**The text of a Spech given by Marc Mac Lochlainn at The APAC conference in 2014, some of the facts are old now but it give a sense of where Branar came from.**

My Name is Marc Mac Lochlainn, I am founder and artistic director of Branar.
I am a farmers son. This has taught me many things that have stood to me in my Artisitc life.
1.  How to live in poverty,
2.  How to be inventive and enterprising
3.  To take time for this most important task of observing, the land, nature, changes in animals. etc
The most enjoyable trait of farming was the variety of tasks in a day or year. I loved that you would milk cows, feed horses, travel to a neighbour and borrow a machine, work on a tractor, mend fences. What ever task was at hand had to be completed.
This variety of tasks is something I think I enjoy about how we work in Branar. This might explain the variety of elements that makes up Branar.

Today i would like to briefly outline Who we are and What we do?,  why we do what we do? and how we do what we do.
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**Our Mission statement at Branar is a simple yet a powerful one.**

Insíonn muid scéalta móra do shaoránaigh Beaga. We tell big stories to little citizens.

In making  this statement it is implicit that we are a child centered organisation.

By **Big stories  we mean that**We always endeavor to engage with stories that are relevant to our audience. When we say big stories we mean stories that have big emotions that are not little inconsequential stories that patronise our audience in a Disney, “it will be ok in the end”,  way. Stories that are important to children. We try to show in our stories that children experience the full spectrum of emotions, its not just happiness and sadness.

**And with Little citizen we believe that**It is important that we refer to children as citizen lest we forget that the are in every way equal to us adults.

Branar is a multi-faceteted organisation.  We are a production company, we have an outreach element to our work, we have theatre resource sharing scheme in which we share our facilities and expertise with smaller less funded companies who work for children, We train artists and teachers. And now we can add a theatre company in residence  here in Mary Immaculate college to that list now.

While I was teaching at a second level school in the late ninties, I had a strong interest in theatre  from my college days and i found that i was using theatre and drama methodologies a lot in my teaching. I searched for someone to come in a do workshops with my students, but to no avail. I saw an opportunity. I left teaching that September and founded Branar, in the beginning my work focused mainly on drama in education but over the years the company has evolved to be a more theatre led model of practice. In our 13 years we have created 15 productions designed for various age groups all under the age of 12.

Today we present work in schools venues and festivals nationally an internationally, we are theatre company in Residence here in Mary Immaculate college and last year we company in residence in Galway city and county**. (slide 3)**  In 2013, 13,000 children engaged with our work. On average we would make artistic contact with 12- 15,000 children per year.

Over the years we have discovered that there are 3 key ingrediets which are paramount in our work

Beauty, simplicity and magic.

**(slide 4)**

I believe the importance of **beauty** in children’s lives is under-estimated. What other area of study is better equipped than the arts to allow them to experience beauty. Children spend their days in functional buildings, a lot of them in need of repair, the least we can do is try to transform their hall for a few hours or transport them upon a narrative to a new world.  We try to create experiences that are beautiful on every level.  The visual aesthetic, the music, the atmosphere, the movement, the language, the puppets and props must be beautiful.

We strive for **simplicity.** Our goal is to simply impart a narrative without loosing any of its emotional depth. Paradoxically simplicity is a difficult thing to attain. We tell and re-tell our stories in development to remove any unnecessary words, movement, lines or scenes. All in the name of clarity and simplicity.

And as for **Magic**. I don’t mean hocus pocus but theatrical moments of magic. You can only plan for magic, you can put all the pieces in place. But the magic in not in our hands, the magic is dependent on the audience. Its that moment of collective awe, or the moment when the entire audience, of 30,60 or 100 children, are certain the saw a puppet smile, or that moments of silence, magical silence when the children completely engaged in the world we have created for them. Its with these moments that they thank us for our efforts. Adults audiences applaud.  Children applaud with their silence and show us they believe.

Branar works trí mheán na **Gaeilge,** through the medium of Irish. Which in someway, you would imagine, should hamper our work, but in fact it has turned out to be a gift.

We cannot assume that our audience speaks our language. So this has forced us to find new ways of communicating stories, of creating a form of theatre that is accessible and that not language dependant.

Working through Irish has forced us to use our imaginations to find ways of becoming visually interesting. We have tried many things, puppetry, object manipulation, mask, comedia, physical theatre and non –lingual theatre. What we eventually discovered is that we must create a piece of theatre that is multi-layered.  In doing this we offer as many opportunities as possible for the children to access and engage with the narrative.

**Our model of practice**

Branar’s creative and developmental process  has evolved over time to become an intensely collaborative process that occurs over a period of 2 yrs, working in phases that will amount to 12 - 20 weeks of development and rehearsal. This elongated process allows to be absolutely certain, that the piece of theatre the children see, has been rigorously interrogated. When creating our work we have the audience constantly at the centre of all of our decisions.  We must be certain that all the decisions, we have made, in the narrative and the performance are valid and that there is clarity in the story. We must ensure that there is beauty in: how it looks, how it sounds and in the atmosphere we create for the audience.

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This process stems from working with a director from Denmark Bjarne Sandborg of Theatre Refleksion. I invited Bjarne to work with us on “An seanfhear beag”, In 2009

 We began to see the value of the extended rehearsal period immediately, shows were not forced, they grew organically and ideas had time to breath is the periods between the stages of development. Performers were more comfortable with the story because the knew it inside out and back to front. The experience for us and our audience was enhanced.

**How we work**

Branar’s success has been built on the dedication and commitment of our artists, we have found new ways of working: developing, creating and producing for longer periods, keeping work in repertoire and working in partnership with venues and international companies.

We receive funding from the Arts council through the PAF, Theatre resource sharing and the Theatre residency, We also receive funding from Foras na Gaeilge and Galway city and county. But none of that covers our core costs so we must ensure that we have a return from the older shows that are in rep.

But the return on investment is quite good – take Clan lir for example it was made with DEIS funding of €10,00 and a small amount of Foras na Gaeilge funding  in 2010. It has being on the road for 4 years now and performed nationally and internationally 180 times.

Our model is something we’ve gleaned from children’s theatre companies working in Europe. Each year We will open one or two new shows, we will have 3 shows from the Repetoir available to tour and a 2 - 3 show s at various stages of development.  So we don’t have any down period as such we try and keep working constantly which provides work for artists and technicians and our core staff (**slide 6)**.
By the end of  2014 for example we will have presented 6 different productions. We will work  in 23 venues in Ireland, and in 6 of those venues we will present 2 or 3 different shows at different times of the year. We will have shows at 3 major arts festivals in Ireland.
**(slide 7)**
3 of those 6 shows have been invited to present in the UK. And by the end of 2014 two of our shows, Spraoi and The Way back Home, will have been presented at The Southbank centre in London.
**(slide 8)**

**Collaboration with artists of varing art forms and our audience has become a pillar of our work.**
I seek to collaborate on every project with artist of the highest calibre , be they musicians, performers, puppet makers, visual artist or designers.
There two reasons for this, the first is to ensure that each production surpasses the achievements of the last and is produced to the highest standard possible.
**(slide 9)**
A good example of this would be our latest show  **Bláth**- the paper set has been designed and built by paper artist Maeve clancy and Colm Mac Con Iomaire, of the frames , has composed the original score.
I  always try to invite  artistic directors or artists who’s work or practice I admire to be involved in the development of new shows. Whether there role is simply to come and do a workshop with the team or to have them be involved as Creative consultant’s, as I like to call them. They would visit a various stages of the process and ask questions of the piece.
Our audience, the children are at the centre of everything we do. We have a  **responsibility** to the children  to ensure that the performance they see is the best it can possibly be.  Because that  performance might be that child first time to see a live theatre show, it could also Unfortunately, be  the last time they experience theatre.
This is why there is no compromise on standards or quality because, you only get one chance to be  5 or 6 or 7, being 7 is a completely different reality to being 5. We have to make work that engages with that child,  not as an adult in training but as a citizen of now.
Most of the time when adults engage with theatre we as artists hope that they will be moved  or be changed in some way. But for us  children are in state of constant change and of development.
Maurice sedak - author of “where the wild things are” once said - “You cannot write for children. They're much too complicated. You can only write books that are of interest to them. ”
**(slide 11)**
To ensure we keep the child at the centre of our process we enlist their help as co creators as critics.  At various stages during our developmental process, we take work to a local school and test it with its potential audience the potential age range. We perform pieces for children and test our ideas. The children now become our co - creatator’s.  We ask to them open questions, The children’s role is crucial it focuses our work in rehearsal it also ensures that we don't become prescriptive or patronizing.
**Communication with venues has become a cornerstone of our process.**
 Joanne Beirne joined Branar nearly three years ago. She brought an element to the company that was lacking. She became the link between the work and the venues. Now we are in constant communication with **The venues** they are our other  partners in the creative process.
We talk to the venues about up coming work, about when would be a good time to of year to visit. We plan almost a year in advance in some cases. We ask how can we help to grow the local audience for our work. Sometimes we might need to offer a workshop to a school to help sell a show.
Its in our interest to help venues develop their audience for our work. Be they  schools or family audience. We now try to do a family show every time we visit a venue instead of just doing school shows. The audience get used to the quality of our work and hopefully will keep coming back.
(slide 11)
A good example of the benefit of this communication is our show  “Twas the night before Christmas” - We met with all our local venues in the west in summer 2012 to how we could grow our audience with them and they identified the need for a quality Christmas show. We planned for it and began developing it that autumn 2012. We luckily received a touring grant towards it and in nov/dec 2013 we toured to 9 venues and sold out most of them and playing nearly 6000 people. Twas will be tour again this Christmas

(Slide 12)
This communication and forward planning has help us attract venues and festivals as co - producers also, Limerick city of culture and Roscommon arts centre are partners on Bláth, Draíocht were co- producers on Mise, and Baboró are associate producers on The way back home.

**Theatre resource sharing: ( slide 13)**
We also are very committed to the development of children’s theatre in Ireland and especially in Galway and in the west.
As soon I managed to get a permanent room for Branar in which we could rehearse we started to help other local companies who were working for children . So when the Theatre Resource Sharing  scheme  was introduced by the Arts Council, it was the perfect fit for our model, we had a history of sharing. We thankfully have been successful in receiving support in this funding strand since 2011,  what Theatre Resource Sharing allows us to do is to share our space and create opportunities for conversation and critical analysis of each others work as well as offer workshop space for development of artistic practice sharing  of expertise within the Branar space.  At the moment Moonfish , The Gombeens and Drama works Ireland share the space. Each company has up to 9 weeks use of the space a year, the use of hot- desk and storage. We have for the past 3 years focused on helping the companies invite international artist to work with them and to share a workshop with everyone in the sharing.
This year we have introduced an initiative called ‘Tiny Shows’ or ‘Seónna Bídeach’. The plan is that we would allow artists to apply with an idea of something they would like to create for children and that they would bring with them two other artists be they visual artists, film makers, musicians, dancers, theatre practitioners, puppeteers or puppet makers. That you bring these people together, those that are successful will work in Branar from a Friday to Sunday to investigate the idea, to see what is there, not necessarily to create anything but just to find out if there is something to it. Then on the Sunday we will have a gathering in the Branar space and they will  share what they have discovered over  the weekend.
We have had 15 applictions for tiny shows that’s 45 artists will to create work for children.
So to facilitate this in some way, Next year we hope to have to two core companies and ourselves and then a panel of artists,  where throughout the year if someone in the region is interested in making work for children they can be part of our panel of artists and can apply to use our space for free so they can create work for children
So I hope I have managed to give you an idea of how and why we make our work, our production model, our collaborations and our sharing of resources.

Can I finish by saying that at the moment and for a long time theatre for young audiences funding wise is tolerated buts its not supported.there are a lot of us out there who make work for children, there are 30 members of TYAI and there is always room for more.  We are as a sector do a lot with what we have. Branar get invitation  to present internationally, Theatre lovett are heading to Australia this summer, Graffiti are just back from the kennedy centre in Washington, Barnstorm were in Warsaw last month, Fibin and Monkeysine are on tour at the moment. Baboro and The Ark are held in the highest esteem wherever you go in the world.

Tá Tír na nÓg ar Chúl an tí, Tír Álainn trí na chéile. / the land of youth is at the back of the house a beautiful and posy turvy world.
said Seán ó Riordán