

## A CHANGE OF SEATS

by Mike White

Centre for arts and humanities in health and medicine, university of Durham

---

*Essay included in the Cork Capital of Culture 2005 Culture + Health Strand publication*

***Changing of seats from far to near.  
A melody, a harmony,  
Humming then awing,  
Soon there is music in every ear  
But that is not all that is happening here –***

*Excerpt from a poem by a participant in the Music in Healthcare / Mental Health project*

I made two brief visits to Cork in the autumn of 2005 to try and absorb the impact of the Culture and Health Strand within the varied facets of Cork's health and social care infrastructure. In just those few days I was able to sample the dress rehearsal for a multi-media performance work in a sheltered housing unit, a puppet show by residents of a long-stay hospital and local students, an international poetry reading on hospital radio, a specially commissioned play in an elderly persons' care home, a display of fabric art by children with dyspraxia, tree dressing in the grounds of a hospital chapel, and a folk concert in a mental health unit. I also took in some mainstream festival events that had lateral connections to the exploration of health themes, such as the 'Home' exhibition at the Crawford Gallery. And outside the Opera House I witnessed the cathartic extreme sport of fifty teenagers head-banging their way through Beethoven's *Ode To Joy*.

In between these events I gave talks on the practice and research of arts in health to mixed audiences of arts, health and social care professionals. This did feel; however, like bringing coals to Newcastle, or rather from Newcastle where I happen to live. Because culture and health has been such an integral part of the Cork 2005: European Capital of Culture programme, Cork is now as ahead of the game on arts in health practice as anywhere else I can think of. It is a privilege to have been asked to reflect on what has happened here and to provide some words for this publication.

My title for this essay derives from a poem by a participant (now training to become a music facilitator) in the Music in Healthcare/ Mental Health project at St. Stephen's Hospital in Glanmire. The line "Changing of seats from far to near" seems to sum up both the context and achievement of the Culture and Health Strand in the Cork 2005 programme. It speaks of inclusion, confluence, empowerment and an engagement with the arts that is personalised through the creation of a congenial space for its enjoyment. But as the author writes, "that is not all that is happening here" – the outcomes have been as wide-ranging as the programme itself. The Culture and Health Strand has been an ambitious initiative comprising of three key projects, ten artist residencies and over twenty smaller, yet no less significant, performances, workshops and events.

Despite the exponential growth internationally in arts in health practice in recent years, Cork has done something that nowhere else has so far attempted – to articulate the relationship between arts and health services throughout a city and its environs and to build the potential and vitality of such a relationship on the involvement of those who might otherwise be

marginalised due to their health status. The brightest legacy that a Capital of Culture designation can offer is a renewed confidence and cohesion, notable not just in centres of cultural excellence but also in centres of necessity – in hospitals, care homes and in social services settings, both formal and informal. The Cork 2005 office also did a relatively simple thing that must be acknowledged – it consistently facilitated access to its mainstream events programme for people dependent on care. Other festivals could learn from this.

Worldwide there is a developing orientation of community arts, cultural education and outreach services to address health issues. The international conference on arts and health held in Dublin by the Arts Council in June 2004 took stock of what was happening in Ireland and elsewhere and set out an agenda for its future development. In alliance with the Health Service Executive (HSE) Southern Area, Cork 2005 has advanced that agenda and shown the relevance of local arts development to current health policy.

The Culture and Health Strand has provided a clear example of how the arts can engage in the partnership approach advocated in the Government's Quality and Fairness Health Strategy (2002). That report's foreword written by the then Health Minister Micheál Martin, T.D. for Cork South, stressed the importance of addressing health inequalities caused by poverty and disadvantage and noted that "the strategy at all points envisages cross-disciplinary collaboration to achieve new standards, protocols and methods." The report elaborated on this later in declaring that "many other factors, and therefore many other individuals, groups, institutions and public and private sector bodies have a part to play in the effort to improve health status and achieve the health potential of the nation." The Strategy acknowledged that cultural conditions can impact on the social determinants of health and recognised the "formal and informal roles of family and community in improving and sustaining well-being in society". It concluded that "the quality of life aspect of health needs to be highlighted. This will involve creating a supportive environment to maximise social well-being for vulnerable groups".

Using the arts to help develop that 'supportive environment' in the context of a city and region is a considerable challenge, and it has required a diversity of work in both healthcare and social settings. Some of the culture and health projects in 2005 have focused on the intrinsic therapeutic benefits of the arts, some on environmental improvements to support health staff in delivering their care services, and others have looked at producing more creative approaches to achieving patient-centred care. In addition, there has been community-based arts in health work tackling issues of social exclusion and focusing on a concept of social capital where 'unity is health'. These are arts projects that start from the point of using creativity to enhance social relationships, reflecting growing evidence that good relationships are a major determinant of health.

For Cork 2005's Culture and Health Project Manager Ann O'Connor "the year has been one of nurtured and informed experimentation", but only now perhaps is it possible to reflect on what has really been achieved. There is recognition that the programme has been a learning process for all involved. As a member of the Cork 2005/ HSE Working Group for the Strand commented, "the strength of this programme is that there has been a huge respect for the competencies and skills and peculiarities of all our fields." Such a sharing of perspectives has infused the co-ordination as well as the actual delivery of the projects. It has established a confident base for cross-disciplinary research, coupled with patient involvement, that I believe should be the way forward in the evaluation of arts in health.

Firstly and rightly, the Culture and Health Strand placed patients and HSE clients at the centre of the work, and through their participation in creative activities sought to celebrate their

relationships with staff, carers and the wider public. This was a bold move, for often with arts in health the safer recourse is simply to commission artworks and performances for healthcare settings. A combination of both approaches, signals a momentum has been generated in all involved to continue this work well beyond 2005.

The appropriately titled 'Encounters' project is a unique partnership developed between two organisations from the arts and health sectors. Triskel Arts Centre and St. Finbarr's Hospital. This partnership gave the Project Co-ordinator, Charlotte Donovan the opportunity to evolve a calendar of quality artist residencies, workshops, installations and events throughout 2005. Early in the year Charlotte took the time to develop relationships with staff and patients as a precursor to any art activity, so that attention could be given not just to the artwork itself but to how it enhances the daily life of the hospital. "I didn't approach this as my residency", she says, "but as something we want to happen".

An arts-led Open Day on the feast of St. Finbarr in September gave thousands the opportunity to experience the hospital not as an array of clinical and rehabilitative units but as a living community. It also overturned the hospital's design limitations in identifying indoor and outdoor spaces that could provide a patient-centred environment for both personal and communal contemplation and enjoyment. It relieved the sadness that many felt about the place, partly due perhaps to its workhouse origins, and instead affirmed the best qualities of an old-style, community-based hospital. But it is not only the image of the hospital that is improved. As the Head of Nursing observes, "this artwork is health promoting, and it's keeping the patients alive. It is providing a vitality that is as crucial to health as treatment." The hospital has secured funds to continue the programme in 2006, and to extend the project's activities out of the hospital into the city.

Sustainability of course cannot be built on enthusiasm alone; it also requires reflective assessment of the impact of arts interventions in health and indicators of their benefits. Music Network's evaluation of its project Music in Healthcare/Mental Health was crucial to its aim to establish a model of good practice for music in mental healthcare settings. This project was based in St. Stephen's Hospital, Glanmire and the Carrigmore Centre, Shanakiel. The combination of direct observation, reflective practice by the musicians, and testimony gathered from staff and patients at St. Stephen's and Carrigmore, suggest that key benefits of the participatory music sessions were a fostering of empathy and self-esteem among participants, and restoring "a sense of individuality that is often lost or damaged when a person suffers from mental illness". Improved self-esteem is a frequently cited benefit of arts participation generally, and it is a prime determinant of health as epidemiologist Sir Michael Marmot, the leading authority on the impact of status on health, has observed:

*All societies have rankings because individuals are unequal in a variety of ways; but not all societies have the same gradients in health. What matters is the degree to which inequalities in ranking lead to inequalities in capabilities ... the lower in the hierarchy you are the less likely it is that you will have full control over life and opportunities for full social participation. Autonomy and full social participation are so important for health that their lack leads to deterioration in health.*

Cultural involvement can help mitigate the adverse effects of exclusion and low status. A recent study commissioned by the UK's Mental Health Foundation showed that people who experienced moderate to severe mental health problems identified the ability to make their own choices and take control as a major factor in the maintenance of mental health. The model that Music Network developed in Cork allows patients to access their own innate musical skills and exercise artistic choice within a context of collective creativity. To help identify such impacts

from the perspective of both clients and staff, Music Network's researcher has concluded that a participatory approach to evaluation with clarity of aims and objectives is crucial. The challenge for future research into a project like this is whether that first step to choice can lead to greater autonomy and restored health of mind.

For research to be meaningful; however, there must be continuity of the activity to assess its impact over time. The Culture and Health Strand has used its key projects as frames on which the health services can weave connections with other arts groups, both professional and amateur. When I visited the Carrigmore Centre in December the Cork Singers Club's session in the day room was concluding with a rousing *Fairytale of New York* with staff and patients in fine voice. Such celebration is actually heir to a much older custom.

In the late nineteenth century Cork Asylum boasted a 20-strong band led by a professional bandmaster. A local newspaper report from 1876 on the band's Christmas concert noted that: "The ballroom is a spacious and lofty apartment, and has recently been painted and decorated with artistic skill by the inmates. A splendid band is directed by an efficient bandmaster. Dancing, singing and other amusements are indulged in, and this treatment has from long experience proved more effectual in restoring the senses than the more stern procedure of close confinement." So arts in health is by no means a new venture for Cork. There are many similar examples too of health institutions in the UK and US that have a long history of engagement with the arts. The difference nowadays is that, whereas they once simply made good sense, public spending pressures and accountability now require that they prove their validity to the arts funding system and clinical governance.

'MOMENT' was perhaps the best-realised example of a participatory arts in health project asserting its quality and relevance to both contemporary art practice and person-centred care. This multi-media project with residents and staff at O'Connell Court sheltered housing unit produced what its Artistic Director Molly Sturges describes as "an engaged ensemble". Over three months the carefully nurtured relationships between artists and participants developed organically into a performance piece that is part-reminiscence, part 'live' art. As one staff member observes, "it came alive, grew out of abstract things ... and created a kind of family". It drew the incidental details of participants' everyday lives and recollections into a creative exchange with artists working in different media to produce a shared experience that celebrated and astonished. The radiance of the performers made clear the whole process had been great fun. 'MOMENT' had an artistic rigour that at first may have mystified the participants but in the end proved revelatory. As one member commented, "you want more of it – you don't want it to stop". It challenged and briefly changed ingrained patterns of care management and mundanity, leading one care manager to declare "it elevated minds to things other than survival here". There were also identified health benefits for some participants, such as less frequent visits to the doctor, less medication required, and more regular sleep patterns.

At the moment, 'MOMENT' may only live on through its dissemination and the individual benefits it may have left residents and staff in O'Connell Court. Ideally, it could have toured to other care homes in the district building the confidence of its ensemble cast to continue beyond a one-off project. But in the process of making 'MOMENT' it was difficult to predict its outcome. Because community-based arts in health projects often are characterised by 'informed experimentation' it is common for them to only realise their potential and the research agenda that could inform them at the close of the work. This further argues a need for their sustainability so that they are not diversionary entertainments but pathways to improved health and social integration that can meet the needs and raised expectations of participants.

But the energy and resources that have gone into Cork 2005's Culture and Health Strand

have delivered a palette of possibilities that goes beyond the albeit vast confines of a year-long international festival. The deep immersion of arts into healthcare settings has sparked a cross-sector dialogue that is essential for continuation of the work, so the finale conference in February 2006 is actually a prologue. In taking stock of what has been achieved in the year, it seems evident that the key projects, artist residencies programme and the twenty or so smaller initiatives which took place have laid the groundwork for a vibrant network of arts in health activity around the city. The sheer diversity of practice and context in these projects has brought arts in health practice into alignment with arts for older people, disability arts, arts for special needs groups, and arts in education. Having these connections at grassroots level should place the arts in a strong position to address policy making initiatives at Government level.

Several of the artist residencies had an integral training element, which sought to build connections between artists, health workers and community representatives, thereby redefining the 'arts in health practitioner' as not being just the artist but rather a network of people keen to explore a health issue creatively. A focus on resource development underpinned the delivery of the arts activity itself.

Dance Facilitator, Jo Nichols's 'A Time To Dance' project, for example, took place in a number of settings where elderly people receive health or social service support. The project involved a team of dance tutors who were in most cases also healthcare staff and community workers. As the project developed the team evaluated and analysed its work. A notable observation was the surprise of many healthcare staff at the agility, enjoyment and concentration of older people once they got involved. At the end of the project the lessons learned and the guidelines for good practice which were developed were fed back to a wider peer group of 27 dance tutors. The project alerted dance resources and care services in the region to what can be offered to elderly residents – and it achieved this on a modest budget.

Similarly the 'Cobh Regeneration' project, facilitated by Sirius Arts Centre, trained a women's group to facilitate visual arts work in a day care centre. It established clear health aims within the district's regeneration agenda. The lead artist Marie Brett helped develop skills in the facilitators in project management and reflective practice, providing them with a strong grounding in community-based arts in health. The artworks emerged naturally out of the learning relationship forged between the apprentice artists, day centre staff and older people. The five collage canvasses that were produced map the journey of the project and embody the revitalisation of the Cobh district through the eyes and handiwork of its senior residents.

'Cobh Regeneration' appears to have been an exemplary project and its documentation could provide a useful template for future activity. It created a domestic familiarity around the art making. My experience of arts in health projects elsewhere has taught me that this is the magic ingredient of good practice in this field. As a daughter of one of the Cobh participant's comments, "it has given my Mam dignity. I can feel the heart in the works." Dignity may be an important trigger to sustaining health. Richard Horton, editor of *The Lancet*, has noted that "injuries to individual and collective dignity may represent a hitherto unrecognised pathogenic force with a destructive capacity towards physical, mental and social well-being at least equal to that of viruses and bacteria". This is why maintaining and enhancing a culture of person-centred care through the arts can be an important adjunct to health services.



*image: Cobh Regeneration / lead artist Marie Brett*

Even an ephemeral experience of creative engagement, when it touches on the personal, can have a resounding impact. What most impressed a staff worker on the puppetry project in St. Raphael's Centre in Youghal, for example, was "the gentleness of it". This project, 'MOMENT' and others in the programme built inter-generational links between care institutions and local schools, providing a mutual learning experience that fostered a positive regard between the young and the vulnerable. Dignity conferred through communal attainment in the arts has been a palpable social outcome.

The Culture and Health Strand merits critical reflection by all who have been involved in it because it has brought into the open patients and clients' views on services provided to them and the very meaning of health, and indeed the meaning of culture. The projects themselves have helped democratise this process, the development of a Forum Theatre project with people with disabilities called 'Finding A Voice' is an example. This project, which is based in St. Laurence's Cheshire Home, enabled and facilitated the residents to articulate health and social care issues that mattered to them. Forum Theatre could also be seen as a metaphor for the cross-sector collaboration that has fuelled the Culture and Health Strand. In Forum Theatre you participate not only as an audience member, but also as an actor or director, as you bring your unique level of expertise to bear on the issues identified by the group.

What I think has worked best in the Culture and Health Strand is that it has not required the arts to demonstrate their worth to healthcare at every turn; rather it has examined the value of the relationships built up through arts activity between staff and the public. It has signposted the benefits rather than the instruments, and so allowed the quality of the art produced to speak for itself.

The creation of a position of Arts and Health Co-Ordinator for the remainder of 2006 by the HSE Southern Area is an indicator that there is confidence within the system to drive this

work forward. There is also recognition that the whole is greater than the sum of parts. As a member of the Cork 2005/HSE Working Group commented to me, “we have to be careful that a conference does not just become a reflection on the projects, and that it is a reflection on the structures and process as well”.

We are beginning to see that successful arts in health projects attempt to establish a continuum of support for people with health problems to improve both their well-being and creative skills. Much of the practice and learning going on in this field can usefully contribute to wider health promotion strategies and the development of participatory arts with the general public. They need not be seen simply as specialist services for excluded minorities, but rather as core applications of the arts to encourage a healthy culture in a healthier nation.

---