

Being Friendly.

Stand in Dundalk with the square behind you. The field of your eyes filled with the columns of the court. The sounds of the market sellers and the fountain reach your ears, mingling with voices at either side, arguing this and petitioning that. A bell above the rooftops calls the faithful to prayer while just up the street the citizens stand in lines to pay their taxes and their fines.

If a time traveller from Ancient Greece were to appear, safely distanced, by your side, she would have no problem recognising the layout of our town. We've been making towns like theirs ever since. The language barrier conveniently solved, takeaway drink of choice in hand, she would no doubt soon ask to see your theatre.

A theatre was a central feature in almost every Greek town, and here, from around 600bc they would perform their great tragedies and comedies. Struggle and revenge, vanity and frailty. Satire and scandal. Just like their town planning, we've been putting on plays like theirs ever since. Orbited by it's satellites - the court and the library, the church, museum and square, our ancient guest would be impressed. For her, the theatre was a continuation of these spaces where the discussion of right and wrong, of good and evil, of how we should live, was played out on stage and argued back and forth by an audience enthralled.

In our recent adaption of Bertold Brecht's *Mother Courage*, the mother of the title found herself at last alone on stage, having dragged her wagon and her children through the hardships of war. Her family gone and no end to the struggle in sight the playwright, Brecht himself, turned to the audience and asked

'In the dark times will there also be singing?'

In answer he himself replied

'Yes. There will be singing *about* the dark times'

This hopeful and defiant statement of intent, that art and creativity, the coming together through the sharing of voices must persist *especially* when times are hardest is perhaps the very touchstone of Brecht as playwright and poet.

There are those who argue that Shakespeare's collection of 154 sonnets was published in 1609, partly as a response to an outbreak of plague in London. With theatres closed and troupes of actors unable to rehearse, here was an art that could be made and shared. Recently, Patrick Stewart Shakespearean actor and sometime Captain Jean - Luc Picard of the Star Ship Enterprise has taken to recording and sharing one of these sonnets every day through social media.

It is in this spirit that the actors of Encore Productions have been taking photographs of the things they see around them every day. Keys, shoes, the sky, a mug, shadows. The photograph taken, each of us then writes whatever comes to mind and shares the pictures and words with each other on our phones and tablets. Thoughtful and caring. At times despairing. More often quiet and calming.

If you feel you might like to try yourself, then there are few better places to start than where we did, with this poem by Bertold Brecht, here translated from the original German:

Pleasures.

First look from mornings window
The rediscovered book
Fascinated faces
Snow, the changing of the seasons
The newspaper
The dog
Dialectics
Showering, swimming
Old music
Comfortable shoes
Comprehension
New music
Writing, planting
Traveling
Singing
Being friendly.

Being friendly. That's something everybody understands, from Dundalk right back to Ancient Greece. Speaking of which, where is Patrick Stewart and the Starship Enterprise when you need him? How is this Greek girl getting home? Beam me up Scotty!

After working in youth work and education in Edinburgh, Sandy Sneddon came to Dundalk in 2003 as writer in residence with the Town Council. Since 2004 he has been Drama Coordinator with RehabCare and director of Encore Productions - currently theatre company in Residence with An Táin Arts Centre.