

# Annual Report 2020



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## Introduction

In many ways, 2020 was a watershed year for writers and the Guild itself and one filled with irony. The Coronavirus devastated the economy and shut down TV and film productions as well as theatres and performance spaces and yet the response from government and state agencies has been to pump unprecedented amount of capital into development which clearly benefits writers both professionally and financially.

On the face of it, staying isolated and working from home is, for many in the Guild, the 'old normal' – if that is a phrase - and required little adjustment to their daily routine compared the others. However, a survey we ran in Spring revealed that nearly two thirds of our members cannot earn a fulltime living from their writing are therefore exposed to the very same vicissitudes that have befallen the rest of the economy.

Personnel changes at the top of key agencies provoked a series of very welcome if unexpected dialogues. We have noted a greater sense of engagement with the issues we have presented and willingness to discuss real change which frankly was not present in the past. Strange days indeed.

The Guild, like many organisations, has had to embrace the virtual (our AGM and Awards show, the ZeBBies were online. We hope to significantly improve the amount of online support and information to the membership and present that in an easy to navigate and comprehensive online format.

So now let's take a closer look at what's been happening since last year.

# Membership

## 2018/2019

- Membership (to end May): 496  
Female 209 (42%). Male 287 (58%)
- Membership fees received (excluding PayPal fees): €13,816<sup>1</sup>
- Fee-paying members: 216 (or 43%)
- New members: 49
- Payments via the website: 88%

## 2019/2020 (to end August)

- Current membership: 571 (380 full members & 191 associates)
- Female 249 (44%). Male 322 (56%)
- Membership fees received to end August: €6,400 (excluding paypal fees)
- Fee-paying members to end August: 99 (56 Full members & 43 Associates)<sup>2</sup>
- New members: 40



<sup>1</sup> (€12,081 payments received via our PayPal facility on the website and €1,735 in cheques/postal orders and cash). The accounting figure of €14,164 takes into account fees paid by members in late 2018 for 2019 and also in early 2020 for 2019

<sup>2</sup> The average payment received is €64 while the mean is €60.

Usually, 40% of Guild members will pay their fees by year's end. The average for membership payment in European guilds is approximately 45%.

### **The effect of Covid on membership fee payments:**

In 2020, pre-Covid, membership fees were generally consistent with the start of a new year but immediately after Covid the payments received dropped significantly and have remained consistently low since then. During the first two and a half months of this year (to Covid), 52 members had paid, but in the five and a half months since then (since Covid to end August) only 47 members have paid.

The decrease in membership payments this year is most likely due to our members' concerns about their income because of Covid. Another consequence of Covid is that people have been avoiding travelling to banks and post offices, therefore of the payments made to end August this year, an even higher number of payments have been made via the website (96%).

## Screen Ireland

Feature film production also shut down during the crisis and production is only now resuming after a six-month gap. Desireé Finnegan took over as Chief Executive at Screen Ireland from James Hickey and introduced a welcome change of style. Our meetings with her have been friendly and frank with nearly always positive outcomes. She okayed the first rise in our funding in five years and entered into a dialogue with the Guild *before* finalising the suite of supplemental support schemes designed to alleviate hardship across the sector due to Covid. It would hard to see any of her predecessors acting in a similar fashion.

The result of those negotiations was the allocation of a ring-fenced €100,000 for screen writers - €50,000 to supplement their new writing scheme, 'Spotlight', and the balance to the Screenplay award. Not everything has been sweetness and light, however. The introduction of a Director's Conceptual fund laid bare some of the structural inequalities in the development process; a point we explored in a recent meeting with Ms. Finnegan and the development team.

We pointed out that while producers and directors could apply for development funding for TV projects, screenwriters could not. Directors could apply for 'concept development funding' with little more than a sketchy outline of a prospective project while writers were expected to turn out a 25-35 pages treatment (amended to 10 pages after our intervention) for even less funding (€12,000 as opposed to €30,000). When we noted the disparity in the number of Feature Film Development Loans (which are accessible only by producers) versus the Screenplay Loans awarded to writers runs to about 9:1, Ms. Finnegan told us that writers do benefit significantly from the former claiming that 47% of money awarded to producers in the last 4 rounds had gone to writers. We'd like to hear your opinion about that, good or bad.

We also made the case to increase the value of the award within the screenplay loan category. They undertook to review the points we have made and discuss them with their board and get back in touch. We'll let you know the result when they do.

As part of the Covid 19 measures, Screen Ireland created a Stakeholders fund to allow organisations to run online courses and events which we have successfully applied for. The €15,000 award will enable us to upgrade our creaking digital infrastructure and run a series of virtual events over the next six months. The new website will offer significantly more practical advice and news as well as an online archive of talks and events.

In autumn of last year, we concluded the final negotiations with Screen Ireland for writers' access to the Recoupment Corridor. In essence, if a Screen Ireland-funded production achieves profitability, forty per cent of the original loan is returned to Screen Ireland. The remaining sixty is split between the producers who get 40% and the writers and director who get 10% each. This was an important first step in ensuring that writers are guaranteed to share in the success of projects they have created. We will talk later about the European Copyright Directive which we hope will provide another mechanism to reward writers.

Finally, in this section, we should acknowledge that the short to medium term prospects for European feature film production look pretty bleak. Ireland makes niche movies: quirky comedies, gritty social realist dramas and increasingly, low-budget horror – all of which rely on functioning festivals and markets and the network of small independent cinemas across the continent.

Co-production finance, which is the life blood of European cinema, is under threat as investors, sales companies and distributors balk at the economic impact of extended cinema closures followed by government-enforced radically restricted seating plans (and thus ticket sales). Fewer screens making less profits generate less income to re-invest in production. Don't be surprised if this year's focus on development finds many great feature scripts unable to source financing.

Without interventions at EU and national levels, the inevitable chicken-and-egg will follow: the disappearance of European content from what screens that remain and its replacement with glossy, high budget US franchises.

## Broadcasting

### **RTE**

After a long hiatus, *Fair City* got back into production and on to our screens. The show is a significant employer of screenwriters in Ireland and the loss of income caused by the stoppage has taken a toll. The need to mitigate the risk of infection has slowed production and reduced the number of episodes shootable from 4 to 3 per week. The long term impact on writing opportunities is still unclear.

Elsewhere in RTE Drama, Shane Murphy has settled in as Group Head of Drama. The Guild has had a number of meetings with him and his deputy David Crean. They have committed to continue to develop and commission new works using their existing 2020 budget and are open to early pitches by writers.

Shane has turned the department's focus aggressively toward co-production with the intention of boosting output from one and a half productions per year to four, leaning heavily into his previous employer Acorn Entertainment for financing. Two of the products of this policy: *The South Westerlies* and *Dead Still* are on, or will shortly be on, our screens. Two productions were mid-shoot at the time of the lockdown and they hope to complete them as soon as possible. They are also planning a multi-part returnable youth drama which they hope will provide for new young talent under an experienced show-runner.

### **McCraith Commission**

A question mark as ever lies over the parlous state of RTE's finances which have been severely impacted by both the drop in advertising revenue and a fall in licence fee revenue. The previous government established the McCraith commission to examine models for Public Service Broadcasting, but the composition of members is unknown as yet and it is unclear how and when it will begin its enquiries.

In a positive move, media and arts were combined under one minister, Catherine Martin, which may encourage a more holistic approach that looks not only at the financial challenges but also the cultural benefits of a properly financed public broadcast sector.

### **AVMS**

One of the positive benefits of RTE's financial woes was their initiative in forming an audio-visual lobby group (comprising WGI, SPI, SDGI, TG4 and others) to make the case for the introduction of a levy on broadcasters and streamers offering audio-visual services in the state. Such a levy is

permissible under the Audio Media Services Directive which was passed by the European Parliament last year.

The WGI has played a large part in formulating the group's strategy and has proposed that the levy would fund both development and production of TV drama thus providing further opportunities and revenue for Irish writers. Many details are still being worked out within the lobby including just which organisation would administer this fund – a new body (unlikely), BAI or Screen Ireland.

The timeframe to establish this fund is estimated at 2-3 years and is expected to raise an additional €13m.

### **Virgin Media**

The independent broadcaster is under a considerable amount of financial pressure with the downturn in advertising. They forecast a drop of 25-30% on last year. They have however continued to call out for episodic drama, building on the success of *The Deceived* and *Darklands*.

At a 'Meet The Commissioners' session in 2019, Frank Agnew said they were looking for other projects that had a strong premise, compelling and realistic characters, contemporary setting and co-production potential. Whether they will have the money to finance anything in 2019, even with BAI funding remains to be seen.

### **TG4**

The Connemara-based broadcaster continues to support Irish language talent with the return of Ros Na Rún. Its drama policy outside of that centres around their Cine-4 scheme which cobbles together funding from the WRAP fund, Screen Ireland and BAI to produce feature films in the Irish language.

This year's production is starting to shoot next week. It's called *Fanacht* and produced by Inscéal and directed by Colm Bairéad. A second feature is scheduled to go in spring of next year.

### **High-End Drama**

Netflix's follow up to *Vikings* entitled *Valhalla* went back into production in August after lockdown was lifted. The 24-episode series will utilise largely Irish talent in front of and behind the camera.

In Troy Studios, Apple's epic *Foundation* series should provide employment for several years to come if further Covid outbreaks can be averted.

To meet the surge in blow-in production, both Ardmore and Ashford Studios are expanding and James Morris's long-gestating Studio complex is seeking planning in west Dublin.

For Irish writers though, it is extremely difficult to get assignments on shows like these as the US financiers are deeply conservative about sanctioning non-US or UK writers, despite the best efforts of Irish co-producers. The guild is lobbying to try to ensure that this issue is addressed, initially through the mandatory training component of the 481 tax breaks that each of these productions avail of, although the long-term solution is to enable Irish writing talent to create and show-run their own high-value show that can attract international co-production finance - which is why our dialogue with Screen Ireland referred to earlier in the document is so relevant.

## European Affairs

The European Copyright Directive will be transposed into Irish law by the second quarter of 2021. If the main provisions are adopted, it will, for the first time, give writers and directors access to the detailed breakdown of revenue received annually by producers from audio visual works they have helped create.

If the fees received are not ‘fair and proportionate’ vis-a-vis the financial performance of the production, the writer may seek a remedy in law *using their representative organisation*. That opens the door to collective bargaining by the guild from which we are currently prevented by law to do. In turn, that will allow stronger more enforceable contracts and the higher rates of remuneration.

## ZeBBies

This year has presented us with a unique challenge in the guise of Covid 19, the effects of which have been devastating worldwide. Considering the government’s health guidelines and how the situation might evolve over the year, the Committee took the decision to move the awards online for this year which will take place in November.

## Equality Action Committee

We campaigned for 50/50 in 2020 but it is a measure of how intractable the issue of redressing the structural inequalities are that Screen Ireland reported that in 2019 that 43% productions that they had funded were written by female screenwriters and 37% were directed by women. What those figures disguise is that they cover both documentary and drama genres so the true number for both is lower.

The guild has been at the forefront of advocating on this issue through Dr. Susan Liddy and Jennifer Davidson’s work on the Equality Action Committee and in providing structural supports, mentoring and training to address these issues, thanks to funding from the BAI.

## B.A.I.

2019’s programme included a mentoring programme led by Dee Roycroft and Eilish Kent as well as an event with Commissioning editors of the major broadcasters and a ‘Meet the Producers’ networking session.

This year, BAI asked us to re-submit our submission to make it deliverable on an online platform. We have met the challenge and delivered our first event ‘Mapping Your Career’ in July. Two further events are scheduled for September and November and will be archived on our revamped website when it goes online.

The BAI will become the Media Commission next year and will take on additional regulatory responsibilities including the policing of defamatory or false online content. We will continue to seek support to offer continual personal development opportunities for our members.

## Conclusion

The Guild had taken a more public-facing role throughout 2019-2020 and extended its authority to speak on behalf of its members to government, state organisations and institutions and expect to be taken seriously. We will continue to seek to influence public arts policy and advocate for proper compensation for writers.

The Covid crisis will have significant impacts on funding available to support representative organisations like WGI in the next few years and we should anticipate budget cuts. However, by shifting more resources online, we hope to trim costs to enable us to offer a similar or better service despite cuts.