

IRISH PLAYWRIGHTS' AND SCREENWRITERS' GUILD

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

Brussels March 2011

The implications of Ireland's ruinous financial situation continue to dominate most aspects of the Guilds work.

Public expenditure has significantly decreased and audiences for arts activities of all kinds have fallen. Reduction in advertising spend has further impacted on broadcasting.

The volume of work available to writers has shrunk further and the prices paid for that work have also fallen. We anticipate that there will be an increase in voluntarism in the arts – people working for nothing – and the likely introduction of job creation schemes by government where unemployed people work for minimum wage, or are allowed to keep unemployment payments, while undertaking voluntary work.

As reported last year the budgets for the Arts and for film actually survived relatively well – there is a perception in government circles that the arts are one of the few remaining areas of success in Irish life. However there will certainly be continuing reductions in government expenditure over the next years.

One result of these cuts that impacts directly on the Guild members is that the income tax exemption for artists has been reduced in its scope. Creative artists now pay income tax on income over €40,000 per annum. Of the approximately 2,600 people who benefit from the scheme each year 86% have incomes from their work as artists under €40,000 – so, along with other artists organisations, we have not objected to this limitation on the scheme.

(Screenwriters in Ireland earn an average of under €15,000 per annum from their work as writers, with those earnings being extremely erratic.)

Given the cuts in funding the volume of production has held up well. The number of feature films made per annum is still in excess of twenty (the number of short films seems to have gone up significantly); production volumes of television drama have decreased in English language production (one hundred and forty hours approximately – including one long running series), but increased in Irish language production (sixty five hours approximately – including one long running series); premieres of new productions in theatre have stayed about the same (at about fifty per annum) as have plays for radio (about thirty five productions of varying lengths).

So far as we can assess the situation there are significantly less projects being put into paid development and the prices being paid to writers are dropping. (Production budgets for feature films are also falling.)

The Competition law issue continues to be a matter of considerable frustration. We believe that draft legislation exists to address the issue, which the last government had on its agenda. However continuing political turmoil over the last months meant that most of the Governments legislative agenda was abandoned, as the government collapsed. A recent election has brought a new government – a coalition of centre right and centre left – and we have no idea as to their attitude to amending competition law. Obviously the matter is a priority for us.

We have invested considerable time and energy lobbying at government and administrative levels and have put in place a new grouping which is a coalition of artists' organisations called the Association of Artists Representative Organisations.

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 provide contract advice to individuals. A notable trend has been the increase in disputes between writer and producers over failure to pay fees – usually because the production company is in financial difficulties.

We continue to provide a fortnightly newsletter to members; while updating the blog and twitter service on a daily basis. We maintain writers groups (there are now five) and organise courses and information meetings.

Our annual ZeBBies awards for best writing in film, television, theatre and radio will take place in May this year. We have decided to add on an additional award for short film from this year onwards. The essence of the ZeBBie award is the publication of a shortlist of scripts online which are read and voted for by Guild members.

The IPSPG has 410 members, a reduction of approximately one hundred following a decision to reduce the number of associate members in the Guild (associate members are aspirant writers who have not yet contracted to write).

We try to keep cheerful.