



DAVE HANNIGAN

A president who broke friendships

THE passage of the six month anniversary of Donald Trump's presidency last week heralded a slew of media coverage.

Almost every item included depressing lists and statistics. Befitting his very peculiar administration, there was lots of stuff about how many lies he's told, how many promises he's broken, and how many threats he's issued and not delivered on.

As I waded through it all, there was something struck me. There was one crucial category of missing statistic. There needed to be one cataloguing how many good friendships have been broken by this presidency.

It may not rank in importance alongside the president of the White House being caught out telling porkies or misinterpreting history but I believe no presidency in modern times has caused so many people to stop talking to each other. Everywhere I go these days, I discover individuals who have fallen out with formerly good friends or colleagues because of the current political climate. It's a very strange type of collateral damage yet a very real one.

This is no ordinary presidency. In the Bush years (which were bitter enough too) and the Obama era (again plenty of mud-slinging), people had disagreements. Now, they get divorces. There have been a few actual cases of marriages ending due to political differences. One wonders whether those involved were merely looking for an excuse and found it in the election.

What I can say for certain is that I have first-hand experience of friends and neighbours falling out because of Trump. My initial inking about this came a couple of months back. Standing at the bus stop waiting for the kids to be picked up, I was chatting to one of the mothers. I mentioned another neighbour who I heard was trying to sell her house.

"I wouldn't know," she said. "I stopped talking to her after the election."

I didn't know how to respond. I presumed the woman I was talking to was anti-Trump but you can never be too careful. My silence lasted long enough for her to go into fuller detail.

"She voted for Trump, and for me, that's a deal-breaker. I cannot be friends with somebody in their right mind who voted for him. I just can't."

I was slightly taken aback. That seemed a tad dramatic. But, as time has gone on, I've discovered this is a very common occurrence in 2017. One colleague of mine explained that he's stopped talking to any friend or relative who cast his ballot for Trump. He did point out that he has one criteria for judging people. If somebody with a college education went for Trump, he cannot speak to them because that's unforgivable. Notwithstanding the fact there are plenty of individuals with college educations who are morons, his contention is that uneducated voters could be easily fooled, educated ones should be too smart for that.

In a peculiarly 21st century twist on post-Trump ostracism, I know a couple of others who told me they have pruned their Facebook friends right back. Anybody who voted Trump or ever posted something pro-Trump (one of the key factors in his unlikely victory) has been culled from their online lives. This has made it uncomfortable at a few family gatherings as they've been asked to explain why they've blocked older or southern relatives (the Trump demographic has a certain age and geographic bias).

Of course, some would say that refusing to engage with those we don't agree with is one of the reasons Trump was able to convince enough gullible rubes to vote for him. We need more dialogue not less.

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Cork's puppetry it socks, with a

CORK Puppetry Festival celebrates its fourth year in 2017, and the family-friendly festival is going international, with touring acts from Germany, Iceland, Greece, the UK and Northern Ireland joining home-grown Irish companies for a week of performances, workshops and even an academic conference.

With an attempt to break the world record for the largest number of people holding sock puppets also taking place, a drop-in festival club at the box office will be taking donations of odd socks for puppet-making workshops suitable for young and old—and the line-up of children's shows will bring myth and magic to young audiences in a way that only the ancient craft of puppetry can.

Irish puppetry has largely centred around a few popular TV shows like *Bosco*, *Zig and Zag* and *Wanderly Wagon*, but in other European countries it's a truly established art-form, with numerous large festivals on the annual calendar. Yet Cork Puppetry Festival (CPF) is the only festival in the Republic of Ireland for the art form.

CPF director Cliff Dolliver of well-known Cork Street Theatre and puppetry company Dwtcha Puppets says that putting Cork on the map as the home of puppetry in Ireland is one of the reasons the annual festival which this year will host 30 puppeteers from 12 national and international companies, was founded in the first place.

"We wanted to raise the profile of puppetry in Ireland," he says. "To have a forum for the industry once a year, and a focus for international guests to visit, and where puppeteers can meet. If you're interested in puppetry, then every August in Cork you know there's going to be something good."

Cliff, originally from Tasmania, arrived in Ireland in 1999, having worked as a theatrical set designer and puppeteer in Melbourne. He co-founded Dwtcha Puppets with musician and actor Mick Lynch, who passed away in 2015, and he says that the landscape for Irish puppetry has been evolving and growing steadily throughout his time in Ireland.

Competing for children's attention against computer games and the ever-present lure of Netflix, is puppetry something that will only draw niche audiences? Cliff doesn't agree.

"There'll always be things that break through into general public interest, like *Warhorse*, or *The Muppets*," he says, "and at the moment I think there's a yearning for live performance that's absent from gaming, animation and TV. Ultimately, there's an opportunity for puppetry there."

It's an artform with universal appeal to people of all ages, he says.

"Name a culture and they'll have some tradition of investing life into inanimate objects; you'll find forms of puppetry connected

Acts are coming from all over the world to take part in Cork's Puppetry Festival this summer, add to that a host of home-grown talent and it makes for an exciting event, writes ELLIE O'BYRNE who talks to those involved



RECORD ATTEMPT: Eleanore Robb launching Cork Puppetry Festival, organised by Dwtcha Puppets. Picture: Clare Keogh

to story-telling and carnival traditions all over the world. It's a really beautiful artform and so versatile: it can be funny, silly, and it's really easy to entertain children with because kids just invest so automatically and so unquestioningly in it. It can really take your breath away; you can have some incredibly magical moments with puppetry."

The world record for the largest number of people holding sock puppets is currently 365, and was set last year in Townsville, North Queensland. Cliff is confident that Cork can beat that record; Cork Puppetry Festival are asking for

donations, so festival patrons can raid the odd sock box on their way in to buy tickets, and do a simple workshop in making their own sock puppet to take part in the attempt on the last day of the festival, Monday August the seventh,

in Fitzgerald's Park. "We'll wash all the donated socks, of course!" Cliff laughs. "But we thought this was a really nice way to make the festival a participative event for people of all ages."

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festival is really giving great line-up for 2017



SHOWCASING HER ART: Emma Fisher puppeteering on *Pupa*.

Picture: Emma Mac

"The festival club in our box office upstairs in The Village Hall will be open throughout the festival...but in the evenings, we'll be moving over into the Sin É on Coburg street, where there'll be an adults-only puppet cabaret, and a few drinks too; puppeteers need to let their hair down too."

Adults' events include the darkly humorous "*Clown's Houses*" from Berlin-based company Merlin Puppet Theatre.

"I'm particularly looking forward to that one; it's a bluesy, gritty, Tom Waits-feel thing about domestic arrangements in the modern world, and all the characters in it are clowns," Cliff says.

The worlds of puppetry and academia may seem a million

miles apart, but in a rather more serious vein than most of the festival programme, this year CPF will host a two-day symposium on puppetry, disability and health in UCC, where performers and members of UNIMA research commission (the UN-backed Union International de la Marionnette, headed up in Ireland by Thomas Baker of Your Man's Puppets, a Galway company) will present their work in the area of puppetry and disability.

The symposium is the brainchild of Limerick puppeteer Emma Fisher, who founded inclusive puppetry and theatre company Beyond the Bark ten years ago, and is now doing a PhD in puppetry and disability, based in part

on her own experience as a puppeteer with a disability; Emma has nerve damage and restricted movement in her right hand.

"I was looking into puppet companies where the performers and writers are disabled," Emma says.

"I have nerve damage in my left hand since I was nine. Before the PhD I never would have even said I had a disability because it doesn't affect me much on a day-to-day basis. During the PhD, I started asking, 'ok, why don't I identify with this group of people?' and that was a lot to do with how society views disability."

As part of her PhD, Emma developed an adult puppet show called *Pupa*, which explored her experiences and

those of five other people with a disability. Emma also worked with Ivan Owen, an engineer who makes prosthetic devices for people with restricted mobility or missing limbs.

"We made this made mechanical backpack that meant that my left arm puppeteered my right arm," she says.

"I have some movement in my arm; it's my hand mainly that's affected. Through using this device, I was treating my arm like a puppet, which might sound strange, but puppets are part of their puppets anyway."

The symposium is yet another way that Cork Puppetry Festival is putting Cork on the international puppetry map; UNIMA research commission

members will be presenting work at the symposium from as far away as Japan and Chile. But nearly as much as the conference, Emma says, she's looking forward to attending Cork Puppetry Festival "just to see all the shows."

Emma, like most puppeteers, builds her own puppets and works primarily with rod marionette and shadow puppets.

"I've always loved puppets since I was a kid," she says. "It's all about the movement for me; I get so excited when they start to move. I'm not great at talking through my puppets, but I just love moving them, and also making them."

Cork Puppetry Festival 2017 takes place from July 30 to August 7 at Cork City venues.



LEADING THE WAY: Cliff Dolliver of Downton Puppets.

■ For more information and a full programme of events, visit: www.corkpuppetryfestival.com