

# Look Back in Joy

16 months in review

## DECLAN GORMAN

**THEATRE ARTIST IN RESIDENCE**  
County Monaghan, 2018-2019

Residency hosted by  
Íontas Arts Centre, Castleblayney  
and Garage Theatre, Monaghan

**Funded by**  
The Arts Council  
Monaghan County Council  
Culture Ireland



Lantern parade: "The Streets of JJ Clarke" Culture Night 2019, Castleblayney

**Photo:** Joske Slabbers

# One residency – Three Strands

## ▶ **The JJ Clarke Project**

*A multi-layered programme responding to the life and legacy of JJ Clarke, noted Castleblayney photographer*

## ▶ **“Identity / Now”**

Community-engaged explorations of identity in a border county (and a madcap Cabaret event in response to Brexit)

## ▶ **Developing the Artist**

Time and space to focus on the artist's own practice, and also networking with fellow Monaghan artists

# Strand 1

## “The JJ Clarke Project”

*A MULTI-LAYERED PROGRAMME RESPONDING TO THE LIFE AND  
LEGACY OF JJ CLARKE, NOTED CASTLEBLAYNEY PHOTOGRAPHER*



# Strand 1: The JJ Clarke Project

- ▶ A year-long programme of workshops and performances aimed at celebrating the legacy of Dr Jack (JJ) Clarke (born 1879), a medical doctor from Castleblayney.
- ▶ Following his death in 1961, a trove of forgotten photos was found at his Castleblayney home, which JJ had taken between 1900 and 1910, while a student in Dublin.
- ▶ Now held at the National Library of Ireland, the collection of over 300 images is regarded as one of the foremost in the world of early 20<sup>th</sup> century street photography.
- ▶ The residency programme included public information meetings, a children's workshop series, a play specially written for family audiences and community street arts event.



PUBLIC INFORMATION EVENT



# INTRODUCING DR. JJ CLARKE

PIONEERING PHOTOGRAPHER, COLLECTOR,  
EARLY MOTOR CAR ENTHUSIAST, DOCTOR,  
CASTLEBLAYNEY GENTLEMAN

IONTAS THEATRE, CASTLEBLAYNEY  
7.30pm Free Entry



While Clarke is best known for his Dublin streets scenes (eg below), he also took photos in Wales (left), in Bundoran Co. Donegal and his native County Monaghan.

An exhibition of 40 of Clarke's finest images, curated by Darren McCreesh ran at Íontas Arts Centre in tandem with the performance events in September 2019.

All Clarke photos shown here are courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.







The National Library's Clarke Collection can be viewed online at [http://catalogue.nli.ie/Search/Results?lookfor=CLAR&type=CallNumber&submit=FIND&filter\[\]=format%3A%22Photo%22](http://catalogue.nli.ie/Search/Results?lookfor=CLAR&type=CallNumber&submit=FIND&filter[]=format%3A%22Photo%22)



JJ Clarke:  
Children's street theatre project,  
Castleblayney 2018







Four primary schools in Castleblayney took part in the workshop programme, with 96 children in total engaging.

The schools were:

- Gaelscoil Lorgain
- Scoil nn gCailíní
- Annalitten NS
- The Central School

Before taking to the streets, the children viewed slideshows, reflected on the historical world captured by Clarke and then undertook creative writing exercises and classroom drama improvisations built around the photos





The children visited sites in Castleblayney which appeared in JJ's photos 110 years earlier, and set about recreating them and also enlarging upon some of them by creating imaginary dramas of "What happened next?"







These photos are from just outside Dr Clarke's family home on York Street.

Informal advisers to the programme included local historian Michael Burns, genealogist Catriona McKenna and also Dr Elizabeth Kirwan of the National Library who kindly gave a talk at one of our public meetings.







Children from the two smaller schools, Central and Annalitten, joined together to recreate JJ's image of the local goat market!

Much fun was had by all. The photos were taken by teachers, volunteer parents and some by Jaki Maughan of Íontas.





# Public information session:

March 2019

Michael Burns and Dr Elizabeth Kirwan were key speakers. Among the guests were surviving relatives of Dr Clarke.



Scenes in progress from the play Dr Jack were performed.





# DR JACK

In September 2019, Dr Jack, a play for family audiences had its premiere, starring local actors Joe Bishop and Eimear McEneaney

The play was informed by the wonder of the school children a year previously when they first explored the photos. Prompted further by an anecdote of Catriona McKenna, "Dr Jack" tells the story of 9 year old Lily in the 1950s who accidentally discovers a box of photos in her neighbour Dr Jack's attic. She travels in time to the Dublin of a much younger JJ's images and has many marvellous adventures!





# THE STREETS OF JJ CLARKE

The following evening, Culture Night (which coincided with the "Back to Castleblayney" County Music festival), sixty local volunteers along with a team of professional actors, technicians and photographers presented a grand street spectacle, moving around three sites in Castleblayney which are documented in JJ Clarke's photos.

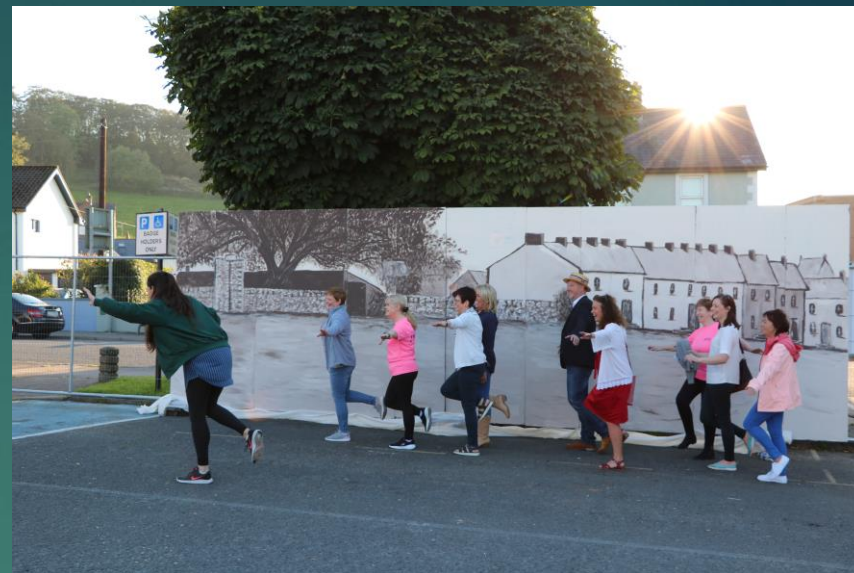
Two performances of the entire promenade were given – at 18.30 and 20.00 – as audiences of 80-100 at a time followed the performers into three separate "immersive" environments.

In the first, "The Time Travel Zone" at a car park outside Dr Clarke's York Street home, a line dancing instructor invited adult members of the public to take part in a country dancing lesson, by a backdrop of historical York Street, painted by local artist Kathleen McCoy. Then an MC, aided by two drama facilitators invited the lines of dancers to travel in time and find themselves caught in Clarke's photo of a line of their own ancestors in 1905, returning from church. An equivalent guided experience was offered to children.



*Photos by Joske Slabbers*





AREA 1

TIME  
TRAVEL  
ZONE







## AREA 2: CASTLEBLAYNEY STATION RECREATED

At Barney's Green, members of the local Castleblayney Players reenacted a famous photo of JJ's family posing before leaving for Bundoran from the now defunct railway station in Castleblayney.







Left: local photographer Jimmy Brophy's montage of the actors in performance (above), and the original Clarke image (below). Jimmy is mentioned in the play Dr Jack, having hosted the first exhibition of JJ's work in Blayney in the 1970s!



After watching a 15 minute comic family drama \*, younger and older audience members boarded the train (built on a float) and were treated to popular opera by fictional touring artiste Signore Scoti (Jahn Scott) as it trundled through Muckno Park, with the rest of the audience following in a lantern parade behind, singing along!

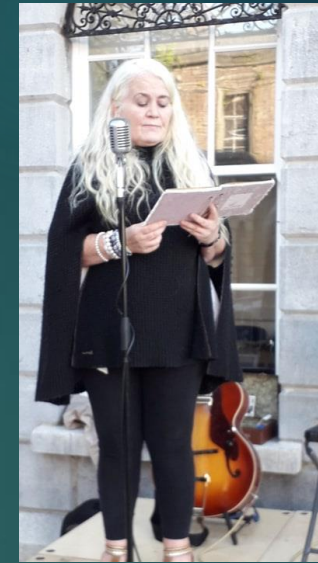


## AREA 3: THE MARKET

Led by costumed actors, the disembarking passengers arrived a timeless market, with poets, musicians, rabbits, llamas, tortoises and geese!



Jazz duo The Two Five Ones provided music!



Links to a video by Steven Larkin of "The Streets of JJ Clarke" can be found on

<https://declangorman.com/collaborations-freelance-work/public-art-residencies/county-monaghan-residency-2018-19/>



# Strand 2

## “Identity Now”

COMMUNITY-ENGAGED EXPLORATIONS OF IDENTITY IN A BORDER  
COUNTY (AND A ONE-OFF CABARET EVENT IN RESPONSE TO BREXIT)



# Strand 2: “Identity Now”

The second key theme of the residency was a consideration of “Identity”.

As social media and the internet take over from traditional print, broadcast and person-to-person methods of learning and reflection...

... as public discourse and mainstream politics are pulled more and more towards populism and division....

... how do people in a rural, border area of Ireland define themselves and maintain an inclusive & just society?



# ID/NOW: Monaghan Youth Theatre

## Pilot workshops

A short series of workshops with MYT in December 2018

Exploratory writing and improvised drama exercises reminded us among other things that there exists, still, a unique, locally grounded Monaghan sense of humour side-by-side with thoughtful insight.

Handed down over centuries, the wisdom and natural wit of the community survives in this generation, and is enhanced by the new cultural diversity of the town and surrounding countryside as Monaghan has become home to young people of diverse ethnic backgrounds, with greater awareness of gender identities, and matters of health and wellbeing.





# ID/NOW: Monaghan Youth Theatre

While there was much laughter and fun, there was also a serious aspect.

- ▶ The improvisations led the group to a number of pressing matters facing adolescents in their daily lives.
- ▶ One storyline in particular, created during a devising exercise, had a striking impact. It arose from an improvised still image simply of a young teenage girl sitting alone at a laptop, lost in some undefined sadness.
- ▶ Several scenarios were then explored in creative writing and drama responses – reminding us of both the artistry and capacity for empathy of these young Monaghan theatre makers.

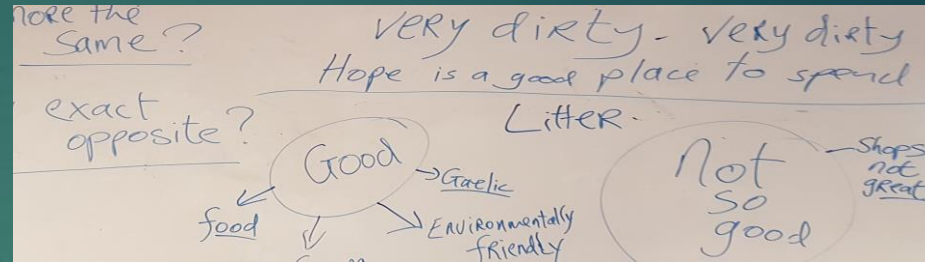


# ID/NOW (Creative Schools)

## BEECH HILL COLLEGE MONAGHAN

Although not a planned part of the residency, a mid-year invitation from Beech Hill College (a designated Creative School), to work with First Years on their Monaghan campus, allowed for further engagement with younger teenagers in the town on questions of place and identity.

A group of 24 students worked with me over 6 weeks and created a 'work-in-progress' drama about a futuristic new model town in Co. Monaghan called 'Hope' where environmental pollution and unequal economic policies are eradicated... until it all goes wrong!





# Cabaret Au Revoir

A rueful, satirical evening of live performance to mark the departure of Britain from the European Union



An 11 minute video capturing a flavour of the Cabaret evening is on <https://declangorman.com/collaborations-freelance-work/public-art-residencies/county-monaghan-residency-2018-19/>



Identity in Co. Monaghan is tied in very much with its location on the border with Northern Ireland.

Decades of violent political conflict came to an end with the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. While it left the political boundary intact, the GFA eliminated many exclusive and offensive aspects of the border: it allowed for the building of a shared identity and a lasting peace.... until the people of England voted in 2017 to take the entire UK, including the dissenting territory of Northern Ireland out of the EU.

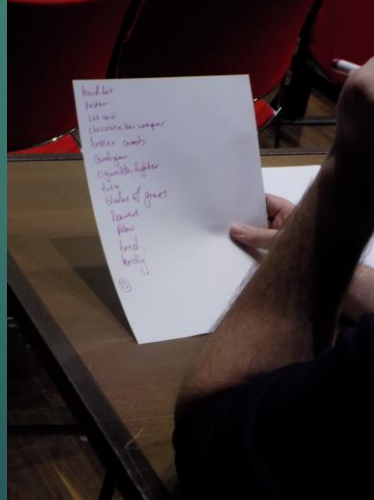
On April 30th 2019, on the day initially designated Brexit Day, Monaghan musicians and actors joined with me in a part-wake, part-satire, part artistic reflection.

# ID/NOW MONAGHAN

- ▶ In April and May 2019, at the Garage Theatre, a group of 14 adults responded to ads on social media and took part in an 8-week programme, again guided loosely by the theme of IDENTITY
- ▶ And again, while serious themes were explored, the main 'takeaway' was laughter and the making of new friends!







On the evening that Jaki Maughan came to document our work, she found us wandering about outside, foraging for recyclable rubbish!

The stuff we found became the starting point for our imaginative work.





The key to all of the workshops, across adults and teenagers was the sense of inclusivity. The groups comprised some with drama experience and some with none – and all were welcome regardless of cultural background, faith, age or ability.

The Monaghan group investigated themes of climate change, refuge and the need for courage and leadership. ...

### **PRESS PLAY!**

We made a 2-min video on our last evening, moving these ideas towards a starting point for a community performance.

At a future time we hope to reconvene to take this work further.

View the video on <https://declangorman.com/collaborations-freelance-work/public-art-residencies/county-monaghan-residency-2018-19/>





# ID/NOW CASTLEBLAYNEY

- ▶ Meanwhile, back at Íontas, 16 adults took up a similar challenge to meet weekly and consider questions of IDENTITY in a series of drama workshops.
- ▶ Again, mainly, fun was had!









We worked exclusively with fiction: using creative writing and imagined dramatic scenarios to reflect on the immediate world around us and on bigger global affairs.

By our final night, we had created a group of fictional, yet quite realistic characters and we interviewed them about their hopes and fears for the future ... and these ranged from loneliness to loss of economic independence to climate change.



# Strand 3

## “Developing the Artist”

TIME AND SPACE TO FOCUS ON THE ARTIST'S OWN PRACTICE, AND  
ALSO NETWORKING WITH FELLOW MONAGHAN ARTISTS



# Exploring new ideas and material

As well as its many collaborative aspects, the residency allowed me to experiment in my own solo practice without the pressure of production deadlines.

Over the 16 months, I had the privilege of performing scenes from a new, autobiographical play-in-progress “Nineteen Eighty Something” at two separate gatherings of the Monaghan Arts Network at Íontas, and showcasing a section from a new solo show based on James Joyce’s “The Dead”, at a third M.A.N. event in the Garage.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, I stepped, on a whim, into the Íontas Theatre auditorium alone with my phone and recorded an extract from my 1998 play, “Hades”, improvised for solo performance.

These tiny moments, these great gifts: having unique personal access to two beautiful theatres, rehearsal rooms and writing stations; also the advice and insights of the staff and programmers of each venue, the county arts officer and the local Creative Ireland coordinator: all this contributed to making my Monaghan residency not just enjoyable but artistically productive!



**“I, me, myself, I”**

Left: rehearsing solo at Íontas

Below: Performing at Monaghan Arts Network showcase



Videos of solo experiments can be viewed on <https://declangorman.com/collaborations-freelance-work/public-art-residencies/county-monaghan-residency-2018-19/>

## NETWORKING WITH OTHER ARTISTS

The residency also allowed me to deepen existing relationships with fellow Monaghan artists. I was invited to compere a Monaghan Arts Network showcase, where I interviewed composer Michael Gallen whose remarkable opera “Elsewehre” had a subsequent work-in-progress performance at St. Maeldoid’s Church in Castleblayney, and visual artist Kate Beagan, some of whose works were on show at the Íontas gallery. I shared the Garage stage with the noted singer-songwriter Ben Reel.

As well as these and other formal evenings, I enjoyed the constant support and good company of professional and amateur artists of all disciplines. The Castleblayney Players were regular contributors to the events I curated. Dara Mac Gabhainn and Andy Hogg (The Two Five Ones jazz duo) were always at hand. Visual artist Orlagh Meegan-Gallagher designed our “Cabaret Au Revoir” event and I, in turn, was treated to a guided tour of her moving memorial installation at Carrickmacross Workhouse and subsequently launched her exhibition “Lose My Breath” which included an innovative piece by the upcoming sound artist Regret Will Come.

These, along with the regular encounters with creative children, teenagers and adults on the community programmes; historians, public officials, arts programmers, youth theatre leaders and so many others, had a renewing effect on my own confidence and practice. In short, it was a marvellous 16 months of meeting and making, for which I am deeply thankful!



**Above:** In conversation with Kate Beagan. **Centre:** At the launch of Orlagh Meegan-Gallagher's exhibition. **Below:** “I follow rivers” by Orlagh Meegan-Gallagher