

PUBLIC ART



John D'Arcy, Tolka Nights Choral Performance, Friday 12 September 2015



Tolka Edibles at the Tolka Quiz, Grasshopper Inn, Clonee, Friday 11 September 2015

Moody River

JOANNE LAWS REPORTS ON 'TOLKA NIGHTS,' A SERIES OF PUBLIC EVENTS THAT INCLUDED FILM SCREENINGS, PERFORMANCES AND DISCUSSIONS, WHICH TOOK PLACE IN VARIOUS LOCATIONS ALONG THE RIVER TOLKA, DUBLIN, 10 – 12 SEPTEMBER 2015.



Jennie Guy, Tolka Quiz, Grasshopper Inn, Clonee, Friday 11 September 2015



John D'Arcy, Mapped Score for Tolka Chorus, Tolka Valley Park, Friday 12 September 2015

PUBLIC ART

IN May 2014, Create (the national development agency for collaborative arts in social and community contexts) launched a Per Cent for Art commission, funded by the Office of Public Works, arising from the creation of flood defence systems along the River Tolka – Dublin's second largest river. Proposals were invited from artists working in any medium to engage selected sites within Meath, Fingal and Dublin City local authority areas, using the Tolka as a 'central connector'. Following a two-stage competition, the commission was awarded to a collaborative proposal by six artists: Matt Green, Sven Anderson, John D'Arcy, Jennie Guy, Conan McIvor and Stuart Sloan. 'Tolka Nights' comprised three public events which took place over consecutive evenings across distinct locations in the Tolka region. Soundscapes, moving image works, performance and dialogue converged, inviting audiences to engage with the river's multi-layered histories, ecosystems and communities.

PUB QUIZ, AMBIENT PROJECTION & HOSPITALITY

With the river Tolka running nearby, the family-run Grasshopper Inn, Clonee, provided an ideal setting for a quintessential opening event: the Tolka Quiz. Having appropriated the pub's in-house media system, the artists ingeniously augmented the traditional pub quiz format with interactive, multimedia elements including maps, films and audio clips. Jennie Guy worked with the Grasshopper Inn's chef to source and prepare a tasty selection of Tolka-inspired food and drinks, including smoked trout, plum chutney, blackberry jam and locally-baked soda bread, as well as nettle tea, berry cocktail and elderflower cordial.

With John D'Arcy as charismatic quizmaster, an entertaining evening of river trivia unfolded. Rounds such as 'Stream of Consciousness' and 'What's That Tolka Sound?' pitched specialist-knowledge alongside multiple-choice questions, conveying the substantial knowledge amassed by the artists on local history (medieval battles, industry, floods), geography (place names, tributaries, architecture), ecology (flora, fauna), literary references (Beckett, Joyce) and folklore (Irish mythology, ghosts, iconography). Many of the community groups attending the quiz had worked with the artists at different stages; however this was the first time members of these groups – BirdWatch Ireland, Irish Wildlife Trust, Anglers Association, Mulhuddart Walkers Group and Coolmine Musical Society – convened in one place. Several members also donated prizes, including a book on *Myths, Legends and Folklore* by local writer Niall MacCoitir, tickets to Coolmine Musical Society's Christmas production and a wooden wishing well hand-crafted by members of Mulhuddart Men's Shed. There is something rather heart-warming about public displays of specialist knowledge, and such fanaticism was abundantly valued within the Tolka Quiz, creating a galvanising gesture within the community setting, while simultaneously broadening interpretations of 'what artists do'.

OUTDOOR SCREENINGS & LIVE PERFORMANCE

The second iteration of 'Tolka Nights' comprised an evening of film screenings on the riverbanks of Tolka Valley Park, where cinematic projections shimmered against a dusky magenta sky, as vibrant light installations cast kaleidoscopic shadows on surrounding trees. Though moderately hampered by wet weather, the sounds of raindrops hitting the viewing gazebo's canopy merged with cascading river sounds to form a fittingly immersive watery soundscape. Matt Green's series of four short films documents his Tolka expeditions with local wildlife enthusiasts to track elusive river animals: kingfishers, trout, otters and bats. Each opening scene is dominated by audible footsteps through the undergrowth. Working in tandem with the films' visual elements, audio was generated through copious field recordings to intensify the river experience. In *Bat Hunting* with Sean Meehan, paranormal night vision footage is compounded by sonar soundscapes emanating from the guide's bat detection device. Across each film, conversations merge with personal, descriptive and anecdotal accounts of the river, embodying the solace people frequently find in nature.

Similarly, Stuart Sloan's *In Troubled Waters* employs documentary techniques to explore symbiotic relationships between humans and the Tolka. A narrator reflects on modern-day agricultural and industrial pollution which severely impacts on the river's wildlife. Archival TV footage conveys recent floods (attributable to climate change and depleting floodplains) which resulted in the evacuation



John D'Arcy, Tolka Nights Choral Performance, Tolka Valley Park, Friday 12 September 2015



Prizes at the Tolka Quiz, Grasshopper Inn, Clonee, Friday 11 September 2015

of nearby homes. The film concludes with reverie, proposing harmonious use of the river, utilised in summer by families for leisure pursuits and during winter by seabirds flocking to calmer waters.

John D'Arcy worked with local residents and singers to develop *Tolka Chorus* – a lyrical composition of found texts and improvised vocals which "recreates the sounds of the river, its communities and its localities". Against a monochrome background, a map of the river appeared luminous, mimicking a satellite navigation interface, with an orbicular 'O' place-marker visibly channelling the mouth and inching down-stream. Layered, whispered voices mirror the twists and turns of the river, marking the sites where memory and historical continuity persist, and building to a sea-shanty crescendo where the river enters Dublin Bay between East Wall and Clontarf.

Taking its title from a nineteenth-century poem of the same name, Conan McIvor's *Our lady of the Tolka* pans the river's mythologies and histories, drawing on the 'trance film' tradition of 1940s avant garde cinema to depict a dreamlike scenario – part flashback, part haunting – through a series of monochromatic vignettes. Distorted, post-industrial soundscapes add dramatic tension. A female apparition dressed in white emerges from the river, interpreted as the Virgin Mary, who features ubiquitously in shrines along the riverbanks. Bearing witness to destructive forces from the Middle Ages, the woman channels Viking invasions and the Battle of Clontarf, summoning storms and floods in one final ritualistic act, aimed at restoring the river.

Before the Flood (2015), by Sven Anderson and Jennie Guy, explores a fictional ecological scenario. The film is narrated from the perspective of a young planner, appointed Temporary Flood Commissioner following catastrophic flooding in the Tolka region. Crisp black and white footage pans a suburban Modernist housing estate as the planner recounts four potential solutions: entombing the river in concrete; propagating plants in gridded shopping centres; and constructing boardwalks to traverse the floodplains. The monologue was discerningly assembled from research probing urban planning, neo-futuristic architecture and shopping-mall design, and narrated by Irish architect and environmentalist Duncan Stewart, who lends

plausibility to these impossible events. A live percussive soundscape and reading performance by the artists accompanied the screening.

SYMPOSIUM & RIVER AMPLIFICATION

The final instalment of 'Tolka Nights' was a river-themed symposium, held in the College of Amenity and Horticulture in the National Botanic Gardens. Director Matthew Jebb ruminated on the Tolka as a "moody" river, "leaky barrier" and northern boundary-marker for the Botanic Gardens, which makes the urban site feel intrinsically "rural". Maryann Harris commenced by outlining Dublin City Council's Integrated Constructed Wetlands for Tolka Valley (1999 – 2000) – an infrastructural project she implemented within the Parks and Landscape Services Division. The region's industrial history since the eighteenth century has comprised brick kilns, forges, mills, pasturelands and abattoirs, while twentieth-century landfill practices ceased in the 1970s with E.U. environmental directives. Continued protection of the Tolka's biodiversity necessitates ongoing strategies to manage pollution, invasive species and anti-social behaviour. A measure of the project's success is the return of salmon to the Tolka after nearly 100 years.

As symposium moderator, Sven Anderson seamlessly managed the technical arrangements for speakers participating via Skype, including Karsten Huneck (KHBT Architects), who discussed a major flood-related commission for the River Ness, Scotland. Currently at planning stage, KHBT's design draws on a rich legacy of British seaside architecture, boardwalks and piers to focus on ideas of "connecting the public to the water". Pitched as a playful architectural intervention, *Gathering Place* is a multi-purpose viewing-platform, shelter and bridge, echoing the counterweight motion of a seesaw. Also participating via Skype, Glasgow-based artist Stephen Hurrel outlined several river-based projects including 'Zones – An Audiology of the River Clyde' (1999) commissioned by Tramway, Glasgow, to reflect on the Clyde's post-industrial landscape. Hurrel produced a soundtrack from field recordings and Scottish TV archives, disseminated via an audio boat tour. Developed in collaboration with social ecologist Ruth Brennan, 'Sea Stories' is an online interactive map documenting the cultural knowledge, oral traditions, place-names, stories and songs of Barra Island in Scotland's Outer Hebrides. 'Clyde Reflections' (2014), commissioned by Creative Scotland, comprises interviews with islanders to elucidate scientific, ecological and philosophical perspectives on the Clyde.

Anne Mullee outlined her recent curatorial project 'The Artists' Armada', for which artist-made watercrafts were launched onto Dublin's Grand Canal last July. The expedition comprised several artists' vessels including Mark Redden's communally-built Irish currach and *Bravo Serotonin*, crafted by The Good Hatchery from a tree felled during Hurricane Katia. Seóidín O'Sullivan's anchored raft hosted *Floating Dialogues*, addressing water politics and the commons. While rigorous planning was essential, Anne views the more performative, risk-taking elements as defining features of the project.

After living in America for almost a decade, Czech artist Klara Hobza commenced a 30-year project 'Diving Through Europe', to find ways of synthesising Europe's diverse cultural histories. Following a scuba-diving trip to Istanbul, she began training with a mentor in the Black Sea. The artist conceded that she is frequently asked "Why are you doing this?" (She has no interest in "colourful fish"...). "Reality", she concluded cheerfully, "has a way of providing you with material experience, often in the form of obstacles".

Moving outdoors for the closing event, audience members were given handheld radio-receivers and invited to wander through the Botanic Gardens, where a series of short-range radio transmissions had been dispersed. Colourful spot-lighting near the riverbank created a festival feel. Periods of static fuzz governed the direction of people's footsteps, until snippets of conversations, voices and music came into frequency range, feeling like a treasure hunt for close-listeners. Like the two other 'Tolka Nights' events, this sonic intervention hinged on the collective artists' impressive technological proficiencies and was activated ultimately by audience participation to great effect.

Joanne Laws is an arts writer based in Leitrim. She has previously written for publications such as: Art Monthly (UK), Art Papers (US), Cabinet (US) and Frieze (UK).