

## In Conversation #2

### Irish Curators in the US

**George Heslin**, Artistic Director, Origin Theatre Company & First Irish Festival, New York  
**Linda Murray**, Artistic Director, Solas Nua, Washington DC.

Facilitated by **Gavin Kostick**, Playwright & Literary Manager, Fishamble: The New Play Company

**Siobhán Bourke (Co-director, Irish Theatre Institute):** Everybody is very welcome to the second session this morning, we are delighted to have with us Linda Murray, who is the Artistic Director of Solas Nua in Washington, Artistic Director of Origin Theatre and our Chair this morning is Gavin Kostick, Literary Manager of Fishamble Theatre Company.

**Gavin Kostick:** Thank you very much Siobhán, and thank you very much for having us.

So we have Linda Murray and we have George Heslin. We're going to ease our way into the conversation and again we're going to be opening it up to you as we go.

Within the Irish theatre world – I don't know how much of a know secret this is – I have a doppelganger and my doppelganger is Hanna Slattne who is the Literary Manager of Tinderbox in Northern Ireland. I secretly steal her ideas and we produce them in Ireland. We also play a sort of game of one-upmanship. I tell Hanna what we're up to. They're currently producing *True North*, which is a series of three plays with an ensemble cast in Belfast, and apparently it's going fantastically. It ends on the 16<sup>th</sup> of October; you should go and see it. So, in the game of one-upmanship I said to her, oh by the way Hanna, Solas Nua in Washington DC will be producing 12 readings of Fishamble plays all through the year, one after the other, once a month. And she said, yes, oh that's very interesting. They did that last year with us. I was much put out.

That is how I heard of Solas Nua in the first place. It's very exciting to have something that's really only existed this century, and I guess the first question is, from your point of view, how did Solas Nua come about? What is it? How did it start? What was the thinking and what was the personal activity that led to it being created?

**Linda Murray:** Well, I moved to DC a little over seven years ago for a completely unrelated task. I was finishing up my PhD in Dance and I went to the Library of Congress. They had asked me to curate a particular exhibition on Russian Ballet. It had nothing to do with Irish theatre at all. But I had written a couple of articles for Irish Theatre Magazine, and when I was heading off, Karen Fricker said have a look around and see if there is a lot of activity going on, and if there is maybe we can put an article together about it. So when I moved to DC I tried to find it on my own, had no luck, went to the embassy, got in touch with the Cultural Attaché there, who was Owen Feeney at the time, and we came to the conclusion that there really wasn't a lot happening by way of exposure in DC certainly for Irish theatre companies and for young Irish artists in general. I thought it was terrible and I kept giving out about it, and you give out about something long enough, eventually people go, well why don't you do something.

So that's what we did. Basically Owen said if you launch this company we'll give you the Embassy to have a party and get it going, and I said that sounds brilliant. So we did that and then he went back to Dublin and we got a new Cultural Attaché. The very first production we did was *Disco Pigs* because Enda Walsh was an unknown quantity. George did *Misterman* back in 2002. So George had just done *Misterman* a couple of years before in New York but there had never been an Enda Walsh production in Washington. Washington is the second largest theatre market in the US. It has 83 professional theatre companies producing there. So it's a huge market, and I couldn't understand how a playwright like Enda Walsh was unknown, completely unknown. So I thought, if we get this one play up and we never do anything else ever again, I'll be happy. We got very lucky. The Washington Post came, the Post loved us. We got great reviews across the board. For the first season it was pretty much kind of a – well, we'll just get the next show up and if the next show does well, great. We'll have the cash to go forward for the next show. When we got through a first season and we had six productions under our belt –

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**Gavin Kostick:** Sorry to stop you there. Can you explain the Washington or American concept of a season? I've heard this a lot. What is a season?

**Linda Murray:** A season generally begins in September and ends around May. Although, George will probably attest to this, the American season has now become a 12-month event. So you have your regular season which goes September through to the end of May, and then you're also expected to kind of keep things going throughout the summer as well. So there's festivals generally throughout the summer which kind of extend you from the end of May through to the beginning of September when your season starts all over again. The season, in terms of your workload, it really doesn't mean anything except it's a reason to have a party and re-engage the donors and remind them that you still need some cash. That's pretty much all the season does.

But yes, we're going into our sixth season now and theatre is a huge part of what we do but it's not the only part of what we do. We also run the largest Irish film festival in the US, the Capital Irish Film Festival. We have the éist podcast series. We have a music series called the Solas Salon. Julie Feeney will be coming in for us in a couple of weeks. What else do we do? Writers' festival, visual arts. But theatre was where we started and built our reputation. I think it's probably to Americans, that and literature would be the two things that Americans are most familiar with. It's certainly the centrepiece in the season for us.

**Gavin Kostick:** Within that, when you say theatre, are you producing works in Washington DC of plays or are companies coming over and presenting the works with you? How does that work?

**Linda Murray:** We produce or co-produce. We've had experience with both. We actually did a co-commission with Tinderbox, the *True North* series. The play by David Ireland *Everything Between Us*, is a co-commission with Solas Nua. We actually sent that play up along the East Coast in March this year, so it did DC, Philadelphia and then we sent it up into New York State. That play has already had its premiere in America and now it's having its premiere in Belfast, which is kind of odd and lovely.

**Gavin Kostick:** While we're on that subject, I know that Kabosh presented a play in the First Irish. Conceptually, do the people in Washington see Ireland as a geographic island or do you see it as Northern Ireland and Ireland?

**Linda Murray:** I think, well, Washington is obviously very political and DC theatre audiences are always looking for the political in plays. I think there is a lot of confusion and misunderstanding about what the situation is with Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. I think from my audiences, if they are aware of the situation, they presume they are two separate places. But most of them really don't understand the situation at all. So that's also part of what you do in bringing work over. It's part of why I'm passionate about representing Northern Ireland and Ireland, is having that dialogue go on as well. A play like *Everything Between Us* was actually revelatory for a lot of our audience in that it's post-conflict. The conversation for playwrights in Northern Ireland has moved on beyond the Troubles and I think American audiences are still firmly in the Troubles phase, so to have new writing by Rosemary Jenkinson, David Ireland, playwrights like that, is really great in opening up the conversation. But [George] you're very passionate about that too. You always make sure you represent Northern Ireland.

**Gavin Kostick:** Shall we bring George in there? We were just talking before we came on here, some twenty-five years ago, before George's time, there was an explosion both in academia, in drama degrees and in companies of Ireland that really changed theatre in many ways. I remember George, just a little bit into that. The first thing I saw him in was *Camino Real* as an actor. I knew him as part of that scene; it was both an exciting artistic scene and a very exciting social scene. It was a mad world going on there. The creation of the Fringe and so forth. There were a lot of things going on. Then the next thing I knew, there was a character called George C. Heslin who lived in New York, and I thought what is this? What brought you to New York and how did Origin, which is the theatre end of things, start. The First Irish is separate after that. Let's start from the beginning.

**George Heslin:** Well, I'm from Limerick originally and I graduated from the Samuel Beckett Centre in 1991. Six months after I graduated I moved to London. I lived in London, did a few shows in the West End, came back to Ireland, did a few shows with Island in Limerick, worked with various theatre companies. In 1994 I was on my way to Australia for a year on our visa programme and my father applied for my Green Card and he said, you've got a Green Card. I didn't want the Green Card. So I arrived in New York in June of 1994. No desire to be there. It was never on my radar. London was kind of where I wanted to be. When I got to New York I started studying a few months later with a woman called Uta Hagen who is an acting teacher. I ended up two years in her masterclass in New York. I remember when I was in her class I

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didn't say a word, believe it or not, for the first six weeks. I was just fascinated by what I considered was a whole different way of working in very specific way. Very much a new language that I really hadn't heard here in Ireland.

So, between 1994 and 2000 at various times I came home and through many, many miracles I got acting jobs here with Druid and Calypso and with the Abbey. I do believe they are jobs I wouldn't have got had I been living here in Dublin. I just think that when I came back with an attitude of – I mean, as an actor, I always found Dublin a little bit intimidating in that you walk into an audition and then you meet the director in the bar five hours later, and there's a weird energy where you're going, did I actually spend fifteen minutes in your company today and are we actually not going to acknowledge that. I found that a very strange environment to work in. So as a result, when I would walk into auditions in a more neutral environment, either here or in America, I'd tend to get a lot more work as an actor.

So fast forward to, I moved to New York, I gave up my apartment here in Dublin in 2000 and I moved to New York full time. I think the thing that became obvious for me very early was what the perception of what contemporary Irish theatre was. That perception was very much like, Conor McPherson, Martin McDonagh, and in my mind I was going, there's a lot more other playwrights out there that I've seen and worked with in Ireland. Nobody seems to know about them in New York. So in January 2002 I had a few months unemployment and I was sitting there going, I've got to do something or I'll go crazy. There was no idea to set up a theatre company. It was just an actor, like we all are actors going, I have to do something to fill my time. With that I produced *Misterman* by Enda Walsh. That was in January of 2002. Then after that I did the Broadway tour of *Stones in his Pockets* for about a year and a half. On that tour I travelled about 18 states in America, kind of observing as well around those 18 states the perception of Irish theatre, and contemporary Irish theatre. So that was just the spark of where it all started.

**Gavin Kostick:** What made you then go European? I notice Origin says it's European. Is that English language European or what?

**George Heslin:** Well the mission is we only do American premieres of European plays. One of the reasons I said European was, I said, well I didn't come to America just to do Irish plays. It was that simple. We only do American premieres. We do two main stage productions a year.

**Gavin Kostick:** How big is main stage?

**George Heslin:** 99-seat theatre.

**Gavin Kostick:** Which is where?

**George Heslin:** Which is at a venue called 59E59 Theatre. Now we have used other venues as well, but that's kind of been our home for the last five years.

**Gavin Kostick:** Can I ask you a really impossible question? You were talking about Washington DC and the political audience, very interestingly. Where is New York now? How are the audiences? You hear lots of different things about how Broadway has become celebrity driven, you know. Not so much a new play area but an event theatre. How is the New York theatre scene at the moment, if that's even possible to answer?

**George Heslin:** The thing about New York is that I think there is an audience for everything. I do believe that. When I come back to Ireland and when we put this festival together, there is an audience for everything. I don't feel part of the Broadway scene. I've been in New York now fourteen years off and on, and I can walk by a Broadway theatre and I certainly wouldn't recognise most of the names on the billboards. There's 300 theatre companies in New York at any one time. Either opening, closing or developing. There's a big audience. The thing is, when 9/11 happened in New York, Broadway kind of crumbled and off-Broadway thrived. That was the crossroads in terms of funding bodies in New York realising that Broadway is driven by tourism and tourists coming to New York, whereas Off-Broadway was being attended by locals from New York. I think that was a big revelation.

**Gavin Kostick:** I think sometimes from our view here in Dublin, sometimes we go, right, let's tour a play to New York or Boston because they've got a lot of Irish people and therefore there will be big audiences because Irish people love their theatre. And then you go, well why aren't we filling venues here?

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**George Heslin:** There was a company in Boston called Sugán which were very successful, by a wonderful director called Carmel O'Reilly, who you might know. Sugán was founded by Elizabeth White as well, who runs the Wexford Arts Centre. She might be here today. And Aideen who is now a documentary maker in the West of Ireland. That was a very successful company that specifically did Irish projects. That company closed down two years ago, actually maybe four years ago. They closed down because the audience they were tapping into was very much the Irish emigrant audience in Boston. As soon as things got great in Ireland, people left America and the theatre company closed. The other side of that is, within Origin, for most of our projects I would say the audience are maybe 5% Irish people seeing what we do in New York.

**Gavin Kostick:** Just to be really crude again. You're not setting up Irish plays for and Irish audience, sort of like a theme bar thing where you're saying this is the Irish abroad. You're a company that produces Irish work for a general audience in New York.

**George Heslin:** Yes, but the Irish abroad – we don't like to say this, but I do a lot of fundraising as Linda does in DC, and a big part of running a company is that we're very often taught about going after the next generation of young Irish people, but the truth is the next generation of young Irish people are working on Wall Street. They're certainly not coming to New York looking for the culture. They're certainly not coming to New York looking for Irish theatre. So you can't rely on that. While they get there and they enjoy their culture, it takes a few years, about three or four years after you get there when you go, Ireland's not a bad place after all. Maybe I'll go see an Irish play. Most people going to America, they're not going there chasing Ireland.

**Gavin Kostick:** Very interesting. Just picking up the point made by Linda. So you're programming work from the island of Ireland, the whole of Ireland. Is that conscious or is it just quality that you go for?

**George Heslin:** No, it's conscious. The festival we run right now, yes absolutely. Every year we have to have work from Northern Ireland.

**Gavin Kostick:** Ok, it's a policy decision you have putting it together. Speaking of which, for our interest here – you can say no to this if you like – do you enjoy receiving scripts from companies in Ireland? Do you want people to send you stuff and say, look this is new, this is what's happening?

**George Heslin:** Well, it's a combination. We have a wonderful literary manager, Rebecca Nesbitt, who's a machine when it comes to reading scripts. Then I have a lot of relationships here over the years. First of all I'm very grateful to be here today thanks to Theatre Institute and Culture Ireland, because for me it's fascinating – particularly yesterday – to just learn of a whole new generation. I was saying last night, I think my history of Dublin kind of stopped at Fishamble and Guna Nua. In the last ten years there are a whole other amazing number of companies here who I really wasn't aware of.

**Gavin Kostick:** Just leading on from that, I notice that you have a relationship with Draíocht, which is a venue-based relationship. Can you tell us a bit about that? The way things have changed, it's now relationships not only with companies but with venues and festivals. There are different models. What was that one?

**George Heslin:** We brought *Mistermen* to Dublin Fringe in 2002. The thing is, since then, the amount of work we've produced in New York has grown and more structure has come on the company and this theatre festival has developed, so we haven't really come back to Ireland with work since then. There's so much to put together in New York.

**Gavin Kostick:** You touched on economics, and it is a fascinating subject in itself. So the tricky area then. How is Solas Nua funded? And what is your structure? Do we imagine you sitting in an office overlooking the Capitol?

**Linda Murray:** I overlook the Martin Luther King Library where the homeless shelter is next door. Although it is actually a fairly nice part of town. It's five blocks from the White House.

Yes, so our funding. I think the big difference between the way an American non-profit operates and the way – I think it's changing here now – but the way I guess arts organisations have traditionally operated in Ireland is that we rely heavily on individual contributions. I would say about 60% of our non-earned income comes from individual donors. Then the next big chunk would be private foundations, and then government money, which would be a combination of Irish Government money and federal US and local DC money, would make up the final 20%.

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**Gavin Kostick:** On the private funders, is that like a project thing, where you have a project, such as the film festival and you fundraise for that project? Or is it more general? Solas Nua raising funds to do what you like.

**Linda Murray:** It's everything. I think George will back me up. Donors are inclined to give more if they know where their money is going toward, so we certainly do targeted fundraising. Certain people on my mailing list don't care about the theatre. They're like, ugh the theatre. But they're all over the film stuff. That's where they get excited about Solas Nua. So if we know that, if we know that they're only buying tickets to come and see the film stuff then we'll target them to fundraise for the film festival and likewise if we know that some people have bought the theatre subscription for four years in a row, we'll approach them too to see if they maybe want to help out on the theatre programming. But we do general fundraising as well throughout the year. But targeted always gives you a better return on the time you put in with the donor.

It's a bizarre system. I think as Irish people we're just really uncomfortable asking for money. We're just not good at it. It's just awful. And you don't get any better at it. My board are predominantly Americans and they're always slapping me around and telling me to get a backbone and go for the hard sell. I watch them in action and they're just amazing. They're wonderful. They walk in and they're very forthright about saying well, we need this right now and what can you do for me? Is your chequebook in your pocket at the moment? They just go there, and I take the long route around the room to get to even thinking about asking for money.

The one good thing about that system that I can say is, I definitely know my audience – I'm sure you [George] feel like this as well – in a way that I think I wouldn't if I were running my company here. I know who practically everybody is who comes to see my show. I know what my age group breakdown is, I know what my ethnic breakdown is. I know why people are interested in the company. That comes from asking people for their own earned income and asking them to give it to your organisation. DC doesn't have an Irish American community to speak of so I'm in a bizarre situation where I'm serving a city that is 85% black and Hispanic. I really can't rely on this sense of an Irish American community supporting my organisation. That's just not the case for me. So I need to be producing work that appeals to and speaks to a very diverse ethnic group that often has no idea where to even find Ireland on the map never mind a sense of what the country is.

**Gavin Kostick:** Slightly tricky one. You programme across the arts. Do you kind of feel you have to represent a certain kind of Irishness, because Americans will go, yes I recognise that as Irishness, or are you trying to open it up a bit more by showing that there's lots of different kinds of Irishness going on at the moment?

**Linda Murray:** I would say, and not to put words in George's mouth, but I would say that we both started our organisations to combat a certain perception of what Irishness is. I don't even know that you can identify what Irishness is any more. We've had such huge sweeping changes in our social and economic make-up recently. Not that I think you were ever able to define Irishness, but I think now more than ever it is a very malleable, diverse, tricky thing to set in stone and say this is what it means to be Irish. It can mean many things. I think the one thing that I was passionate about was just, I truly felt that there was a young generation of artists whose voices were not being heard in America and I wanted to make sure that they had a platform. Like George said, I love Conor McPherson as a playwright but I'm never going to do him because he's on Broadway. He doesn't need me. Martin McDonagh I have different feelings about, but again I'm never going to do him because he is this huge big playwright and everybody in America knows who he is. I think there is really interesting, wonderful things happening in the arts here and I just wanted to allow people the opportunity to view our country through that window, and to allow their voices to give them another way of looking at what it means to be Irish, or what Ireland as a concept can possibly mean.

**Gavin Kostick:** A question towards George on that. Fishamble were involved in presenting four short works at the Very Special Arts Festival organised with the Kennedy Centre, which were new plays. Rosaleen McDonagh presented work there.

**Rosaleen McDonagh (from audience):** Can I say something about that?

**Gavin Kostick:** Go for it. So Rosaleen was the author of one of the plays presented at the Kennedy Centre.

**Rosaleen McDonagh:** Sorry, Gavin, to steal your thunder. I suppose before I talk about the play, but what George was saying about New York and Washington, that there is room for all sorts of theatre, it really is true. I saw disabled arts, not just

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disabled arts, but the standard was so high. It was really fulfilling and energetic, I felt really empowered and inspired by it. But also, when I went to New York, I didn't necessarily want to see disabled or specialised theatre, but what I saw and what I was exposed to really, as a writer, informed and reassured me that there is a bigger pond than Dublin. You know what I mean?

Also, the Washington event was a huge moment in my life as a writer, not just the performance and all that, but it was more that people addressed me and took me seriously as a writer. That doesn't always lend itself here in Ireland. So that was really – I loved every minute of it. I loved it.

**Linda Murray:** And Rosaleen's play did so well. It was in a huge big venue, the Shakespeare Theatre, the four plays by Fishamble.

**Rosaleen McDonagh:** But I suppose, in Washington and New York – maybe George would say that – but there is more of a risk-taking factor. Here in Dublin or Ireland when we talk about risk we mean money. Over there it's bigger than money. Am I right?

**George Heslin:** Yes, I think you've touched something very interesting there. The thing about America is that when you set up your company your mission statement is vital. Our mission is to do American premieres of European plays. Every company has a very specific mission. It's the first thing on every application form. You never, ever deviate from your mission. That's how you build an audience. That's how you build the board of directors. We have a wonderful guy on our advisory board, Bob Dunne, and he's like, you know, George, I'd love to see this kind of a mission, and if it was this mission I would be on your board and because your mission is this I will be on your advisory board. People are that specific about what they get involved in. One of the great things about here in Ireland – even yesterday I was surprised by the amount of companies who sat opposite me talking about, we do new Irish playwrighting. I think it's important that you do new Irish playwrighting, I just think, particularly the way funding streams have to change with the recession, that if you're smarter about specifically, if you're the new play company that's just what you are. If you're the devising company, that's just what you are. If you're Barabbas, that's just what you do, physical theatre. We don't have Barabbas any more unfortunately, but that's what they did do brilliantly.

Also the thing in America is audience development is not going to mean income from audience. Audience development is a group of people who support your work. You're not always tapping them. Our income from audiences is about 22%, our income from State funding is about 8%, every board member of the company gives a donation. Every organisation in America has a board give. So for instance, every application you fill out on a foundation, it says how much did you receive from your audience, how much did you receive from your board, how much did you receive federally, how much from a fundraising activity. These are requirements that you must be – for instance, if tomorrow morning somebody gave me \$3 million for Origin, not a single foundation would give me money if my board was giving me \$5,000. So the more your money goes up, the more the board give goes up. Let's say – I can't talk about the Lincoln Centre, but just say as an example – if you were to sit on the board of the Lincoln Centre in New York, the board give there is probably \$200,000 a year, if not more. They won't accept anybody on the board unless the first of January there's \$200,000.

**Gavin Kostick:** Conceptually though, what's the tax situation of them doing that, and on the other hand is it nothing to do with tax, it's to do with the concept of having a good society as it were.

**George Heslin:** Well the gifts are tax deductible. That's a very broad concept as well, but you get the gifts off a percentage of your tax. But I think it's the nature of America and how it was built.

**Gavin Kostick:** Picking up on what Rosaleen was saying, I think it what's really interesting in what you are saying is that we actually have gone straight back into money, which is probably my fault, but it seems to me that both of you are people on a mission, and that's what counts first. You're not inheriting a preexisting structure. You're both on missions to create, and that's quite exciting, whatever that it. Do you feel people respond to you because of your energy? For example, Linda was really helpful with Fishamble, which was not actually a Solas Nua production. She just came and helped it work. So there seems to be that going on as well. I'm not embarrassing you?

**Linda Murray:** Well, I think if anybody is ever in – I'll be helping Druid next March when they come to DC with *Penelope* even though they're going to be at the Studio Theatre. If any Irish artist comes to me in DC I will try to help them, and that's not trying to make myself look great. I think that's what we're supposed to do. I think for generations that's what happened when people went abroad, be it America, Australia or England, that was part of why Irish people

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sought out their own community was that sense of, if I can find other Irish people they will take care of me, they'll help me. I see it very much as part of my job, not only to promote whatever it is I'm currently producing, but also to be helpful overall to whatever is passing through the Kennedy Centre or the Studio Theatre or the Shakespeare Theatre from an Irish company.

But yes, I think a big part of that idea of being on a mission is tied back into that fundraising idea. As the Artistic Director, you are the face of your company, and your board, as much as they give they also hold you very accountable to be the person who goes out and motivates people to fundraise on your behalf or to give directly to your company.

I think Irish people are generous. We have a philanthropic nature, whether we realise it or not. It's something I've talked to Jo Mangan of The Performance Corporation a lot is, Irish people give to Trocaire, they give to Concern, they give to Oxfam. I guarantee loads of you have stopped for somebody on the street asking you to give €5 to whatever cause it may be. As a nation we have yet to wrap our heads around the idea that the arts need funding too. I think at the moment we all feel that it's the government's responsibility to ensure that our arts community remains intact. And it is, it is their responsibility. I'm not saying it's not, but the fact of the matter is they don't have the cash right now. Hard, tough things are going to happen, and I think the companies that will probably fare best are the ones that, for good or for bad, look at that American model of diversifying your funding sources. I think it's got to start with your board members. I think you've got to look to your board members. If they can't give to the company, you're never going to get your larger audience to give to the company. I think that's going to be a huge game changer that's going to have to occur.

**George Heslin:** I think it's about educating companies as well in terms of the strategy involved. I had a meeting last week in New York, part of this brainstorming team, and we talked about culture, and Minister Micheál Martin made a suggestion that for Irish theatre companies it might be very wise to have an American person on every one of your boards. Because they come with a different way of thinking. Also, I think if some education were to take place it would be amazing, like the theatre shop we had yesterday. I just could imagine a forum like that whereby theatre companies are at one side of the desk and Google is at the other, Coca Cola is at the other. There are only how many theatre companies in this country? Forty? Surely there are forty companies out there who can give fifty grand a year. It's just an idea. Why don't we have a Google Ireland foundation? Why don't we have a Coca Cola Ireland foundation?

**Gavin Kostick:** I think it's absolutely fascinating and maybe I'll open it up to the floor to ask questions across any spectrum of the subjects being touched on so far. I just wanted to touch a couple of things first. You're producing new Irish plays with American actors who perform in those roles. It's fascinating when we in Ireland produce American plays, we do Arthur Miller and Sam Shepherd and so forth – in your case, how do you feel American actors are coping with it?

**George Heslin:** Fantastic. Fantastic. It's not the sound, it's the sense. It's very weird. I was in the Roundabout directed by John Crowley in *Juno and the Paycock* in 2000 and three weeks into rehearsal John said, you know the director didn't want to cast you, the casting director. I said why? The only Irish people were myself, Jim Norton and Derbhle Molloy. Basically they didn't want to cast us because we would sound too Irish and lose the balance. A similar thing happened. I was in the Pittsburg Public and I did *The Weir* in the Pittsburg Public with a wonderful director called Eddie Gilbert. Eddie said the same thing three weeks in, you know our casting director didn't want to cast you in the project because the balance of your Irish dialect up against the Americans. So it's very strange. But we just did, as part of the festival Trans Euro Express at the Irish Arts Centre in New York, and there was no Irish actors in it, but it certainly didn't take away from the quality of the story. If anything, I don't know if you would agree with me or not, having Americans sometimes, in a way, American audiences understand them a little bit better.

**Gavin Kostick:** We found the same regarding actors with disability. The voice was different, but the understanding and the intent and the interpretation and deliver was certainly all there. Do you find that at all?

**Linda Murray:** Yes, I think it depends on the play. Say the festival that Rosaleen was involved in, what was most important to that festival was that actors with disabilities would be – that was their first concern. The fact that the plays were coming from Ireland was certainly secondary to the festival and the first thing they wanted, that they were most passionate about was that the actors had to have disabilities in order to be involved in the project. Then if they could handle an Irish accent, or if they could somehow rustle up somebody that came from Ireland that came second. It's something I struggled with. We have a local company of actors in DC, some of whom are American, some of whom can actually convince an Irish person that they are from Ireland if they set their minds to it. It's a challenge. There's a balance to it. But necessity means that you are going to be using American actors whether you like it or not. Some of our actors who are American are just brilliant and they are very sensitive to the text and work incredibly well with it.

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**Gavin Kostick:** And just briefly, because we haven't touched on it yet, Origin powers First Irish. First Irish has been going for three years. Can you just tell us a little bit about where that came from and what that's doing now?

**George Heslin:** Well, First Irish is a theatre festival that I set up three years ago in New York. It only presents Irish playwrights from Ireland who have an Irish passport. North and South of the border. The project began three years ago. Three years ago we invited five Irish playwrights to New York to put them on the subway for a week. Each one of them had to write a play inspired by each subway line. That was the idea behind the project. Then it grew out of that. The first year we presented work by 13 playwrights. Linda's company came that year to do *Disco Pigs*. Last year we did 16 and this year we did 16. So the festival has developed into a kind of citywide festival. This year we had about 25 or 28 organisations helping and supporting it. It receives funding from Tourism Ireland, the Irish Government, Culture Ireland and various organisations in New York and the Irish Examiner. Last year we brought three companies from Ireland with Culture Ireland's support and this year we had Kabosh, Guna Nua and Tall Tales from Navan. The festival just finished on Monday night. That's kind of the structure of the festival.

How we source work is through a variety of ways: through work that I know, to people that I know, we are taking submissions all the time. The biggest part of putting the festival together is taking companies through budgets and expectations of what to expect when they get to New York in terms of audiences.

**Gavin Kostick:** Could one of you explain visas?

**George Heslin:** Yes, basically one of the advantages of the festival is, if you want to travel to America there are six festivals on the East Coast of America that have what's called International Status. That's Brits Off Broadway, Lincoln Centre, Festival of Arts and Ideas in New Haven, BAM, First Irish and Charleston North Carolina. What that means is that the union have come to an agreement that we can invite companies from Ireland and that Irish companies can pay actors at the Irish rate of salary. So if you were to come to America, the whole union of America is divided up into different regions, so taking a play to Washington DC is a whole different set of rules to taking it to New York. The union sees New York as a prime location so they're very strict on rules. And then it depends on the organisation, it depends on the budget size, it depends on the size of the theatre. There are many different kinds of contracts. But the contract we have allows companies to come from Ireland where you can pay actors here but you must hire an American stage manager, which we guide you and provide to, and you must apply for performance visas. It's fair to say, all the companies who came over in the last two years, roughly the visa requirements cost about \$5,000.

**Gavin Kostick:** That's for how many people?

**George Heslin:** That covers about 5 or 6. I think for one visa it's \$2,000 and for 6 visas it's \$5,000. So \$5,000 is kind of a fair way to put that down. That's the first expense of the festival. I met a lot of companies yesterday and when I spoke about the visa they were like, oh I didn't realise you need a visa. The unions – there are three unions we work with – they have to sign off on all of this. You have to give an Equity bond which you get back 30 days after the performance. The bond this year was about \$2,100 for each company. You give that to the union and once their stage manager is paid I get the bond back and I give it back to the company. Also, the company is coming to America under the Origin tax ID number, so again that's a big thing that we provide in that the stage manager has got to file taxes and all that kind of thing.

**Gavin Kostick:** So this might cloud the notion of things. Was there ever a situation where you'd like to bring a play over but you wouldn't be allowed to use that cast because the American actor would have the right to try for that role?

**Linda Murray:** It varies from situation to situation. There are two separate things you're dealing with. You're dealing with Equity which, as George said, New York Equity and DC Equity are completely different ball games. I recently found myself in a situation with Equity where New York has a basic contract but DC doesn't have a basic contract. So I had moved onto a special agreement contract in DC, which is the lowest contract that DC allows. Then I went to New York trying to get a basic contract and they said, no, sorry. You used a special agreement contract in DC so you can't have the basic contract. It's very – it's awful. If you have the money, most large theatres have a staff person and all they do is deal with Equity all day long.

But yes, you have the Equity requirements which can sometimes mean that there is a situation depending on the particular context, where an American actor must have a right to the part before you bring over the Irish actor. Then

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there is also just getting your federal paperwork in place through visas and there's a variety of different visas you can go for. We run our visas through our law firm King & Spalding so someone like Julie Feeney coming in came to me and she wanted to do some other concert dates in addition to her residency with us. So basically my law firm acted as her sponsor and so they are her sponsor for all her tour dates. It varies. Each situation is different and it depends on what each artist coming in wants.

**Gavin Kostick:** Would that apply to dance as well?

**Linda Murray:** Yes it would. That would apply to dance as well. If you're coming in to do one show, if it's and in and out job, basically Solas Nua would act as your sponsor. If you're coming in to do multiple jobs then basically you need something like a law firm to act as your sponsor for the event, in which case we have a pro bono law firm, King & Spalding. They basically undertake to be responsible for the artists I drag through the country. They've never questioned, thank god.

**George Heslin:** They're not as strict on directors. They're obsessed with actors. So directors can come in and mount shows, anyone who has come for First Irish. They don't ask about directors.

**Linda Murray:** Yes, you have Actors' Equity -

**George Heslin:** And then you have the SSDC, the Society of Stage Directors.

**Linda Murray:** Actors' Equity is the one that's really tricky.

**George Heslin:** Also, when you're developing a company in America it's a long, long stage – it's all based on your income. So, depending on what income you get into the company you're on a certain contract. You've got to be careful in developing your company because you can't go backwards. So let's say your income is half a million and then you have a recession and your income next year is \$100,000, the unions say you can't now go backwards, and that's the end of your company. So it's really, really careful strategy in terms of development, you know.

**Gavin Kostick:** Ok, can I open it up to the audience now if anyone has questions of any kind?

**Audience 1:** John Scott, Irish Modern Dance Theatre. It's a question about boards. I have a lot of contact with dance companies in the US and I've been made aware of some very painful circumstances recently with some dance organisations. Because of the power of some board members, because of the magnitude of some of their donations, it has created some imbalances where the management and artistic team no longer necessarily have sovereignty over the idea. If someone is giving two million, they want their say. They're not just giving it. That is something that can be a problem, I've been made aware of.

**George Heslin:** Yes, we've crossed that in Origin in terms of, the board who has taken us through the first eight years, they've given a lot of brainpower into putting this organisation together. There is a trade-off. There's a wonderful guy who runs the Kennedy Centre, Michael Kaiser. If you haven't read his books, you certainly should. He's called the turnaround king. He basically analyses not-for-profit organisations and he's got big philosophies on clearing boards and all that stuff. It is hard, it is difficult. Yes, it's difficult. We have a motto: get, give or get off. But people can give in different ways. For instance, at Origin when we have a fundraiser, each board member must sell 15 tickets. They must obviously, come to all board meetings. You certainly have to introduce people with wallets to the company. Everything is discussed. It's discussed strategically. Anybody here from an American organisation can vouch for that. Anything from an opening night, to a donor being in the room, to appointing board members, you stand beside John Scott for the next two hours, and that's your job. It's that planned out, the whole thing. But yes, it's difficult. Fortunately or unfortunately we're not at the \$2 million mark yet.

**Linda Murray:** I think the other thing you can do is protect yourself. The first thing you write is your mission statement when you're starting a non-profit. The second thing you do is you write your by-laws. When you write your by-laws, that's the governing document for both your board and the staff of the organisation, that's where you have an opportunity to be patently clear about what your expectations are as an artist in terms of the control you have. For me it's never been an issue. My board is incredibly aware that I am in charge. They are not in charge of the artistic decisions. If it all goes horribly wrong it's my fault. But they don't interfere in that way. But again you've got to be very open with your board. The other thing is I think, while it's great to have artists on your board, sometimes their best role is in an advisory board

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context. Then they can be part of artistic discussions with you. But I think your board is a place to put people with business acumen. Different skill sets that you as an artist and your staff generally wouldn't have at your disposal. That's one of their functions, to steer the business end of the ship, put your strategic plan in place and help the staff navigate all of that stuff. Yes it's something you need to be aware of, that with a gift can sometimes come strings, and to be very upfront and open with the person who is making the gift in advance about what their expectations are as much as yours.

**George Heslin:** Or you can skew the gift – yes I will produce three plays from Munster with your gift – so that you channel the gift. And now that gift is used up in the next ten months, and thank you very much. Also there's a great organisation in New York called the Foundation Center, [www.foundationcenter.org](http://www.foundationcenter.org), which is a 40 year old organisation dedicated to supporting not-for-profits. If you run a theatre company you should definitely look at it. There are board packs available, strategy packs. They literally go, have a doctor, an accountant, a business owner, a small business owner. It's all there.

**Linda Murray:** Our office space is in an incubator space called Flashpoint. We are a resident organisation there] two other organisations. Something that you have to do when you join is take all of your board for a board development session. We actually have a board retreat once every six months where we bring in a mediator from a kind of a parent organisation of the Foundation Center. They send a mediator in to do a check-in about how the staff feels about how the board is behaving, how the board feels how the staff is behaving. It's a really good way to keep your board focused and on track about what the organisation actually needs.

**George Heslin:** We are going for our retreat now in November. In that retreat we have a board review pack, where every board member reviews their own performance. It's literally 50 questions. How do you feel? Do you feel you're part of the organisation? What embarrasses you about the organisation? It could be something from, I wish George wouldn't turn up in a pair of jeans at an opening night.

**Gavin Kostick:** More questions? Now that we've had a good go at American boards. Any questions while they're here? They run festivals in America. Is there anything anyone wants to know while they're here? Or anything at all.

**Audience 2:** There's also, George, following up the Foundation Center there's also the [www.donorsforum.org](http://www.donorsforum.org) which is a slightly smaller organisation. As well as, you were saying about the board packs, there's also grant-writing seminars. I know at the Foundation Center they're free. And you can get them online. And as George was saying about the board pack, it's a step-by-step process of how to write a grant, for a corporation, for a foundation, whatever. I've found them really invaluable resources.

**Linda Murray:** I think that's actually a really good point, that because you've different places to apply for grants in America, there's different ways you write grants. You don't write a grant for government the same way you write a grant for a corporation. The government wants to see community impact; the corporation usually wants to see how you're going to help promote their brand. So there's different strategies for how you write grants. Yes, grant writing workshops are invaluable.

I would say, certainly in the first couple of years of running a non-profit in America where my learning curve was very steep – it's still going but at a slightly less incline now – I went to a workshop at least once or twice a month on many different topics, just to get myself up to speed. Actually the best thing that I've ever gone to is the Kennedy Centre, not to give the Irish Theatre Institute more to do, it already does way too much – but the Kennedy Centre runs what they call their masterclass, and they run it four times a year on a different topic. They bring in their staff person from the field. The Kennedy Centre has more money than God, so their staff people are fantastic. They had a marketing session where their Director of Marketing came in and went through everything from social media through to print versus online. It was a three hour morning session, and it's free to anybody running a theatre company or any kind of arts organisation in Washington. Those sessions can be incredibly useful, just having somebody from a specialised skill set come along and in a three-hour session just go boom, boom, boom, boom. They run a board one every year as well, and all of my board members have to go to it. They always come out of it feeling that they've gained a lot of information. They're usually better board members for it.

**George Heslin:** It's also about inspiring your board. I have a lot of friends who run theatre companies here in Ireland and I hear the conversation a lot, but it's your job to inspire them. They're business people. They're bored of their day job. They're involved in your organisation because it's something different. Don't presume they know what you do. That

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comes back to the mission again. Come on John, we're the best company in Ireland because we're the only ones doing this. That comes back to the mission again.

**Gavin Kostick:** In talking to your boards, does the support in the work of the Arts Council here and Culture Ireland, does that resonate at all? Do they go, oh right, well if this is supported by a national and international body that's a good thing?

**George Heslin:** Yes, we had a situation where one of our board members, Ben Gilmartin – we had Kabosh over recently, and Ben has a friend who is a barrister in Northern Ireland. He said to Paula, I've a friend who is a barrister, are you expanding your board? And he was a guy who who'd love to be involved. The fact that Culture Ireland had supported Kabosh coming to New York, that was a huge endorsement, a huge endorsement for someone involved in the legal profession in Northern Ireland. Yes, absolutely. Having the Irish harp on something, that's why we work closely with the Irish consulate in New York. It makes a difference.

**Gavin Kostick:** Great. If, happily enough, we were to meet in five years' time and we were to do this again, just from each of you, what would you like to have achieved? What would Solas Nua have liked to have done, Origin and First Irish? Where would you be in five years' time?

**Linda Murray:** Well next season we're hoping to introduce dance, so for season seven that's one of our goals. With each season we try to expand the programme and get another area up and running. We have programme managers in each area. My actual background is in dance so I get a lot of stick all the time that I still haven't managed to represent my home community. So that's definitely something that I hope in five years will be flourishing.

Other than that, even though New York is obviously where it's at, I'm not going to even try to say DC and New York are the same thing, it is really important I think for Irish companies to come to DC more because it is the seat of political power for the US. I think you have a platform there that does different things for Irish arts in general. You have a lot of politicians in America who want to be seen to be favourable to Ireland and making them aware of your presence can lead to injections of money back into the Irish economy and into the Irish arts. I think the more of you who can come to DC and the more of you we can put in front of somebody who works for Hilary Clinton or somebody who works for some congressman, it's just generally helpful. It is also a huge theatre market in its own right. I think New York offers, certainly on an artistic level, something that you definitely want to go after, but DC offers something else. So for us five years from now I would hope that we have something approximating a centre. Somewhere definite for all of you to visit and come to. That's something we're working on right now.

**Gavin Kostick:** And just to say, your next major production just coming up is *Improbable Frequency*.

**Linda Murray:** Yes, we've got *Improbable Frequency* at the moment – and thank you to the Rough Magic people who were really helpful on that. So it's our first musical. Again, this is one of the new trends that I see coming up, musicals are now starting to become a thing that Irish companies seem to be getting a hold of. *Improbable Frequency* I think is one of those big first Irish musicals so I felt like we should give it a bash. It's going really well. We took over an empty office space and turned it into the 1940s red bank restaurant, so it's a different feel from the Rough Magic production. But the reviews so far have been really good. Yes, they have three more weeks in the run. We're hoping it will go well.

**Gavin Kostick:** Great, best of luck with that. Can you get news from the website?

**Linda Murray:** Yes, solasnua.org and anybody interested in the film festival it's irishfilmdc.org and I'm linda@solasnua.org. It couldn't be easier.

**Gavin Kostick:** George, same for you. Five years' time.

**George Heslin:** Well, Origin is European theatre and I do keep a close eye on the Bush in London. I know some of them are here today. We don't really have a desire to own buildings, because owning a building in New York is a whole other animal. I've seen a lot of theatre companies fail in New York as soon as they bought a building. They turn into a rental facility and it's a whole other beast. I think for us it's about extending the mission into the rest of Europe. Since 2002, separate to First Irish – First Irish has done 48 Irish playwrights in three years, and Origin has launched 39 European playwrights since 2002 in the US. Most of our plays up until this point have been English, Irish, Scottish and

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Welsh. Our next play is by a Romanian playwright. I think for the next 5 years for us it's about expanding into the rest of Europe in terms of contemporary translations. That's where we see the company in five years.

**Gavin Kostick:** Thanks you all for that and thanks for coming.