

DIVERSITY CENTRE STAGE:

Being Seen

By Peter Crawley

Acting, at its simplest, is the art of representation. Can The Lir Academy and the Samuel Beckett Centre ensure a student body that is diverse enough to represent the nation?

In a way, Clinton Liberty could always see himself attending The Lir, the National Academy of Acting at Trinity College Dublin, until he actually got there. In the foyer of its modern building hangs a gallery of headshots of each year's graduating class, facing into an intensive year of productions and a future in the industry. Liberty, a warm and confident speaker with an easy smile, remembers thinking, "Oh, there's nobody there who looks like me. I guess there's not a lot of black actors in third year at the moment."

In a school in which class sizes are necessarily small and competition for places is high (16 students are admitted to the Bachelor in Acting course each year, selected by a rigorous audition process), it wasn't a realisation that had escaped the attentions of The Lir Academy's Director, Loughlin Deegan, either. Five years into The Lir's existence, a strategic review resulted in new objectives for the dramatic arts conservatory (which also provides a bachelor's degree in Stage Management and Technical Theatre, master's degrees in Playwriting, Directing and Stage Design, a foundation course in Acting, and a growing list of short courses).

Of those objectives, one has been made a top priority: to help diversify the student base through the encouragement of access and outreach programmes, strategic partnerships, and wherever possible, by putting a face on The Lir Academy's achievements in equality so far.

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Acting is the business of representation – you take on another identity, inhabit a role, invite people to see lives imagined on stage or on screen. But how well are Ireland's rapidly changing demographics represented by professional acting? Places at The Lir Academy are always assigned by merit, but its pool of applicants is not a broad panoply. At a time when there has been much soul-searching in the industry about the decline of working-class artists, a renewed emphasis on enshrining gender and sexual equality, and a better appreciation for Ireland's burgeoning intercultural identity, the field of higher education, as much as the culture at large, is encouraged to check its privilege.

"We realise that we have got to get out there, particularly to talk to young people, to let them know that the opportunity to train to work in the creative arts at The Lir exists," says Deegan.

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Clinton Liberty,
Bachelor in Acting
(2019)

Photos: Kevin Newcomen

“Acting is a particularly difficult career to proselytise for, so we need to do that creatively and sensitively, just by really making people aware of the opportunity. That’s where the new Diversity Champions come in. It’s the classic idea: If you can’t see it, you can’t be it.”

To some extent, when Clinton Liberty first arrived to The Lir Academy, the wall of white faces that greeted him was the exception rather than the rule.

Since its first graduates emerged, in 2014, The Lir has been able to point to some diversity among its former students, including David Fawaz (from Nigeria who graduated in 2018), the Ghanaian-Irish actor Kwaku Fortune (2017) and the Irish-Filipina actor Vanessa Emme (one of The Lir’s first graduates in 2014). In 2019, Liberty is one of two Nigerian-Irish actors to graduate from the Academy, together with Patrick Martins.

“I had just about become used to the idea of being the only black person in [Irish] acting,” says Martins. “So when I first saw Clinton, it opened up the possibility of actually acting with another black person in this country.”

Now, both Liberty and Martins will be The Lir’s first official Diversity Champions, visiting schools and communities to give talks about their experiences in the Academy, and partaking in social media campaigns to highlight the possibilities available

at The Lir and in the acting profession. “Encouraging students to come to the arts and acknowledge the arts is something that I’m very passionate about,” says Martins, whose own journey persuaded skeptical peers that acting could be more than a hobby. “It’s something I really want to encourage.”

It also serves a pressing need in the industry itself. One frank question that Liberty and Martins had for Deegan, in their first year at The Lir, was whether they would find sufficient work in Ireland after graduation. Deegan, then fielding requests for actors of colour from casting directors in the wake of 2016’s #OscarsSoWhite protest, told them, “You’re going to be fine.”

As with heightened awareness within the Irish theatre industry since the #WakingTheFeminists movement, #OscarsSoWhite has helped to spur a greater equality of opportunities in filmmaking. “There is a lot of work out there for actors of colour,” says Deegan, referring to the booming film and television industry. “People are actively looking for diversity in the cast of TV and film dramas.” Presently, in fact, there are barely enough actors of colour to meet demand.

That might come as a reassuring sign of cultural shift to Vanessa Emme, one of the first graduates of The Lir Academy, whose earlier experience as an actor with Irish and Filipina heritage was a sobering lesson in the politics of “being seen”.

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“I told Loughlin that, based on some previous experiences, maybe I wouldn’t be seen professionally for the kind of parts that I was getting to play in university,” she says. “It is an utter joy how the world has been moving since towards colour-blind casting. And, on the flipside, I think there is also the notion of colour-conscious casting, which does take ethnicity into account. Why shouldn’t actors of colour be able to play certain characters? Opening up that conversation was really helpful for me, and for the school too, I think.”

If The Lir Academy must be proactive when it comes to promoting diversity – “to ensure that the application pool is as diverse as the population,” as Deegan puts it, “while still keeping it a meritocracy” – in matters of gender, sexuality and ability, it must necessarily be responsive. “A younger generation is leading us,” he says. “We have non-binary students, gender-queer students and transgender students. In most courses, it’s straightforward – as a designer, a playwright or a technician, your gender is irrelevant. It’s a particular challenge within actor training, though, where almost every day you are asked to choose [to play] a binary gender. Our focus at the moment is on how can we better support gender-diverse students.”



Vanessa Emme,
Bachelor in Acting
(2014)

Photo: Foye Thomas



Patrick Martins,
Bachelor in Acting
(2019)

Photo: Lorna Fitzsimons

As with The Lir, a department concerned with how art and society correspond must itself keep pace with that society. “I think we are really on top of it in Drama,” says Sihra, “because so much of theatre is about identity, human exploration, sexualities, the body on stage... So we are already thinking about these questions in our work.”

The department could point to its own unofficial diversity champions, graduates who exemplify inclusivity and might encourage a broader field of applicants, although Sihra is hesitant to tokenise. “Well, Ruth Negga is our star, an Irish woman and a woman of colour,” she says. Negga, who graduated from the Bachelor in Theatre Studies in 2001 (The Lir’s predecessor), was nominated for Best Actress at the Oscars for her role in 2016’s *Loving*, and soon returns to play the lead role in the Gate Theatre’s production of *Hamlet*, which transfers to New York in early 2020.

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Indeed, everything from the IT systems of The Lir (where applicants once chose titles from a dropdown menu) to the facilities have been made gender neutral. “I think we have been showing leadership within Trinity in this regard,” says Deegan.

At Trinity’s School of Creative Arts, which now hosts the Drama, Film and Music departments, the diversity of its students, faculty and course materials is something to keep its eye on. As with The Lir Academy, students at the School’s Drama department at the Samuel Beckett Centre are also admitted by audition, with most offers dependent on the CAO process. The department can also award ten discretionary places, a boon to disadvantaged applicants, which in tandem with Trinity Access has helped to broaden the social-class backgrounds of its students and in turn brought a more interrogative dynamic to its classrooms and political charge to its work.

According to Dr Melissa Sihra, Head of Drama, the most significant development in her department’s diversity in recent years has been in gender identity. In the past five years, for instance, students who identify as transgender, non-binary or gender-queer have come to make up ten per cent of the Drama department, while training from Transgender Equality Network Ireland, together with guidance from Trinity’s Equality Office, has helped to inform a sympathetic, accommodating environment. As with classes and coursework that respond to the needs of students with physical disabilities, that signals a comparatively rapid evolution in equality. This year, in fact, there are more female employees than male at the department for the first time in its 27-year history.

That Negga is an inspiration goes without saying: it’s easier to think of her *Hamlet*, for director Yaël Farber, not so much as colour-blind or colour-conscious, gender-blind or gender-conscious, than as an invitation to see the play differently. Before Negga’s performance, Martins never recalled seeing an actor of colour on the stage of the Gate before, and similarly hopes Irish theatre can absorb African-Irish experience. Emme, who remembers struggling to find “examples of me in the arts” as a young actor, long considered Negga to be “the only person I could see as a beacon of hope.”

But Negga might be just one extraordinary example of what diversity makes possible, rather than the answer. As The Lir’s graduates dive into the industry – Emme has just finished work on the prestigious television show *Dublin Murders*, and both Liberty and Martins had work already lined up before graduating – the benefit of a diverse classroom, or diverse campus, or ultimately a diverse nation, will champion itself.

“We can see things differently,” Martins says of the broader perspective that two cultures afford. That might as well go for the shared benefits of diversity itself. “It brings more options to how you tackle something,” he says. “You have a lot more to choose from.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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