

IRISH PLAYWRIGHTS' AND SCREENWRITERS' GUILD

**REPORT TO THE ANNUAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE FEDERATION
OF SCREENWRITERS IN EUROPE**

February 2010 – Berlin

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.” (W. B Yeats)

“The world is in a state of chassis.” (Sean O’Casey)

“I can’t go on. I’ll go on.” (Samuel Beckett)

Having flown too close to the sun the Irish state is currently plunging towards the ground, covered in melting wax and feathers, trying to sort out our problems as we fall. Recession has hit Ireland very hard with the problems of the world economy exacerbated by a property bubble collapse of gigantic proportions.

The Government Budget in December of 2009 reduced spending by more than three billion euros per annum by reducing services and reducing the wages of public sector workers.

Initial proposals in respect of the arts and culture budget were to close the Irish Film Board, cut the Arts Council’s budget and do away with our artists’ income tax exemption scheme.

The national broadcaster relies heavily on advertising which is in a state of free fall at present leading to cuts in the volume of production and reduction in salaries and fees for everyone at the national broadcaster including writers.

The volume of work available to writers has shrunk rapidly and the prices paid are also reducing.

As you would expect the Irish Guild has been primarily engaged in lobbying activities of one kind or another for the last number of months (trying to explain why it is more important to spend money on the arts than invest in inoculation against cancer in young girls).

Effective lobbying by a group of organisations in the film industry has secured a future for the Film Board at least in the short term but cuts to arts organisations are running at between 15% and 20%. Our Guild worked closely with the Directors Guild on the subject of the Film Board in our allocated role of fighting the trench warfare of political lobbying – organising individual members to meet local political representatives and trying to build a consensus about the economic value of the Film Industry (as distinct from its cultural value which we largely downplayed).

The income tax exemption for artists has been particularly hard to fight for and there is no evident consensus in the general world of the arts on the topic. However, somewhat to our surprise, the scheme has survived (although there is now a ‘cap’ on it which means that you must start to pay some tax when your annual income reaches €125,000.)

Our key pitch was that the 2500 badly paid creative artists make the raw material which provides jobs for the 47,500 people (2.5% of the work force) who work in arts and culture in Ireland – but frankly we did not get much purchase with this idea.

So, in fact, while things are certainly very tough, the arts budgets have survived, and at a higher level of support than many people feared.

It is anticipated that in Ireland the recession will take a longer time to reverse than in other countries and we therefore expect difficult budgets again next year and the year after – but at least for now we will survive for one more year!

We held our third annual ZeBBies award late last year. The awards are based on making the best scripts of the year, in radio, television, theatre and film, available to our members who read and vote (all online). The award is strictly for the scripts so it does not matter if the readers and voters have seen the production or not.

A ceremony is held to announce and celebrate the winners. You can see a rather basic three minute video of this year’s ceremony on our blog <http://irishscriptwritersguild.blogspot.com/>

The ZeBBies system has some other benefits. Because we have to collect a complete list of all productions in the year as the basis for the nominating procedure we have a very useful database for analysing the scale and the trends in writing for performance (radio, film, theatre and television).

We can say that there are just under 300 persons each year who are paid for writing for television, film theatre or radio which is produced in Ireland, with the largest group being the one writing for television.

Over the two years we looked at, some 450 persons earned some money for writing for production. Average income in each year is €15,000. But average income over the two

years is lower (because of the many who had work in only one year) at just under €10,000.

The representation of women in the profession is a little more than 40% in total although this is heavily skewed in favour of television and long running series in particular - women are very badly represented in writing for feature film.

The IPSG now has 545 members (of whom 218 are associate members).

There seems to be a possibility that just when we did not think it possible to get busier the Competition Law issue is coming back on the table. The largest Irish trade union got a concession from government that promised a change in Irish competition law that might have provided a solution to the issue. We had thought that recent economic problems had put this issue on the back burner but in recent months we have heard a rumour that legislation is actually being prepared. This might be a great thing (if we are included) or a disaster (if we are excluded from the provisions of the proposed legislation).

The Guild continues to represent its members in contract and dispute issues at the national broadcaster, the Irish language broadcaster and with independent producers. (We have been involved in a particularly difficult row about an Oscar nominated project which raises interesting questions about writers involvement in awards.) We provide contract advice to individuals. We have been involved in discussions about cuts in fees to writers with the national broadcaster similar to those being imposed on all the stations staff. We have been involved in negotiations for online catch-up services on the national broadcaster and for changes in work practise at the Irish language station. We provide a fortnightly newsletter to members; while updating the blog on a daily basis and we have a twitter service used by a small number of people. We maintain writers groups and organise courses and information meetings.

We have arrived in the eccentric position of having a Guild which is more and more busy in a development and production environment which is more and more quiet.

Audrey O'Reilly, Chairwoman.

David Kavanagh, Chief Executive.
Irish Playwrights' and Screenwriters' Guild