

Older actors strike back against an ageist system



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You can hear the actors before you see them: five spirited thespians reunited after one of their most important projects in years. Between them, they have more than 250 years' experience on stage, radio, television and film. They graduated from the Irish Theatre Institute's inaugural Prime programme in 2015, and have been busy ever since, filling out funding applications, polishing final drafts of new plays, performing around the country.

Prime was developed by the Irish Theatre Institute in association with Age and Opportunity's [Bealtaine](#) Festival. It was designed to provide career support and training opportunities for theatre practitioners aged 55-80, covering such ground as the maintenance of physical and mental wellbeing, entrepreneurial skills, social welfare, social media and funding, as well as providing opportunities to meet arts practitioners, theatre-makers and directors.

For actor [Michael Judd](#), the project came at exactly the right moment. He was not long out of hospital after open-heart surgery, and it was a "terrific, gentle reintroduction into the professional world again". Judd spent most of his professional life working the regional circuit in New York – the city where his heart problems were first detected.

"I was going for an acting job," he says. "And as part of [the casting process] you had to have a full medical. As an Equity member in America, you are medically insured once you have 12 weeks' work a year, so all the bills were paid."

Age, honour, gravitas

He came back to Ireland in 2001, but looks back upon his American entitlements with nostalgia – "There is subsidised housing, right in the middle of Manhattan, and actors' nursing homes" – because there are no similar supports in Ireland. However, what Judd feels most grievously is the lack of status accorded to actors as they age.

"In England there is an honorary system where the great actors are acknowledged and appreciated for what they contributed to the country. It would be great for there to be something similar here."

PJ Brady, an actor, producer, director, writer and poet, increasingly feels the invisibility of his generation. He started acting professionally in 1987, working at the Abbey and the Gate, touring Beckett and a play about [Patrick Kavanagh](#) all over the world. "When I started acting it was not unusual to see people on stage who were 70 or 80, but you don't get that now. Now there are younger casts everywhere, often playing older people. And it's a pity: age gives the gravitas to carry character."

Brady thinks the reason for this is practical as well as social. These days, a lot of casting takes place online, and Brady says he and his generation find that difficult and intimidating. "The cyber world is too big for me, and if you are not up to speed you miss out."

Last year, for example, he was put forward for *Game of Thrones*. "But you needed to submit a self-directed video piece within three days and I couldn't do it, so that was that." The Prime project was "an opportunity to get those sort of skills. It is continuous professional development, the kind of thing you need no matter what industry you are working in."

Chance to upskill

Actor [Angela Harding](#) agrees. "The emphasis on training, particularly in the theatre and film business, is always on younger people. But I have been learning all my life. As I work, yes, but also taking courses, at the London Actors Centre and in New York." For her, Prime was another opportunity to upskill, which is important not just for your career "but for your personal growth".

Harding, who played lead roles in dozens of [RTÉ](#) and BBC dramas, as well as on Irish and London stages, stopped acting professionally to raise her family when she was in her 30s. "I was working at the Abbey at night, doing plays in the Peacock at lunchtime, so from the practical end of things it wasn't compatible with being a mother. But I also found that when I was playing a leading role, it was too difficult to balance the emotional and physical needs of an actress and my emotional and physical needs as mother."

She returned to work as a radio announcer with [RTÉ](#), eventually finding her way back into performance through radio drama. It was then that Harding realised "the technology for putting yourself out there as an actress had changed so much".

Prime allowed Harding to hone some of these skills, and she welcomed the practical thrust of the course. “We talked about pensions and funding and application forms, and when you have no skill in business, like me, it was brilliant.”

Actor and director [Liam Burke](#) has plenty of experience in business. He spent most of his working life in hotels after leaving a permanent job at the Gate Theatre in the 1970s for a Hollywood part. Even so, he feels it is a struggle for performers and practitioners of his generation to engage with many of the mechanisms of professional theatre. “It is not that there is no help,” he says. “It is that there are so many obstacles.”

Burke, who trained in drama at DIT and took a master’s in directing at UCD after retirement, recently applied to the [Arts Council](#) for funding for an arts participation project. “It was a struggle even to get into the site, let alone do the application. In fact, it is one of the reasons Prime was founded, because older actors and directors and writers weren’t applying for things.”

[Sheila Flitton](#) has just applied to the Arts Council for the first time after completing the programme. She hopes to get funding to employ a dramaturg and finish a play. “And the fact is that I don’t even have to get it put on – that I can do it for its own sake.”

At 82, Flitton is the oldest of the participants. “I’m actually too old to be here, according to the application guidelines,” she jokes. She was so energised by the course she has applied to do it again, if she has time. Flitton is constantly working, either with the one-woman show *Beezie*, which she tours around the country in active retirement communities and nursing homes, or on television or film jobs. She finds the film industry ageist. “They ask what age you are when you are filling out applications, and then discount you if you don’t fit their profile. So I put down, cheekily, ‘What age do you want me to be?’”

Judd, who is working hard on a condensed version of Micheál Mac Liammóir’s character piece *The Importance of Being Oscar* for Bewley’s Cafe Theatre, has clearly been taking inspiration from Flitton. “That’s the thing about working in theatre, in TV, in film: you don’t retire, no matter what age you are – as long as you are healthy, you’ll say ‘I’ll do it.’”

- The participants of Prime 2015 perform a rehearsed reading of Flann O’Brien’s *Thirst in the Lord Edward Bar*, Dublin, on May 26th at 6pm and May 27th at 1pm as part of Bealtaine Festival. *The Importance of Being Oscar* is at Bewley’s Cafe Theatre until May 14th. irishtheatreinstitute.ie

BEALTAINÉ COMES OF AGE: HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 21ST ANNUAL FESTIVAL

Bealtaine celebrates its 21st birthday this year with more than 600 events in libraries, arts centres, care settings, galleries, local halls and community centres countrywide. The theme is Iconic Citizens, and the wide range of activities includes poetry readings, writing workshops, traditional music events, and art exhibitions. The highlights include:

- Visual artist Deirdre O’Mahony will present *First Citizens Speak*, a film that explores the lives of a community of older people in north Clare.
- Writer [Brian Leyden](#) is the Bealtaine national writer in residence. His book *The Home Place: A Memoir* is Bealtaine book of the month. His residency includes three performances with musician Seamie O’Dowd in Clare, Dublin and Leitrim, along with visits to writers’ groups in Sligo, Longford, Dublin, Portlaoise and Navan.
- Visual artist [Anna Spearman](#) has a residency with the Kilkenny Collective for Arts Talent (kcat.ie) – an open-access arts and lifelong learning initiative promoted by the Camphill Communities. This will be complemented by an exhibition at Damer House Gallery in Roscrea of the work of painter [Andrew Pike](#).
- WillFredd Theatre Company tours *Care* during the festival, and will be running workshops with staff in hospices.
- The Ark centre for children in Temple Bar hosts a reading event for grandparents and their grandchildren led by Marita Conlon-McKenna and [Sarah Webb](#).
- Another intergenerational literary event features writer [Mary Morrissey](#) and her niece, poet [Julie Morrissey](#); and poets Ciaran O’Rourke and his aunt [Enda Wyley](#).
- *This Is Not My Beautiful House* seminar examines how creativity and the arts contribute to better ways of living as we age. It will address how creativity should shape residential and community design to enhance human dignity and growth.

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