

BALLINAMORE FREE FRINGE FESTIVAL

Dwayne Woods.

"IT WAS ALL Brendan's fault" the result of a conversation between friends in a tea room in an otherwise dusty Leitrim town. FREE FESTIVAL was the hook that gave birth to an idea that was on the minds of not only the three tea drinkers in question but of a nation on the front line of a financial/environmental war. "FREE" yes FREE" LOL, OMG, WTF, LMAO, but really "free" and yes free, Lets think about this. Free for everyone. For performers, for the audience, for love and no money, for Ireland...possibly? For you...

It has happened, it did work and it will continue.

So back to the tea rooms. WELCOME TO BALLINAMORE Co. Leitrim (the friendly town). Enter Tracy Murray of Edinburgh fame, owner of Murray's vintage clothes shop/tea rooms. A lady and entrepreneur for the masses. Her response to Brendan's (Brendan Dean—fabulous local artist) idea of a free festival was a spark to flame. Tracy is a native of Edinburgh and has worked for many years with the Fringe Festival, on radio and everywhere in between. So somewhere in the tea leaves was the Leitrim Free Fringe Festival. With Dubliner Sonya Cassidy on board she became the "lets £@\$\$%! do it" girl of the trilogy. A threesome to rival a glamorous coven of streetwise white witches, reminiscing Macbeth even. Best cup of tea ever one would imagine! "When shall we three meet again, in thunder, lightning or in BALLINAMORE?" Recession is a word that is dampened or flat-lined by such ideas and it's not rocket science. And so the reaction, the locals, the far and wide, and fundamentally brave, and the awkwardly rich. A small town in the north west of Ireland is not an easy ground to infiltrate with new visions and most importantly possibilities. However, change is positive, an idea from a general mass. Who said Woodstock? Smoked salmon, eggs, champagne (no boxty)

were the plated ingredients to an epiphany. Sometimes even free things need expensive glamour!!

Enter Clare Roche...

"I would be honoured". Yes, she is to string arrangement as Mary Robinson is to polo necks. And so it happened the first ever Leitrim free fringe festival. After we sent a million e-mails hunting for amateur performers, musicians, dancers, poets, the cultured and curious and a handful of established legends well versed in the industry of creativity and life and living local. Can you believe it?

So tea turns into gold and the Internet sells ideas better than the stock exchange. Without a blink of an over eager eye, we had a Facebook page, a very camp St Patrick's day parade and Tracy, Brendan and Dwayne, frolicking around Galway in pirate/transsexual costume, not according to constitutional law and not handing out flyers. (THANK YOU GALWAY). And so the Festival was set to take off.

We approached many of the town's publicans and were greatly surprised by how accommodating they were in particular Liam McGirl and Osmond Costello. One of the greatest disappointments was the fact that we were refused permission to use the community centre as a venue for the event. Apparently "it would not be suitable for this type of thing", which kind of defeats the purpose of the words "community centre".

Next up on the list of events was whipping boy and front man Fearghal McKee who jumped on board and played a fundamental roll in helping to attract bands and everything else, including his famous *chilli con carne*. Greg Gorman and his blue stack jam also jumped on board and told us he had thirty bands ready to go. After much preparation and improvisation to avoid spending money (as it is a free festival after all), we were



delighted to receive a 200 euro grant from the arts council. Some great donations were also made at various fundraising events throughout the year. The festival itself was a shocking success, the performers were of a high calibre and the fact that 142 acts gave us their time for free is proof of that. The general feedback from the locals was that this was the greatest thing to happen to Ballinamore for 40 years.

With an eclectic mix of act such as Cold Comfort, The Cool Hand Dukes, Charlie McGettigan and 21 outs to name but a few we also had a performance of Victor's Dung by the award winning Corn Mill theatre group, written by Seamus O'Rourke and thanks to him. Also incorporated in the Festival was an international film festival organised by Ger Boland and Teresa Wood showing films from as far away as India and America movies were shown free of charge, 10 am to 10 pm, for the duration of the festival. Altogether the cost of hosting the festival cost a mere 1000 euro, all included. All the performers were fed for the weekend and thanks to locals who offered spare rooms and places to camp.

It's not that the people of Ireland need reminding that the price of milk or coal or the arts is a costly venture, it is more so that the people of Ireland need to be reminded of our hidden treasure, which is the high level of talent we have here. The buzz and high energy that came from the festival and artists exchanging talents for free is priceless. We are all looking forward to next years festival same time, same place. If you or anyone you may know would like to be on the line up please e-mail Tracy at: freefringefest@gmail.com