



# #WAKING THEFEMINISTS

IN 2015, LIAN BELL, A FREELANCE CULTURAL PROJECT MANAGER AND SET DESIGNER, WROTE A POST ON FACEBOOK ABOUT THE ABSENCE OF WOMEN WRITERS AND DIRECTORS IN A NEW PROGRAMME AT DUBLIN'S ABBEY THEATRE – AND FOUND HERSELF ACCIDENTALLY SPARKING A NATIONWIDE SOCIAL MOVEMENT. HEADED BY A SMALL VOLUNTEER TEAM, #WAKINGTHEFEMINISTS EMERGED AS A YEAR-LONG CAMPAIGN PUSHING FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN IRISH THEATRE. HERE LIAN TELLS HER STORY OF BECOMING AN ACCIDENTAL ACTIVIST, SHARING PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE CHALLENGES OF ADOPTING THIS ROLE, AS WELL AS SOME THOUGHTS ON HOW THE PERFORMING ARTS, WITH A FOUNDATION IN COLLABORATION AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY, CAN ASSIST THE DRIVE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE.

DANSE  
HALLERNE

*The Innovative Leadership Network (ILN) is a Nordic cross-disciplinary platform focusing on the development of artist-led initiatives in the contemporary choreographic performing arts. The network establishes a cross-disciplinary exchange between artistic activities (choreography), universities (academic research) and the market (from production to presentation spaces). ILN aims to provide a framework to question classic models, tackle old-fashioned interdependences, and rethink practices in the performing arts value chain.*

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*INL is one strand of an ambitious Artist's Research Lab and Residency Programme developed by Dansehallerne and its international partners.*

*For more information, please contact Programme Coordinator Yohann Floch: [yohann@dansehallerne.dk](mailto:yohann@dansehallerne.dk)*

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**AUTHOR:** Lian Bell  
**EDITOR:** John Ellingsworth, [mesplease.com](http://mesplease.com)  
**GRAPHIC DESIGNER:** Marine Hadjès-Glatard, [arrose-tes-plantes.fr](http://arrose-tes-plantes.fr)  
**PUBLISHER:** Dansehallerne, Regnbuepladsen 7, 5. sal, DK-1550 Copenhagen V, [dansehallerne.dk](http://dansehallerne.dk)

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In September this year I was asked by Dansehallerne to come to Copenhagen and speak about my experiences as the Campaign Director of a movement called #WakingTheFeminists that happened recently in Ireland. While I was there I had a vibrant conversation with local artists and practitioners, and by the end of the morning it was clear to me that there was a strong interest in talking about activism and feminism in the context of the Danish performance community. Dansehallerne have asked me to write this article to explore some of the topics at that event a little more deeply, particularly looking at the role of being an artist-activist, and how activism can inform our work. I'm going to give a little outline of what happened with #WakingTheFeminists, talk about some of my experiences as an artist-activist, and give some examples of activism in the Irish community. I hope you will be able to relate it in some way with the Danish performing arts, and it might help you formulate what you would like to do to improve your own community.

## WAKING THE NATION

I came to activism by accident. I've worked in Dublin as a freelance cultural project manager and a set designer for the past 15+ years; until recently I had never been directly involved in any kind of campaign. In October 2015, in a moment of frustration, I wrote a Facebook post about the lack of women writers and directors in a programme that had just been announced by our national theatre, the Abbey Theatre. Out of the ten productions in their Waking The Nation programme, three were being directed by women, and just one was written by a woman. I had long been having conversations in a casual way with my peers and colleagues about the imbalance we saw in our community, but these conversations were always between ourselves – quietly, over a cup of tea, or a drink in a bar after a show. I was tired of that. I didn't want to start having those conversations behind closed doors again, so I said something publicly on social media. I was just getting it off my chest. I had absolutely no idea what was to come.

The best way I've found to describe that moment was feeling like I had lit a match without realising I was in a room filled with gas. The response was instant and extraordinary. A discussion exploded online, with hundreds of women artists and theatre workers sharing stories of being sidelined (and worse) in theatres across the country. It was clear that gender discrimination wasn't only a problem with the national theatre, but pervaded the entire Irish theatre community.

And it was not just, of course, a problem with theatre. As soon as we looked – really looked – around us, it was clear that women were not being treated as equals in almost every aspect of society. We all know this. Most of us have decided not to see it, to think of it as ‘normal’, and get on with our lives. Some of us are so good at not seeing it that we’ve convinced ourselves that discrimination doesn’t happen. It’s an overwhelming and daunting feeling to really open our eyes to it. Miraculously, through #WakingTheFeminists, the Irish theatre community opened its eyes and said it was time for change.

In a nutshell, #WakingTheFeminists swiftly emerged from a storm of online social media testimonies, photos of support by international celebrities, national and international media coverage, and an extremely affecting and meticulously-run public event on the main stage of the Abbey Theatre that took place just two weeks after my first post.<sup>1</sup> Using the power and media attention that we gained from that event, a group of us – theatre professionals of all kinds – decided to work together for a full year to see how far we could push our community into embracing gender equality. We thought that if we could make significant change in the small Irish theatre community, we might be able to inspire others working in other areas of society to also push for change.

## CAMPAIGN

As volunteers, it was clear we had a finite amount of time and energy. We needed to use that time and energy to focus on making changes happen at the highest levels, where it would have the greatest effect across the community. We demanded, and got, meetings with the boards and directors of ten of the highest publicly funded theatre organisations, as well as with our primary funding body, the Arts Council of Ireland. We worked with them continuously over the course of the year to push our objectives: sustained policies for inclusion with action plans and measurable results; equal championing and advancement for women artists; and economic parity for all working in the theatre. Over that year #WakingTheFeminists was rarely out of the news. Our national theatre quickly issued an apology, and within a few short months it published eight guiding principles on gender equality.<sup>2</sup> Gender equality became (and still is) a live topic of

1 [www.wakingthefeminists.org/glossary-test](http://www.wakingthefeminists.org/glossary-test)  
[www.wakingthefeminists.org/showing-their-support](http://www.wakingthefeminists.org/showing-their-support)  
[www.wakingthefeminists.org/category/press](http://www.wakingthefeminists.org/category/press)  
[www.wakingthefeminists.org/public-meeting-video](http://www.wakingthefeminists.org/public-meeting-video)

2 [www.abbeytheatre.ie/gender-equality](http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/gender-equality)

conversation in festivals, venues and companies across the country. When the campaign officially ended in November 2016, I continued to meet with ten major theatre organisations as they developed their own policies, which were launched publicly in July 2018.<sup>3</sup> Our Arts Council is currently developing its own diversity and inclusion policy, as are many of our National Cultural Institutions – the state-funded organisations that are, essentially, the arbiters of Irish national cultural identity. #WakingTheFeminists also commissioned groundbreaking research into gender balance in Irish theatre, and published the *Gender Counts* report in June 2017.<sup>4</sup> This is only a tiny glimpse at the kind of success that the campaign achieved in its short existence.

The power that #WakingTheFeminists had within the community came entirely from the investment and support of individuals. For the first time ever, people working in all areas of the theatre – as performers, writers, producers, technicians, administrators, designers, directors, academics – felt a personal responsibility, and courage, to speak up about the problems that they were facing. The critical mass of our peers debating and championing this issue gave us the permission and support to keep going. Since the gender discrimination across our community was so blatant once we opened our eyes to it, and was clearly experienced by so many people once we truly listened to each other, there was no denying the reality any more.

## STORIES

In talking with the media, and via them talking to people who were not part of the theatre community, we tried to stress two points. Firstly, that the theatre organisations being exposed as having a historical discrimination against women are funded with public money, and that the organisations have a responsibility to the citizens of the country to not allow bias to affect the use of that money. (They also have legal responsibilities under the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act that many organisations were not taking into account.<sup>5</sup>) We also tried to make it clear to non-theatre people that when we talk about theatre, we are talking about the stories that we tell about ourselves and our nation. Theatre may not seem important to many, but the fight we were having was about whose stories get told, who tells them, and who gets to choose that. We

3 [www.wakingthefeminists.org/gender\\_equality\\_in\\_practice](http://www.wakingthefeminists.org/gender_equality_in_practice)

4 [www.wakingthefeminists.org/research](http://www.wakingthefeminists.org/research) organisations were not taking into account

5 [www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2014/act/25/enacted/en/html](http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2014/act/25/enacted/en/html)

also talked about how stories represent our society, and that those stories do, ultimately, affect how we as a nation see ourselves. 2016 was the centenary year of the Easter Rising, the failed revolution that nevertheless is seen as the start of the founding of our republic. We were at a time of reassessing and retelling that revolutionary story to include the people (mainly women) who had previously been written out of the official narrative. The general public were attuned, that year more than ever, to the power of stories.

There is much more to the #WakingTheFeminists movement than I can cover here. For anyone who is interested, there is more information available on the campaign's website [www.wakingthefeminists.org](http://www.wakingthefeminists.org). Essentially, and extraordinarily, the movement has had a huge and (hopefully) lasting effect Irish theatre – from the grassroots up to the biggest organisations and funders. It is seen nationally and internationally as a beacon of effective campaigning, has won multiple awards, and is still referenced regularly in the media. Many of us in the theatre community feel more comfortable and empowered to discuss the issues of diversity and inclusion within our own work circles. Our successes inspired other people in other sectors to also have these conversations, with a number of other campaign and support groups forming in the wake of #WakingTheFeminists. One year after our campaign officially ended the #MeToo movement exploded internationally, and it is a fact that #WakingTheFeminists paved the way for the significant impact that #MeToo had on the performing arts in Ireland – encapsulated by a major industry event held by the Irish Theatre Institute in March 2018.<sup>6</sup>

## ARTIST-ACTIVIST

I'll now switch to a more personal view of becoming an (accidental) artist-activist, how it has impacted on my own practice, and how I see activism having impacted on the work of artists around me. Nothing prepared me for the experience of being at the centre of this movement. I was reluctant, initially, to take any kind of public role as spokesperson for #WakingTheFeminists. I felt that it was not my place to speak on behalf of such a diverse and nebulous group of people. I had rarely spoken publicly about anything, and I had never been the director or figurehead of any organisation in the past. My work was always behind the scenes, where I felt most comfortable.

Very quickly, however, it became clear that for the campaign to have a strong voice in the media, at least, we would benefit from having a designated representative or two. So I took a deep breath, and said yes, I'll do the interviews and panel discussions. I'll give the speeches and presentations. I'll speak to journalists and to the 'high ups'. My palms sweated every time.

At first I needed to tell myself I was doing it for the good of the campaign; that helped me take the deep breaths and get through it. I also was extremely fortunate to have extraordinary people around me, giving me advice and encouragement at every step. Over time, as I got more comfortable with speaking publicly, I noticed I began to enjoy it. That was a surprise; even at university I was fearful of speaking up in class. I thought a lot in those first weeks of the campaign about that fear – the fear of being laughed at, of not being listened to, of being dismissed. And I realised how deep the feeling of shame was embedded in me – shame of taking up space, of expressing my opinion. While it's not a shame that's exclusive to women, I do see it more in my female peers and friends. Learning to trust my own voice has been an important part of my experience of the campaign, so much so that I have been encouraging women around me to get over the fear of speaking publicly. If you have the opportunity, take it – it may be nerve-wracking, but it gets easier, and it changes you for the better. It also means we get to hear more women's voices in the world.

The theatre sector in Ireland has changed significantly in the last years. Individuals feel more empowered and supported to talk about issues that come out of gender discrimination. In certain theatres on the first day of rehearsals they now make sure to talk through the organisation's policies on sexual harassment and bullying. When an arts festival announces their programme, it is scrutinised by individuals in the community who will begin open discussions online if the gender balance is uneven, and sometimes these discussions spread to the mainstream media. There has been an increase of work by women on the stages of our major theatres and festivals. The conversation around presenting that work is far more nuanced than it was – looking at the marketing, and the size of the venue, at the length of the run, and of course at the content. These changes come from the issues of gender equality and diversity being brought up regularly within those organisations, and within the rehearsal room. When I look at some of the online testimonies from late 2015, I remember how dangerous they felt at the time – that these things were being aired publicly was extraordinary. That sense of danger, that fear, is greatly reduced now. Gender equality has become part of how we talk about our work in an everyday way.

As to how my experience affected my own creative practice, I find that more difficult to pinpoint. During the year of #WakingTheFeminists and most of the year afterwards I stopped designing. In part because I was so busy with volunteering on the campaign and working on the few paid freelance projects that I kept up during that time. But also because I found it very difficult to give my brain the space it needed to be creative. I have learned, through this experience, a little bit more about the time and space that I need to give my creative thinking, and now I work to safeguard that. From talking with other artists who have become activists in the past years I know that being an activist can take a lot of time and energy, and can in some ways negatively impact on our work – not least because we may change in the eyes of the people around us. The year after #WakingTheFeminists, I found I wasn't being offered as much work – partly, I imagine, because people saw me in a new light.

I talked a bit about the effects of activism with Grace Dyas, the young director who kicked off the #MeToo discussion in Ireland by writing about her experience of harassment by a highly regarded theatre producer.<sup>7</sup> With her company, THEATREclub, she has always made powerful work that talks frankly and provocatively about social issues, but this was the first time she had put herself in the spotlight. It was not an easy thing to do, and I know it was exhausting. Partly because so many people saw her as a person to confide in – to tell their own stories of bullying and harassment to. Difficult stories, that she then had to hold within herself. Throughout the whole experience, she was careful to surround herself with people she trusted, and who supported her – she talks about this in a blog post about how she came to first talk about her experiences publicly.<sup>8</sup> Active self-care, we both discovered, is a fundamentally important part of being an activist. Over the last year, I've been visiting a therapist to talk about many aspects of my life, but my experience with #WakingTheFeminists is part of that discussion. That helps enormously.

Ireland has seen a lot of positive social activism in recent years. From a referendum on same sex marriage,<sup>9</sup> to #WakingTheFeminists, to #MeToo, to a referendum on abortion,<sup>10</sup> and current activism on housing rights,<sup>11</sup> there have been artists in the front lines of all of these movements. We are visible, we are articulate, we are thoughtful, we are critical, we are inventive. Those of us working in the performing

7 [www.independent.ie/irish-news/news/his-behaviour-was-more-than-politically-incorrect-i-think-it-was-abusive-grace-dyas-on-michael-colgans-apology-36312302.html](http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/news/his-behaviour-was-more-than-politically-incorrect-i-think-it-was-abusive-grace-dyas-on-michael-colgans-apology-36312302.html)

8 [www.gracedyas.tumblr.com/post/166894301504/how-i-wrote-about-michael-colgan-and-how-you-can](http://www.gracedyas.tumblr.com/post/166894301504/how-i-wrote-about-michael-colgan-and-how-you-can)

9 [www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/how-the-yes-was-won-the-inside-story-of-the-marriage-referendum-1.2418302](http://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/how-the-yes-was-won-the-inside-story-of-the-marriage-referendum-1.2418302)

10 [www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/ireland-s-abortion-referendum-result-in-five-charts-1.3509845](http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/ireland-s-abortion-referendum-result-in-five-charts-1.3509845)

11 [www.thejournal.ie/take-back-the-city-4255230-Sep2018](http://www.thejournal.ie/take-back-the-city-4255230-Sep2018)

arts have an incredibly fine-tuned capacity for collaboration and working collectively. We have begun to see that we have a role in these national conversations. Some of us use our skills to try to influence societal change directly. Some of us make creative work that addresses the social issues that we feel strongly about. Both of these activities are needed – we use our skills as artists either way, and we collectively begin to refashion the national narrative.

As I wrote this article, I asked my friends on Facebook to help me compile a list of recent works of art that they could think of that came directly out of Irish social movements, or (more subjectively) were made possible thanks to how our society has been changing in the past ten years. The response was extraordinary. Within a day we had a list of over fifty artworks of all kinds including performance, theatre, dance, video, live art, poetry, novels, anthologies and essay collections, street art and murals, music, podcasts, photography, installations, and events of all kinds. They look at the rights of women, Travellers (an ethnic minority group in Ireland), migrants and refugees, the LGBTQ community, and people with disabilities. At the state-sanctioned abuse and control of women and children, at the socio-economic and class divide, at homelessness, sex abuse, mental health, abortion, and the environment. And I know for sure that there have been many, many more works that could be added to the list.

As I read down the list we had made, I felt a surge of pride in our artists. These are the people who didn't shy away from saying the difficult thing. The people who used their skills to create something significant, nuanced, subtle, pertinent, contradictory, relatable, or awe-inspiring from what they saw in the society around them and the values they hold. I have listed a few below that personally spoke to me, with a focus on dance, that I'd like to share with you. Hopefully they might inspire you a little. We have power as artists – in the work we make, and in our own voices. Have faith in the strength of what you have to say, and say it loud.

- *Artists' Campaign to Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> banners*, beautiful hand-made banners created by some members of the artist-led campaign for abortion rights: [www.theartnewspaper.com/news/artists-take-to-the-streets-of-limerick-in-emotive-abortion-rights-protest-ahead-of-irish-referendum](http://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/artists-take-to-the-streets-of-limerick-in-emotive-abortion-rights-protest-ahead-of-irish-referendum)
- *Fall & Recover* by John Scott Dance (Irish Modern Dance Theatre), made with asylum seeker survivors of torture: [www.vimeo.com/104607771](http://www.vimeo.com/104607771)
- *Hope Hunt* by choreographer Oona Doherty, looking at masculinity and class: [www.oonadohertyweb.com/hope-hunt](http://www.oonadohertyweb.com/hope-hunt)
- *In The Shadow Of The State* and *The Touching Contract* by visual artists Sarah Browne and Jesse Jones, exploring regulation of women's bodies by the state: [www.sarahbrowne.info/work/in-the-shadow-of-the-state](http://www.sarahbrowne.info/work/in-the-shadow-of-the-state) & [www.irelandatvenice2017.ie/2017/01/20/in-the-shadow-of-the-state-the-touching-contract](http://www.irelandatvenice2017.ie/2017/01/20/in-the-shadow-of-the-state-the-touching-contract)

- *Laundry*, Anu Productions' site-specific immersive performance which looked at Magdalene Laundries (Church-run and State-sanctioned workhouses where 'fallen' women were incarcerated) and, more broadly, at how women have been treated by the Irish State:  
[www.irishtimes.com/culture/modern-ireland-in-100-artworks-2011-laundry-by-louise-low-e-1.2793624](http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/modern-ireland-in-100-artworks-2011-laundry-by-louise-low-e-1.2793624) (Short video available at: [www.vimeo.com/34489217](http://www.vimeo.com/34489217))
- *LiffeyTown* by visual artist Fergal McCarthy – an installation on the river in Dublin, commenting on the role of property in the boom and bust economy: [www.publicart.ie/main/directory/directory/view/liffeytown/7d2642d3a5ab8c302a69d651e7c82f59](http://www.publicart.ie/main/directory/directory/view/liffeytown/7d2642d3a5ab8c302a69d651e7c82f59)
- *The Grey Area Project*, murals by street art collective Subset, highlighting homelessness, and raising money for a homeless charity:  
[www.store.subset.ie](http://www.store.subset.ie)
- *Panti Bliss' Noble Call*, a speech given by Ireland's leading drag queen and activist on the main stage of the national theatre:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=WXayhUzWnI0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WXayhUzWnI0)
- *Postscript*, a play by Noelle Brown about her own experience of Ireland's often-draconian adoption system:  
[www.thejournal.ie/adoption-noelle-brown-play-postscript-3440442-Jun2017](http://www.thejournal.ie/adoption-noelle-brown-play-postscript-3440442-Jun2017)
- *Repeal mural*, a highly controversial artwork by street artist Maser that called for the legalisation of abortion:  
[www.thejournal.ie/repeal-mural-temple-bar-2-3973134-Apr2018](http://www.thejournal.ie/repeal-mural-temple-bar-2-3973134-Apr2018)
- *State of Exception* by choreographer Catherine Young, and working with and about refugees and migrants:  
[www.catherinyoungdance.com/index.php/state-of-exception](http://www.catherinyoungdance.com/index.php/state-of-exception)
- *The Game* by THEATREclub, exploring the act of buying sex:  
[www.facebook.com/THEATREclubbing](http://www.facebook.com/THEATREclubbing)
- *The Casement Project* by Fearghus Ó Conchúir – a multi-faceted dance project looking at the body, the nation, and hospitality:  
[www.thecasementproject.ie](http://www.thecasementproject.ie)
- *Traveller Collection*, a work by visual artist Seamus Nolan exploring the integration of Traveller culture into the national narrative:  
[www.travellercollection.ie](http://www.travellercollection.ie)

Lian Bell<sup>12</sup>

12 Since completing an MA in Scenography at Central St. Martin's College of Art and Design, Lian Bell has freelanced in Dublin both as an arts manager and designer for performance, working with some of the most significant organisations, artists and makers in Irish performing arts. As a designer, she works with dance and theatre artists making contemporary performance. Many of these performances are devised and/or site specific – spaces designed for include a busy city junction, empty factories, and the tower of St. Anne's Church in Cork city. As a manager, she works primarily on one-off cultural events and stand-alone projects in all areas of the arts. Lian has devised and run a number of artist support programmes.

In 2015-16, she was Campaign Director of #WakingTheFeminists, leading a game-changing grassroots campaign for equality for women working in Irish theatre. For this work she won the Judges' Special Award at the 2016 Irish Times Irish Theatre Awards, the Trinity College Law Society's Praeses Elit Award, an Outstanding Young Person Award from the Dublin branch of Junior Chamber International, and the Trinity College Philosophical Society's Bram Stoker Award; the campaign also won the first international Lilly Award.

Liana is currently on the Advisory Committee of IETM, the international network for contemporary performing arts, and am a member of The Irish Society of Stage and Screen Designers.