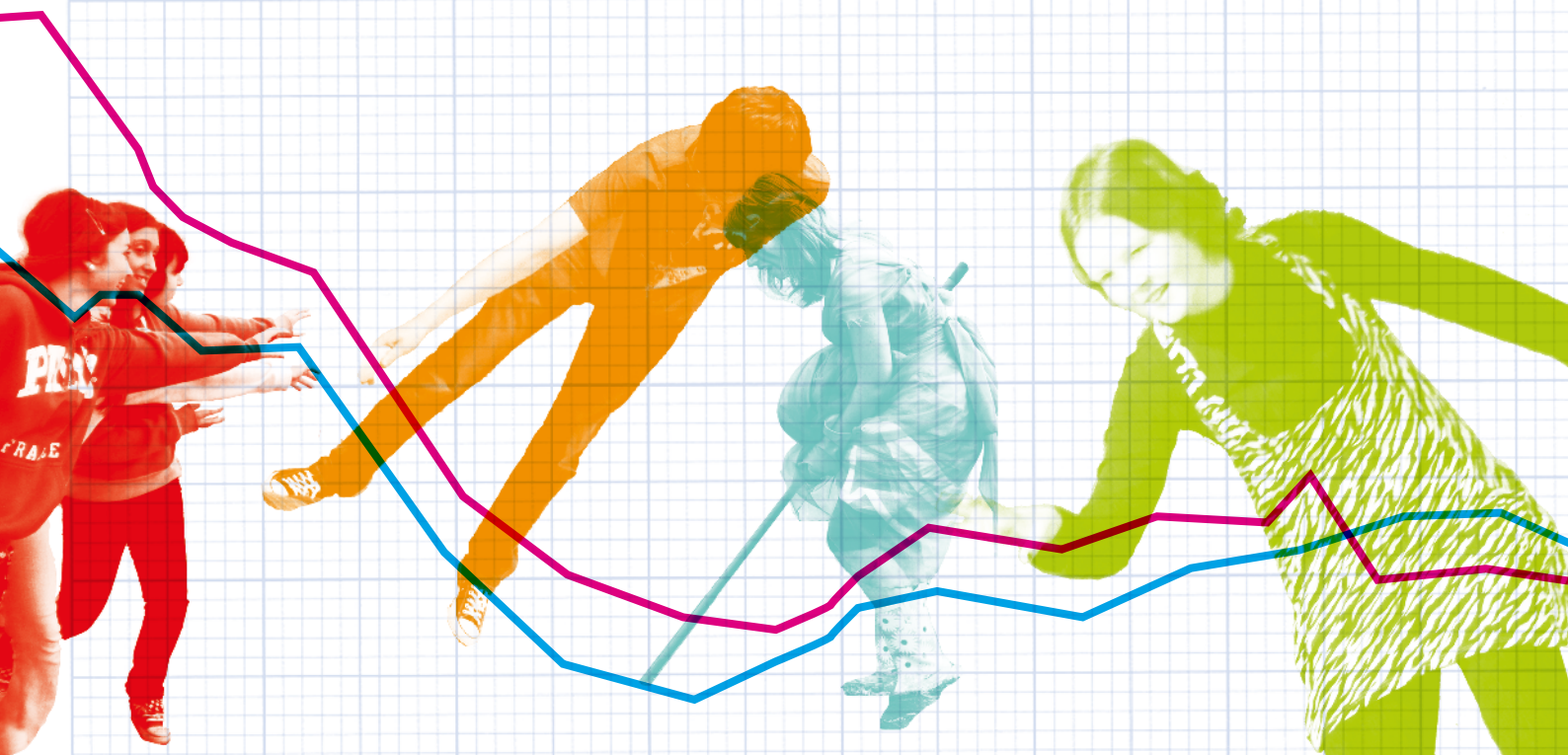


Youth Drama Spurs Innovative Ireland

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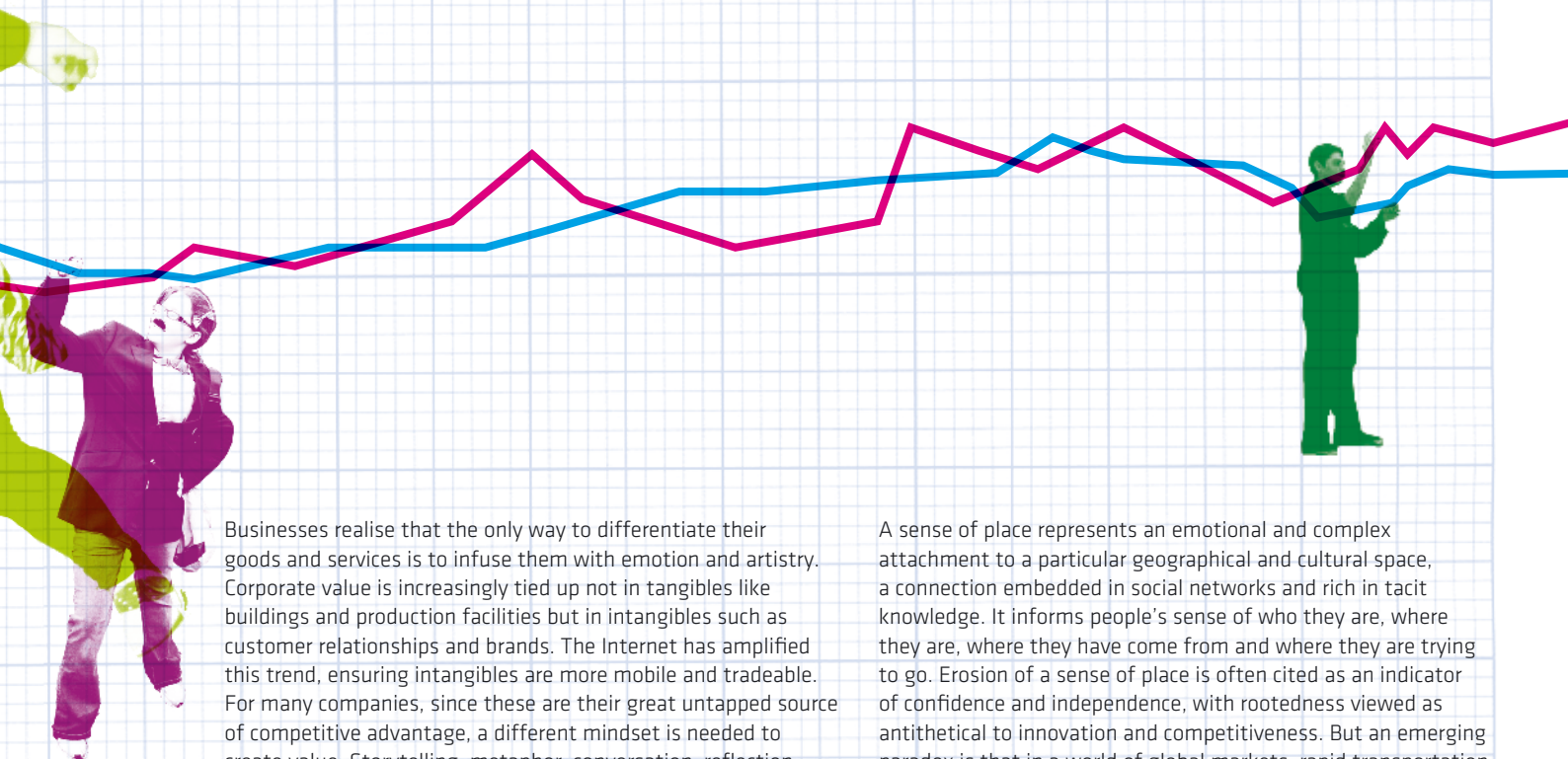
While there is much current debate on the need to restore the Irish economy, most of the commentary appears blind to the important role that culture might play in this endeavour. An intriguing question is, what might be the impact on young people, many of whom understandably suffer from alienation during these difficult economic times, if a concerted effort was made to foster a strong sense of cultural identity? Can Ireland's youth be given a sense of empowerment through culture, especially when economically and politically many feel desperately disenfranchised? How can youth clubs or a community spirit generate a sense of ownership that empowers rather than tries to 'manage' or 'control' a generation? Is theatre a good form to do all this? Most intriguing of all: is culture, not science or technology, key to Ireland's attempt to become a creative 'smart' economy?

To answer such questions, a good starting point is to reflect on a world undergoing a fundamental shift from the industrial or manufacturing age of physical goods to a network age dominated by intangible services and experiences. The industrial enterprise is wedded to rationality and control rather than emotions, empathy and relationships, characteristics of a network organisation. As the significance of the material diminishes and capacities of the mind become more and more crucial, human attitudes and meaning become key resources. We are entering an era where patterns, context and the symbolic are crucial. Strong personal feelings and the ability to foster relationships are critical.

Nurturing meaning by delivering experiences replicate the role that selling goods or delivering services played in the past. An experience occurs when a company uses its services as a stage and its goods as props, to engage its customers in a memorable event. Experiences are inherently personal, and exist only in the mind of an individual engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual level. As with any play, no two people have the same experience, because this derives from the relationship between the staged event and the audience member's response to it.

delivers theatre-based learning methods for personal and professional development by recreating classroom versions of workplace situations. Clients participate in scenes with actors which helps them explore problems in an interactive way.

Imagination, the most valuable resource of all, is driven primarily by emotions and feelings, the heart rather than rational mind, and nurtured through drama, poetry, literature, music and art. This emerges from rootedness and is founded on inspiration, identity, empathy, memory, tradition, belonging and trust. Value rises as meaning deepens, as knowledge moves from information to understanding and wisdom, illustrated in digital media by content, tacit patient knowledge in healthcare, originality in crafts, local expertise in food recipes and tradition in farming practices. The quality of knowledge depends on a point-of-view or cultural perspective, and is now more valuable than ever. Indeed, most IT companies now spend more on the symbolic or design-driven aspects of products than on technical development *per se*. In innovation, while scientific research or information mediated by computers does matter, it is more crucial to create conditions where meanings, experiences, identities and resourcefulness prosper. This is why distinct cultural resources rooted in place are potentially an enormous competitive advantage.



Businesses realise that the only way to differentiate their goods and services is to infuse them with emotion and artistry. Corporate value is increasingly tied up not in tangibles like buildings and production facilities but in intangibles such as customer relationships and brands. The Internet has amplified this trend, ensuring intangibles are more mobile and tradeable. For many companies, since these are their great untapped source of competitive advantage, a different mindset is needed to create value. Storytelling, metaphor, conversation, reflection, development of character and an ethic of quality are essential.

Storytelling has emerged as a popular approach for teaching leadership effectiveness in many companies. Drama also helps leaders develop their potential. Olivier Mythodrama, for example, set up in 1997 by Richard Olivier (son of Laurence) uses the leadership stories of Shakespeare as maps of human development. The company creates transformational experiences in the safe environment of a rehearsal room in order to help executives grow their leadership skills and develop their characters. It engages all of the senses, motivating and inspiring ordinary people to practice and perfect extraordinary leadership. In Denmark, professional actors at Dacapo Theatre work with organisations in creating custom-made plays that help drive creativity, innovation and strategy. A good Irish example is ToBe, a company that

A sense of place represents an emotional and complex attachment to a particular geographical and cultural space, a connection embedded in social networks and rich in tacit knowledge. It informs people's sense of who they are, where they are, where they have come from and where they are trying to go. Erosion of a sense of place is often cited as an indicator of confidence and independence, with rootedness viewed as antithetical to innovation and competitiveness. But an emerging paradox is that in a world of global markets, rapid transportation and high-speed communications, location and culture are becoming *more*, not *less* important. The local matters more than ever!

Places that succeed emphasise culture and community, attracting and keeping the most creative people and organisations, and thereby generating the highest quality of life. Creative people are clustering in places which offer authenticity, uniqueness and the lifestyles and diversity they crave. They are attracted by the qualities of a community, while this in turn attracts enterprise, reversing the traditional direction of industrial development. Unlike the past where reducing the cost of business or clustering companies in industrial estates was central to development, attracting creative individuals to a special place can now ensure its long-term competitiveness.

Special places possess distinctive, inimitable, rare, not easily substitutable and valuable resources. Ireland possesses such resources in abundance providing ideal conditions for creativity and innovation, though this is not appreciated fully nor harnessed properly. But it is clear that contemporary Ireland is also badly in need of the driving vision that characterised the Cultural Revival, that period some thirty years before the foundation of the State in 1922. The Revival was an exhilarating mix of cultural cohesion, idealism, self-reliance and creativity, encompassing a range of innovative initiatives in commerce, agriculture, theatre, literature, sport and language all relating to a common theme: an awakening interest in Irish identity, broadly defined. The Gaelic League, the Co-operative Movement, the GAA and the Irish Literary Theatre (later Abbey Theatre) attracted an eclectic array of individuals involved in projects across a wide spectrum, with a sense of identity and national purpose the glue that bound them in a common enterprise. Co-operative organisers, sceptical farmers, idealistic patriots, language enthusiasts and literati of all stripes contributed to the democratic, experimental, exciting mosaic of the time. This vision was never articulated as one seamless manifesto, still there existed certain characteristics that were common to many organisations.

Foremost was self-reliance or character and the notion that responsibility for development resided in Irish, not foreign hands. Shared identity, self-confidence and sense of place were all prerequisites to the development of character and imperative for creativity and innovativeness. Character was at the core of the Gaelic League, the intellectual movement that fostered the use of the Irish language and supported native literature and arts. Central to its philosophy was an insistence that the Irish personality could not reach its potential except within a cultural milieu proper to it. It held that creative personalities cannot be produced without an integrated community having a unique and continuing experience of its own.

The idea that a strong cultural identity is opposed to materialism, that profit motive and innovation, reflects an unfortunate legacy of the elites who governed this country over its first decades. In the space of eighty odd years, we have moved from one extreme to another: from a place where culture featured prominently in the national vision to its opposite, where science, rationality and markets dominate. We should harness the positive elements of both, embracing especially our unique imaginative tradition which is fostered by belonging, purpose and idealism.

While we are now in a completely different political, social and technological context it is essential to recapture the Revival spirit and excitement. But its exhilarating message seems lost nowadays on most politicians and those leading our education institutions. Very useful lessons can still be learned from say poet W.B. Yeats on the potential of the arts in Ireland's economic development. Just as the Revival emphasised the authenticity of place in defining Irishness, a sense of shared place holds the key to creating a common identity. Privileging place over a common ethnic and cultural identity permits the accommodation of cultural difference while working as a welcome antidote to the mantra of globalisation that *'geography doesn't matter'*.

Prospering in a multicultural world requires individuals that possess a deep understanding of their own culture. With greater self-confidence there is usually more curiosity and openness to the outsider. Grounded this way, people appreciate the cultural values of others with whom they must co-operate. While remaining open to outside influences, they learn to identify difference and appreciate distinctiveness. They are able to absorb many different ideas, yet are not dominated by globalised cultural influences. But as the *Irish Times* (27th June 2007) notes, many immigrants today feel that the Irish appear to lack a clear sense of themselves and their own culture. One confessed that in reading the works of John McGahern and Brian Friel she found a more fully formed sense of belonging and self-assurance set in the past than she sensed among those reaching maturity today.

Stories create a rich visual imagery through conversation, reflection and shared meaning. This is why Ireland's cultural traditions are so valuable. Far from being dead artefacts that are anti-modern and non-economic, our heritage represents a significant asset that fosters innovation, creativity, entrepreneurship and meaning. Innovation is really about stories and the Irish are the world's great story-tellers. In social networks, the Irish have natural advantages but these will only be fully realised if the artistic is combined with the scientific, interpreted through the prism of Irish culture and tradition.

This country's tradition of metaphors, narrative and mythology, if integrated properly with science and technology, offers a huge competitive advantage. However, our current policy focuses largely on scientific research based on objectivity, denying the

legitimacy of the subjective world of feeling, ignoring our distinct and valuable resource, a sense of connection and the imaginal life. The scientific mind simplifies and narrows experiences into manageable principles whereas literature and the arts emphasise complexity, crucial if entrepreneurial imagination and innovation is to flourish. While scientific research is certainly important, breakthrough ideas require intelligence of the heart and hand, not just intelligence of the head. The new usually begins with an unspecified emotion or feeling which then morphs into a new insight or idea that is then related to a problem or context; only then does it get framed by a rational structure or form. Combining the scientific mind of separability and rationality with say Irish mythology, which is not linear but with a meandering interconnectedness, is ideal for the emerging sustainable age where conversation, empathy, meaning and relationships are critical.

Much can be learned from a resurgent cultural self-confidence of the late 1950s to mid 1960s. Outstanding figures of that era such as Seán Lemass and Seán Ó Riada possessed a sophisticated regard for tradition. While T.K. Whitaker was responsible for transforming the Irish economy and embracing the world, a strong cultural perspective was at the core of his vision. This year's St Patrick's Day editorial in the *Irish Times* put it well: *'There will be no recovery worth its name without the spiritual, moral and cultural dimensions which renew Ireland's self-understanding and confidence.'* Like physical infrastructure,

cultural infrastructure needs investment too! It is especially smart to take advantage of our distinct characteristics since policies that recognise the nature and feelings of a people provide a powerful and inimitable competitive advantage. With our great artistic heritage and worldwide renown for imaginative thinking, Ireland is ideally placed to challenge convention, insuring cultural-based creativity becomes a driver of innovation in the years to come.

For imagination and innovation to flourish, a radical transformation is needed so interdisciplinarity, diversity and sustainability become central in learning. These nurture personal development, a spirit of self-discovery and an innovative mind-frame, thereby contributing to integrity, civic responsibility, aesthetic sensibility and ecological stewardship. Individuals with meaning in their lives, and a sense of continuity between past and present, are likely to be active participants in the building of more trusting and caring communities. Young people must think globally but feel rooted in the local, so learning should emphasise a sense of place and shared meaning nurtured by experience.

They must be helped change their thinking from individual rights to collective responsibilities, independence to interdependence, luxuries to necessities, short-term to long-term thinking, and growth that benefits a few to development and vitality that benefits all. This implies a culture founded on the realisation of human potential and the interdependence of social, economic, and ecological well-being.

Local amenities in urban and rural areas of Ireland that offer vibrant youth arts programmes, are very important. In the creative age, ideally three elements should feature in learning, namely *craft* (or experience), *art* (or imagination) and *science* (or analysis). Here is where youth drama can and does play a special role as it embodies all these elements. Such learning is closely allied to the concept of apprenticeship, leading to enhanced pride, ownership and motivation. Young people become inspired through their actions, helping them to understand more about themselves. By offering an opportunity to reflect on their place in the world, this helps them better manage uncertainty. Reflection and practical skills foster a sense of identity, a great spur for entrepreneurship and innovation.

This is especially true for youth drama groups that place young people at the core, engage them in discussions, help them perform practical work, make decisions and work within a mutually supportive environment, while drawing on and learning from each other. By taking place within an experiential-learning framework, it shows them that by combining individual and team work, imaginative concepts can be put into practice. This engages the young person in transformative learning, balances intuition with analysis, focuses on character and community, and cultivates wisdom rather than mere accumulation of facts.

Here is an example, familiar I am sure to many readers, that illustrates the difference between the more holistic methods of youth drama compared to traditional education. I am referring to the rich learning in Forum Theatre, the theatre form created by the innovative practitioner Augusto Boal as part of his 'Theatre of the Oppressed'. Actors tell a story to an audience, often a

short scene in which a character is being oppressed in some way. The audience can stop a performance and suggest different actions for the actors to carry out in an attempt to change the outcome of what they are seeing. This brings audience members into the performance, so they have an input into the drama they are watching. The process is designed to come to a conclusion through considering opposing arguments, rather than being one-sided and promoted by the actors with no chance of counter-argument. If the audience feel somebody is being oppressed, it gets the opportunity to replace the oppressors, or find new ways of challenging the oppressed character. In this way a more realistic depiction can be made by audience members, often victims themselves of the oppression depicted on stage.

Compare this approach where young people are active participants in their own learning with the teacher-student

one way information flow in many contemporary learning environments. Learning in Forum Theatre - and in youth theatre generally - allows young people to respond to diverse local situations and to changes over time without having to depend heavily on external experts to lead this. In orthodox education, young people often fail to see connections and patterns whereas youth drama helps them to think holistically and work in multidisciplinary groups.

Such learning tends to be systemic rather than linear, integrative rather than fragmentary, concerned with process, and emphasising a dynamic rather than simple cause and effect. It builds leadership, collaboration, interdependency, relationships, responsibility and communications skills, all at the heart of innovation in a network economy. Self-awareness and reflection fosters an innovative attitude, stimulates personal development and a sense of community. It draws on the imagination as the young person performs practical work, makes decisions and works as a member of a team. This develops an independent attitude along with responsibility to the community, helping to foster self-confidence and an ethic of morality.

To conclude, in a modern education, the arts are at least as important as science or mathematics for developing a vibrant and innovative ethic. Learning through the arts helps young people recreate themselves, the true aim of education. Above all, individuals are moved by the imagination. With the arts, young people imagine the future, believing their vision can change the world. The arts provide a way of experiencing and exploring their inner selves so they can confidently and creatively deal with change and be open to new possibilities. The workplace they enter is increasingly riddled with ambiguities and the need to exercise judgement where no rules may apply. Intrinsic motivation, characterised by a sense of purpose, excitement and play, develops a strong mission or vocation. This is ideal preparation for the surprises and uncertainties they will face in the future.

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