that it is going to be horrific - it is as if I need to over worry about it in order for it to go ok

Stephen: Yes - there was a workshop group recently who I had been working with for quite a while where there was an individual who completely monopolised the conversation and you could see the effect it was having on other people in the group. You could see eyes rolling or people looking at each other and I would think to myself, right I've got to make sure that we don't lose the group - first of all the person who is monopolising the conversation - there is a reason for that and it's not an ego thing and certainly with this person - you could tell that it was probably that they didn't get to speak to anyone the rest of the week and it would come across as being very full of themselves

but I could see that they were actually very anxious but equally I didn't want to lose the other people who might say, 'I'm not going to come to this' - because I find that there is a natural human reaction when something is difficult or stressful or you have a stressful life then you don't want to add something more stressful to it - especially if you are a volunteer who is coming along to something just for the craic - so I always feel that I can't expect these other people to be doing all this thinking - that's again where you look around the room and your mind is racing while you are doing your warm up, your first gig, your mind is racing about how this person is going to get on etc - and you want them all to have gone home at the end and have had a good time

Seonaid: This is making me smile because I have had long conversations regarding egos in a group setting -

Stephen: I think humour is the best way to deal with many of those issues -

They won't happen if I don't do them and that's - you have to realise that sometimes you will be ill in the same way that you would be ill if you had Covid

Seonaid: What about expectations from you or the organisation you are working with - perhaps certain organisations are better at that than others? And you get to know the ones that you can be more familiar and comfortable with - I think there is something interesting there -

Stephen: Yes - and experience and age helps that. Because when you are younger you feel like and this is why I think it is very important - that we as people working in this industry - speak to and communicate with young people starting out on their career - and trying to say to them without getting patronising that I have trod this path and that it is what I have experienced - what works and what doesn't work and here are some things to remember - that - what is an

I worked with an actor who is long gone and he would have been a great one for like we were on stage together and we were in a dress rehearsal for something and I was standing there doing my part - we were 2 psychiatrists in this play and this other actor who shall remain nameless, I adored him and he was hilarious - he would slowly but surely be edging across the space until he was almost standing in front of you and the director would go - 'ehhhh - you are standing right in front of Stephen' and he would go - 'oh am I? I am just trying to find my light!' *Laughter from both!*

Seonaid: So in regards of Pitfalls to look out for - we have talked about some already - you could have something going on in your personal life - obviously you can decide to take yourself out of the equation but it's not always possible - but certainly I have had experiences where minutes before a workshop something happens - either that the artist that we are working with can't

make it or I have had a personal call or issue that I didn't expect - I think normally you can come to some sort of agreement or hopefully there is someone there that can support you?

Stephen: It's tricky - I would of had ups and downs with my mental health over the years and I never used to be very good at seeing it coming, I have found myself in a situation where I was completely overwhelmed before I realised it was happening. Then I am no good to myself and no good to anyone. I would end up having to take 2 weeks off. Whereas now I am better at first of all - good support from family, good support from my GP and some very well planned medication, I am able to see it coming and I am able to thin out the diary if I need to - where I can work out what I can move, reschedule, and I am perfectly honest about why as well. So I can just focus then on the things that can't be moved

opportunity again is another good thing to remember - just because someone offers something - you know someone says 'will you come and play a gig at our festival?' and you think, woah what a great opportunity - and then they say, 'yeah, if you can just get yourself here, put up your own accommodation and we'll pay your expenses' - but there is no fee and then you kind of think - right, that's not actually an opportunity, that's actually going to cost me a lot!

Seonaid: And that is why this 4th Community Toolkit is possibly the most important one! If Artist's don't look after themselves and if organisations don't look after the Artist, then it all falls apart. I can remember years ago - my parents had a builder in our house and I was heading out with a small basket of instruments and my Saxophone - I was going out the door and I couldn't manage it all on my bike (!) and the builder was witnessing me doing all this -

**and then I rang a taxi and then he just said,
'Here - how much are you getting for this?'
And I replied £4.50 per hour!**

Stephen: £4.50 - brilliant!

**Seonaid: Something ridiculous like that and
he was like: 'You can't carry that and you
are getting into a taxi - you are losing
money aren't you?' And I was like - 'Yeah'!**

**Stephen: I remember being asked to do a
workshop for a company and there was a
long phone conversation where I went
through in great detail what I was going to
do and then when I told them the cost -
and it was not a lot of money - it was a
Community rate and they guy laughed
down the phone at me and said, 'I think we
will do it ourselves!' You learn to value
yourself more - I did a job once where they
said as part of the work I would be filmed
and they would get a promotional film out
of it and I said, 'Ok - what will be the extra
fee for that?' and they said 'nothing!' And
so I actually turned the job down.**

Seonaid: There is a lonely aspect to our type of work -

Stephen: Yeah - I agree....

Seonaid: Do you feel navigating loneliness in the job can be challenging?

Stephen: Yeah - I mean - it was interesting during Covid because my wife was working in the kitchen and I was working upstairs and sometimes my daughter would be in the living room. And this situation was completely different, where all of my family were in the same place! In 'normal' times whatever those are these days, I am doing all my planning and my admin in the house, and no-one else is around - BBC Radio 4 tends to be my friend during that time. Yeah - loneliness is that thing of building in time - like today I am going to have lunch with my daughter and I could probably do without it - time-wise! But I am gonna go and do you know what, I am gonna love that and it will be lovely and I will get to spend a bit of time with the girl and it's gonna be great and I can get on

with the admin after that! I do try and keep up with friends I haven't seen for a while and have a coffee and that is just as good a use of your time as anything else!

Seonaid: That's really important. My own working from home company is BBC Radio Ulster in the morning and then BBC 6 music in the afternoon. It is whatever routine you have which gives you some company I think? It's really nice to talk about all of the different aspects of our work - is there any good advice that you have been given that you would like to share?

Stephen: Yeah - one of them we have already talked about, I think? I was at an Arts and Business thing where I was told to make sure that when someone describes something as an opportunity that you check whether it actually is or not! That was a big thing and oddly one of the good bits of advice, I got from my Mum whenever I was quite young, anxious and a teenager I suppose - and it's interesting because I know I have probably contradicted this already but she said to me at one point, never stop saying yes,

now, she didn't mean so much that you are overwhelmed - what she meant was don't turn down things because you feel that you can't do it or because you think you are not good enough. So it comes down to knowing that you can take things on and knowing that you don't have to - I think those would be the two big bits of advice and don't leave your tax return until the last minute! *Both laugh!*

Seonaid: Have you seen the episode of Black Books where he is filling in his Tax return?!

Stephen: Yes - where he makes a coat out of his receipts?! Every January I used to put a picture of Bernard Black covered in receipts on social media and say 'guess what I'm doing?!'

Seonaid: I still do that! Although now I am also doing the equivalent in the South! It has been brilliant to hear all of your insights and talking to you and there is so much advice within it - thank you.

Stephen: A pleasure.