

Creative Ireland makes U.S. debut

By Orla O'Sullivan
letters@irishecho.com

Creative Ireland - a government arts initiative that debuted in Ireland last month—was launched on the international stage last Friday in New York City.

Minister for the Arts Heather Humphreys announced Ireland's vow to put culture at the center of government policy, and committed €2 million in funding to the arts in the U.S.

The big winner was the Irish Arts Center, which received €1 million (\$1.06 million) to build its new premises in Manhattan, plus one fifth of the other million that the government is providing for arts programs for the entire U.S. this year.

Speaking to a gathering of IAC supporters, Thursday night, Minister Humphreys said, "This center is not just for New York, but for the U.S."

Executive Director Aidan Connolly told the Echo that he has been visiting venues around the country with an eye to bringing some IAC programs nationwide. Already, the center has brought work to Boston and played "a significant role," he said, in the 1916 commemorations at the Kennedy Center in D.C.

Ireland's centenary celebrations inspired Creative Ireland, the Humphreys noted, during its official launch abroad at the launch of the Irish Consulate. The unanticipated level of engagement, spawning 3,500 commemorative events at home and



Irish Consul General Barbara Jones.

1,000 abroad, was something the government decided it could not let pass.

"It developed into a legacy program," the minister said. "We have remembered and reflected. Now, we are into the reimagine stage."

"I'm launching the international dimension of Creative Ireland," she said, noting that its director is John Cannon, who headed Ireland 2016.

The former Bord Fáilte marketing executive was also behind the Gathering, a 2013 tourism initiative designed to

draw members of the Irish diaspora to Ireland.

Branding—by any other name—is a key element of Creative Ireland's five-year plan. The government calls it, "Unifying Our Global Reputation." The minister's prepared remarks noted: "Culture Ireland, our embassies, consulates and agencies do tremendous work to present Ireland to overseas audiences—but now we want to combine all of their efforts to ensure that we capture the overarching narrative of our unique creativity and cultural heritage."

Humphreys said at the Irish Art Center, "For many, this is their first experience of Irish culture. It's a taste of Ireland that most likely brings them to Ireland at some later date."

Poet Paul Muldoon, one of several artists who performed at the event for the minister at the IAC, said, "It seems crass to use such a term as 'cultural tourism.'" However, he added, any cultural activity, "helps us to make sense of who we are."

Irish-American philanthropist Loretta Brennan Glucksman, who said she visited the minister at home in County Monaghan to encourage her to support the IAC, was in a playful mood Thursday. She followed Consul General Barbara Jones with "You go, girl!" then turned to Humphreys to say, "You are welcome here to New York anytime. You don't have to bring a million, but it would be lovely."

Another international emphasis in the plan is establishing



Minister for the Arts Heather Humphreys speaking at the United States launch of Creative Ireland on Friday.

Ireland as a media production hub, exemplified by the movie "Brooklyn," based on Colm Tóibín's novel of that name.

Visitors will likely be attracted to a big annual cultural celebration on Easter Monday that Creative Ireland will inaugurate this year.

For Irish residents, what is being dubbed an "artists' dole," is likely to be huge. Financial aid for working artists, such as exists on Continental Europe, is to be tested. And parents will welcome the promise of universal computer coding and arts instruction for school children.

The increased arts budget will also help the U.S., bringing a dozen bands to the South by Southwest festival, Irish films to Sundance, and visual artists to Portland and L.A., for example.

Support for Irish theatre includes funding for the Irish Repertory Theatre in Manhattan, where Minister Humphreys saw its hit production of "Finnian's Rainbow." "They do wonderful work showcasing Irish work to an audience that is not just Irish," Humphreys said to the Echo.

The minister also went to BAM to meet one of the first beneficiaries of the year, Galway's Druid Theatre, visiting with a 20th-anniversary production of "The Beauty Queen on Leenane."

And she met the Irish caucus of the New York City Council to thank it for contributing to 1916 commemorations.

New York City provided the lion's share of the IAC's renovation cost, \$37 million of \$60 mil-

lion required. (Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs contributed several million euro to the construction before the recent contribution by Minister Humphreys's department.)

Bill Mulrow, secretary to New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, spoke at the IAC, remembering his parents, who emigrated from Clonbur, Co. Galway. "I can't help but imagine if in 1948 there was an Irish Arts Center how much easier their transition would have been," he said.

The IAC is evidently and increasingly cramped in its original 1972 premises and has several times gone off-site for events that exceed the capacity of its 99-seat theatre.

It will build on its existing site at West 51st Street in Manhattan and expand around the corner onto 11th Avenue, taking the place of a garage there that is soon to be demolished. (The garage, Cybert Tire, was built in 1916.)

Before its demolition it will house immersive theatre from leading Irish playwright Enda Walsh. "Rooms" will be performed in May.

Another element of the 2017 season IAC just announced is a current-affairs conversation series, whose first guest will be Northern Ireland peace broker George Mitchell.

Connolly promised the gathering, "This will be a groundbreaking year in every way."

"The new IAC is about so much more than a new building. It's a new idea of who we are."