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The Ark, Dublin: Children's Cultural Archives and the Space in Between

Abstract

This research paper addresses the poetics and politics of the children's cultural archive held at The Ark, a custom-built children's cultural centre in the heart of Dublin city, Ireland, that opened its doors to the public in 1995. This is one of several outputs from the ongoing LA-TRAC project, a collaboration between The Ark and the School of English, Trinity College Dublin. The ultimate goal of the LA-TRAC project is to use the archive held at The Ark to establish a Living Archive for Teachers, Researchers, Artists, and Children. The LA-TRAC project asks – how do we go about creating living cultural archives with, about, and for children? In this paper, I reflect on the early stages of the research, map out the nature of The Ark archive, and highlight its research potential and possibilities. The first two sections provide an overview of the archive and theorise its distinct nature in terms of child and adult voices; the following three sections set out the potential of the archive to contribute to and advance broader cultural debates on the politics of childhood in Ireland, on Irish theatre history, and on marginalised voices. I suggest that the exploration of the potential of The Ark archive may act as a model for the research and development of children's cultural archives across Europe. This study, therefore, may be of particular interest to other researchers working in the field of children's cultural archives.

Keywords: archives; history; Europe; Ireland

Introduction

This research paper addresses the poetics and politics of the children's cultural archive held at The Ark, a custom-built children's cultural centre in the heart of Dublin city, Ireland, that opened its doors to the public in 1995. This is one of several outputs from the ongoing LA-TRAC project, a collaboration between The Ark and the School of English, Trinity College Dublin and is supported by Trinity's Research Boost programme. The ultimate goal of the LA-TRAC project is to use the archive held at The Ark to establish a **Living Archive for Teachers, Researchers, Artists, and Children**. The project is guided by principles of equality, diversity, and inclusion as well as Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which notes: 'State Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.' The LA-TRAC project asks – how do we go about creating living cultural archives *with, about, and for* children?

In this paper, in my capacity as Principal Investigator on the project, I reflect on the early stages of the research, map out the nature of The Ark archive, and highlight its research potential and possibilities. In this sense, this paper differs from a traditional research paper in that it focuses on an exploratory stage rather than on research findings of a completed project. The paper is divided into sections: the first two sections provide an overview of the archive and theorise its distinct nature in terms of child and adult voices; the following three sections set out the potential of the archive to contribute to and advance broader cultural debates on the politics of childhood in Ireland, on Irish theatre history, and on marginalised voices. Throughout, I address the politics of the children's cultural archive by positioning the archive as a political space of childhood. I also examine the poetics of the archive by discussing select artistic materials connected to Irish theatre. I suggest that the exploration of the potential of The Ark archive may act as a model for the research and development of children's cultural archives across Europe. This study, therefore, may be of particular interest to other researchers working in the field of children's cultural archives.

Despite the fact that The Ark archive is a central repository of our cultural heritage, it has never been researched in detail. As demonstrated below, this study of the poetics and politics of the archive necessitates an interdisciplinary approach and draws on a range of critical and theoretical perspectives, from broader theories on archives (Derrida, 1996; Steedman, 2002; Foucault, 1972; Osborne, 1999; Lustig, 2019) to children's rights (Lundy, 2007) through to children's literature (Hollindale 1997; Rose 1994; Rudd 2010) and children's cultural heritage (Sparrman, Sjöberg, et al, 2024). The political nature of the archive is well documented, such as in Michel Foucault's exploration of the power dynamics of the archive in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) and Thomas Osborne's (1999) argument that no archive is free of politics and 'it would be a mistake ever to think that there could be an archive without a politics of the archive' (Osborne, p. 55). Within children's cultural archives a distinct and complicated set of politics can be found, as demonstrated by scholarship from the Swedish 'Children's Cultural Heritage: Visual Voices from the Archives' project. Of particular significance are the project's collective paper and the special issue of *Archives and Records* from 2024. As the authors point out, children's cultural archives are also political spaces (Sparrman, Sjöberg, et al, 2024, p. 83). The works of Anna Sparrman, Victoria Hoyle, Johanna Sjöberg – and others – pose important questions about the role and function of children's cultural archives, the power dynamics

involved in archival processes, the heterogeneous nature of childhood experiences, and about the position of children – past, present, and future – within such complex discourses. At the end of their introduction to the special issue of *Archives and Records*, Sparrman, Hoyle, et al encourage us to 'think of children not as the subjects of extraordinary projects, engagements, or interventions but as integral to the vision of the archive' (Sparrman, Hoyle, et al, 2024, p. 214), thus ensuring that the role of children is considered throughout every aspect of the process, from constructing a knowledge organisation system through to accessing and using the archive. These principles have directly informed the work of the LA-TRAC project.

The project has two main stages: Stage 1 is an exploratory stage that asks: how do we build and make accessible a children's cultural archive for Teachers, Researchers, Artists, and (especially) Children? Based on these research findings, we plan to catalogue and archive the materials according to principles of best practice, establish a knowledge organisation system that caters for multiple stakeholders, and open up the archive as a living archive. It is envisaged that Stage 1 will pave the way for Stage 2, where we have aspirations to collaborate with European partners to develop a multi-lingual European database and online platform of children's cultural archives.

Overview: Toward a Living Archive

Founded in 1995, The Ark is a registered charity, a non-profit organisation now mostly funded by the Irish Government. It is the most significant children's cultural institution on the island of Ireland, and one of the only custom-built children's cultural centres in Europe. Our research has revealed that, since its founding, The Ark has carefully built, developed, and curated a distinct archive. Significant materials from across all of the programmes have been selected for inclusion, labelled appropriately, and then stored for posterity. The Ark retains particular types of material from workshops, exhibitions, performances and marketing. These can include, for example, contracts, financial records, scripts, children's feedback forms, and so on. References to these practices can also be found in the archive itself. As a result of this work, The Ark now holds over thirty years of archival material on children's culture, from dance and theatre through to literature, visual arts, music and film. These are cultural productions that are produced for, and sometimes with, children at The Ark. The archive also holds records of children's evaluations and feedback on programmes as well as children's creative responses and creative activities, such as paintings, drawings, poems and short stories. As a result, this is a children's cultural archive both in the sense that it houses material related to professional cultural productions made *for* children, but also holds the voices and creative outputs *of* children. The Ark archive, therefore, differs from other children's cultural archives such as the Swedish Archive of Children's Art (SBBA), the archive central to the Children's Cultural Heritage project. SBBA 'holds drawings, painting, film, and digital images made by children and young people' (Sparrman, Sjöberg, et al, 2024, p. 82), while The Ark is a children's cultural archive that contains material – both poetic and political – produced by adults as well as by children.

With ambitious goals, we began the LA-TRAC project by first conducting a survey of materials held in The Ark and thereby gaining a better understanding of the nature and range of items in the uncatalogued archive. It was determined that the archival materials are currently held in two different forms: analogue and born digital. The analogue aspects of

the archive are stored in boxes across three rooms in The Ark's basement, with born digital content (mostly since 2016) being held on the server. An archivist, Rebecca Casey, was hired to work on the archives over a 9-week period in November 2024 and to conduct a survey of the analogue records that hold materials from adults and children. These include paper records, posters, artwork, objects (t-shirts and badges), photographs, reversal film slides, floppy disks, DVDs, CDs, VHS, SV videos, mini disks and cassette tapes. There were two main outputs from this initial task: A detailed report with recommendations; and a box-list spreadsheet with almost 4,000 columns of data listing information/materials held in 302 containers (mostly boxes). This detailed spreadsheet will form the basis for a longer-term goal of Stage 1 of the LA-TRAC project – the cataloguing of The Ark's archive.

According to the archivist's report, clear record-keeping has been a priority at The Ark since it opened and the archive contains the following:

Boxes with records relating to programmes typically comprise multiple brochures; typed and handwritten notes on paper/scrap paper; a note (sometimes on scrap paper) with individuals' name/address/contact details; letters of agreement/formal engagement/contracts/deal memos issued by The Ark; correspondence with artists regarding their programmes (fax, letters or emails); technical specifications; schedules of events/itineraries; resources/notes for teachers/teacher's packs; notes for staff; invoices and budgets; performers bios/CVs and related articles/reviews; proposals for funding; communication with external stakeholders; scripts; workshop sheets; children's artwork; children's evaluations of programmes (artwork/letters); reversal film slides and photographs. (Casey, 2024, p. 7)

It appears that the majority of the materials relate to theatre, musical theatre, music, art or visual arts, while poetry, dance, photography and storytelling feature to a lesser extent. A small number of materials relate to other programmes such as architecture, computers (digital programmes) and animation. We have grouped these records into two distinct categories: Ark administration (establishment and foundation, day to day running and Ark ethos); and Ark programmes and collaborations (including outreach). From this archival work, a more complete picture of the breadth and depth of the archive has come into focus. The extensive collection provides evidence of concept development, ethos and construction, programmes held at The Ark, scripts and technical designs, and collaborations and outreach initiatives – this includes work in children's hospitals and in inner-city communities. Meanwhile, the decision to preserve children's evaluations and feedback on programmes over the thirty year period has ensured that the collection includes diverse children's voices from across the decades, voices which typically are not present in the historical record (Sparrman, Hoyle, et al, 2024, p. 208).

Although the archival material is carefully labelled, organised, and stored, The Ark archive remains uncatalogued and is, therefore, a closed archive. If, as the critic Charlotte McIvor points out, 'Archives must be encountered in order to live' (McIvor, 2019, p. 8), then they must be made accessible to adults and children through knowledge organisation systems. Rather than simply producing a knowledge organisation system and subsequently inviting these stakeholders to use it, a key aspect of the LA-TRAC project is to consult with stakeholders

(teachers, researchers, artists, and children) and then ascertain the most appropriate knowledge organisation system for these cohorts; one that will cater to their specific needs, that will easily facilitate encounters, and that will ensure this is a living archive. Significantly, and adopting a rights based approach in line with the broader principles of The Ark, children will also offer input at an early stage of the process on how best to design and provide access to this children's cultural archive. If, as noted above, children are 'integral to the vision of the archive' then they should also be integral in the design of the knowledge organisation system that will then allow us to open up, develop, analyse, and make accessible one of Europe's most important children's cultural archives as a *living* archive.

Drawing on the work of the Living Archives project (2018) at Malmö University, Amalia G. Sabiescu (2020) refers to living archives as the 'practices and environments that connect the organisation, curation and transmission of memory with present-bound creative, performative, and participatory processes' and addresses the potential 'synergy between creative and archival practices' (Sabiescu, 2020, p. 497). Similarly, the LA-TRAC project's aim is also to explore this 'synergy between creative and archival practices' – especially in relation to teachers, artists, and children – and to connect the curation of archival materials with creative and participatory processes in the present, thus establishing a living archive. Given that this is a cultural archive, it is well disposed to such synergy.

For researchers, too, this archive also holds great power. In 'The Ordinarity of the Archive', Osborne discusses the 'secret' archive that is not open to the public. He argues that it becomes an 'instrument of power' when there is a 'transition from secrecy to publicity' and the archive is made accessible to the public (Osborne, 1999, p. 56). The Ark archive can be similarly understood as an instrument of power when we think about the possibilities it might hold if changed from a 'closed' to an accessible 'living' archive. Specifically, it has the potential to transform existing understandings of the politics of children's culture as well as of Irish culture more broadly, as discussed below.

A Distinct Space of Child and Adult Voices

The Ark as an institution is significant, as are records pertaining to its history and development. The Ark's commitment to commissioning great, original art for children is integral to its ethos and the records attest to this. As a result of this established tradition of commissioning (rather than simply being a receiving house), the archive holds extensive original material connected to artists from Ireland (and abroad), including Jole Bartoli, Paula Meehan, Helen O'Connell, Roddy Doyle, Anna Carey, Wayne Jordan, Bryan Burroughs, and Aaron Monaghan, and is thereby a significant repository of Irish cultural heritage. The fact that members of the Children's Council at the Ark often play a role in the creative development of a project, and that children's artwork and responses to exhibitions, performances and programmes were collected and preserved by The Ark, points to an archive where child perspectives and children's voice are positioned as equal in value to those of adults. We can see from the archive how The Ark promoted creativity and inclusion for children throughout the decades with programmes such as: 'Flags Along the River', which centred on designing and making flags for poles on either side of the Dublin's River Liffey (1995); 'Plant an Idea', a mosaic programme for children inspired by National Botanic Garden's carnivorous plants (2004); The Stained Glass Project, a collaboration with five schools in Dublin which resulted in the

creation of a stained glass window for each school (2005); and 'Blown Away', a collaboration with Cork Midsummer Festival that facilitated children of pre-school age to create public artwork (2006).

Sparrman, Sjöberg, et al refer in general terms to children's cultural archives as political spaces; yet The Ark archive is somewhat unique in that it contains its own distinct set of politics that arise from its holdings of adult-produced materials as well as child-produced materials. It can, therefore, be understood as a site of intersection of child and adult voices, as a *space* where adult ideas of childhood and children's experiences of childhood are in dialogue with each other. Children's literatures studies, one of the more established research areas in children's cultural studies, takes an inherently interdisciplinary approach and, therefore, can provide a point of entry for the examination of the children's cultural archive in such spatial terms.

Peter Hollindale's work on 'childness' is a useful way to conceptualise such an archive. Writing from within children's literature studies and addressing the act of reading children's books as a complex event, Hollindale describes childness as a space where 'many kinds of interest in childhood meet ...: the child's concern with the presentness of her own childhood, and interest in its possibilities; the adult's recall of childhood and desire to refresh the roots and keep a sense of continuous identity; and the adult's hopes and beliefs and desires about childhood, what it is and what it ought to be.' (Hollindale, 1997, p. 42) Considering the archive as a space of childness not only opens up ways to examine the complex power-dynamics of child-adult relations but also allows us to move beyond simplistic binaries of child and adult. David Rudd's work on children's literature is particularly informative in our exploration of the children's cultural archive. In response to psychologist Jaqueline Rose's famous claim that children's literature is about adults' wants and desires rather than those of children (Rose, 1994), Rudd argues that a Bakhtinian reading of the process, would be more productive and 'would point to »the space in between« as precisely where things happen (in what he terms »the border zone«), instead of conceiving isolated authors (adults) in »command«, with passive readers (children) in danger of »seduction«, and insular texts waiting to trap readers with their baited »image of the child« (Rudd, 2010, p. 294). The Ark archive can be conceived of as precisely that, 'a space in between', a space of diverse child and diverse adult voices that presents an opportunity to explore complex child-adult power dynamics in relational terms rather than solely in terms of difference. The archive, therefore, offers significant research potential for the analysis of children's constructions of childhood and adults' constructions of childhood and the complex ways in which they intersect across three decades.

Physical Space and the Politics of the Archive

An analysis of the founding documents of The Ark held within the archive provides a wonderful insight into the shifting politics and perceptions of childhood in Ireland in the early 1990s. The earliest documents in the archive provide a unique narrative about the dreams and ambitions of conceiving a children's cultural space in the centre of Dublin. They record how Ireland formally ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992 and in October of that same year Martin Drury (who would become the first artistic director of The Ark) was hired by Temple Bar Properties Ltd to conduct a feasibility study for the creation of a children's cultural centre. These founding documents make for a fascinating read: the vision

and ambition of this project shaped by children's rights, led to children's culture being placed at the centre of a huge urban renewal project in the capital city, a project that was in part supported by European funding: Temple Bar Properties secured the original (capital) funding from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) with matching funds from the Irish Exchequer through the Department of the Environment. These foundational materials in the archive provide a narrative that reveals a massive shift in political attitudes toward children in Ireland the 1990s, moving from a society that, notoriously, often silenced children when they did try to speak up about abuse and neglect, to a culture that began to understand, acknowledge, and promote children's rights and to inscribe a physical space for children on the landscape of the capital city.

Out of these ambitions for a child-centred children's cultural centre came The Ark building itself. The Ark occupies the site of a 1725 Presbyterian Meeting House and maintains the six-bay façade to Eustace Street. The archive contains records relating to the design and repurposing of the site as a children's cultural centre and documents the way in which the architecture of the new centre invokes the memory of the original building. According to an article in *The Journal of the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland* (May 1996), this is a building that 'in its general design and in its detail signals respect for children' (p. 32) – the theatre seating and toilets, for example, are all child-sized. We can see from this that the building is valued in architectural and cultural terms, past and present. While The Ark's identity is firmly tied to the building in the Temple Bar district in Dublin's city centre, it should be noted that its activities are not confined to the building it occupies; its reach spreads throughout Dublin City, into local communities, out to national schools across the country through its online initiatives, and to the US and across Europe through international collaborations. And while the archival material highlights the value of the building as space for children, conversely the building may be understood as conferring a value on all that it holds, from artistic programmes to the archive itself.

One of the questions raised by the LA-TRAC project, is where – in physical terms – might The Ark archive be located in the future? Should it be relocated to a university library, for example, with all its tools for cataloguing and preserving, or should it remain within The Ark itself, despite the limitations of that physical space? The location of the archive has a direct impact on how the archive might be accessed, read and understood. As has been argued by numerous scholars, the position of a historical children's book collection within a university library, for example, confers a status on that collection and on the books within that collection. (Kidd, 2011; Lundin, 2004; Whyte & O'Sullivan, 2022) To move the archive might confer a similar status on its materials. However, specialised access is normally required in university libraries and there is often no access for children who may want to engage with this aspect of their cultural heritage. This is a space reserved for adult researchers, in the main. Therefore, if the archive is kept within The Ark itself, it is not conferred with the same sense of value as that of a collection within a university library. However, its value – and potential – is evident in a different way. It is housed within an organisation that places the rights of the child to the fore of all that it does and, therefore, holds the potential for a child-centred approach to the archive. This includes, for example, granting children access to the archive and to a history of children's culture; using material in the archive as a source of inspiration for artistic workshops for children; and drawing on cultural programmes from the past to create cultural outputs for

children in the present. The Ark's Mission Statement notes 'Our work is our advocacy' (www.ark.ie) and the archive fits directly within this mission statement. To remove the archive from The Ark for preservation purposes, for example, and move it to a library that does not adhere to The Ark's principles on children's rights, participation, and access, would therefore have a direct impact on how the archive could be conceived and understood as a 'children's cultural archive'. The unique value conferred on the archive by holding it in The Ark building is its potential for access – an archival space for children as well as adults.

The physical space of The Ark building has also had a formative impact on artistic creations. For example, performances commissioned to take place within The Ark building are directly shaped by the possibilities of the site itself. The Ark's commissioning process has meant that it is one of the leaders in the field in producing children's theatre in Ireland and, as a result, it can be concluded that much of Irish theatre for children over the last number of decades has been directly shaped by the performance spaces in The Ark. As outlined below, an analysis of materials in the archive that relate to these theatre productions also demonstrates the important role that this archive can play in providing a more complete picture of Irish plays as well as of Irish theatre history.

Irish Theatre and the Poetics of the Archive

While children's literature in Ireland has received increased attention in academia in recent years, this has not been the case for children's theatre. Despite its important role in the development of drama in Ireland, references to The Ark are noticeably absent from academic histories, surveys, and criticism of Irish theatre. For example, the recent *Contemporary Irish Theatre: Histories and Theories* (2024) by Charlotte McIvor and Ian R. Walsh contains only one mention of The Ark, and that is simply in a fleeting reference to Marina Carr's play for children, *The Giant Blue Hand* (2009). However, there is some notable material from outside of academia: reviews of theatre productions at The Ark can be found in newspapers in Ireland and the UK as well as in *Irish Theatre Magazine* (1998 – 2014), from 1995 right up to the present day. As well as that, Fintan Walsh's 2009 feature article in *Irish Theatre Magazine*, 'Child's Play: Making Theatre for Young Audiences', provides a rare engagement with children's theatre in Ireland. Walsh includes a discussion of the position of The Ark, highlights its appointment of 'Louis Lovett as their first theatre-maker in residence', and notes The Ark's collaborations with 'established names' such as Marina Carr, Selina Cartmell, Monica Frawley, Lynne Parker and Don Wycherley, Jo Mangan, Veronica Coburn, and John Banville. (Walsh, 2009, n.p.).

An exclusion of children's theatre and its archives will always mean an incomplete view of Irish theatre, and its artists, more broadly. Therefore, to some extent, it is important to look at material connected to these 'established names'. For example, The Ark archive holds important materials connected to John Banville: In 1995, Banville was commissioned to write a book, *The Ark*, illustrated by Conor Fallon (Gallery Press, 1996); and in 2002, his theatre show and theatrical exhibition *Dublin 1742*, was performed at The Ark, directed by Eric Fraad. The archival material for *Dublin 1742* is particularly interesting as it provides an insight into the planning and development of Banville's show, and includes scripts, casting notes, source materials, and designs. Aimed at children aged nine to fourteen, the play is set in the days leading up to the world premiere of Georg Frideric Handel's *Messiah* in Dublin

and, as the critic Karen Fricker noted in her review in *The Guardian* newspaper, features characters that 'use heightened language and convey complex ideas' (Fricker, 2002, n.p.). This host of real-life characters includes German composer Handel, author Jonathan Swift who was Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, and philosopher George Berkeley. Meanwhile actors David Garrick and Peg Woffington also make an appearance as they rehearse for a production of *Hamlet* in the nearby Smock Alley Theatre. The play is inspired by the memoirs of Dublin poet and socialite Laetitia Pilkington and focuses on Handel's attempts 'to persuade Swift to loan him six boy singers from St Patrick's choir for the premiere' of *Messiah* in Neal's Music Hall on Dublin's Fishamble Street. (Fricker, 2002, n.p.) Interestingly, the premise of play revolves around the notion of child participation – Handel's *Messiah* cannot proceed without the choir boys. Banville's text directly engages with the cultural history of Temple Bar – with Fishamble Street and Smock Alley Theatre being just a few streets away from The Ark – while also introducing a young audience to complex philosophical ideas. This event is also a good example of how the space of The Ark has directly informed the type of theatrical text produced: audience members wandered through and encountered actors in various rooms in The Ark building before being seated in the theatre.

Within studies of Irish literature and theatre, Banville and his works for adults have received significant attention, while this fascinating text for children has been completely ignored – there is no discussion of *Dublin 1742* in any critical works on Banville. Once properly catalogued, The Ark archive, therefore, can offer a rich repository of material that can directly inform research in Banville studies, that can speak to other archives such as the John Banville archive held at Trinity College Library, and, by extension, to Irish cultural studies more broadly.

While the above example demonstrates the value of the archive in terms of furthering research on 'established names' in Irish theatre, such an approach is complicit in a conservative process of canon formation. Writing about theatre archives in Ireland, Barry Houlihan notes that a 'patriarchal concept in itself, the canon of theatre propagates and ensures a continual process of inadequate historicization by future generations.' (Houlihan, 2019, p. 18) The Ark archive, however, can simultaneously be used to deconstruct this canon. Drawing on Sparrman, Sjöberg, et al's argument, this archive can be viewed as a political space that has "the potential to empower and affirm individuals and groups of people who have not been seen or heard in the historical past, in the present, or in the pasts created in the future.' (Sparrman, Sjöberg, et al, 2024, p. 83) The Ark archive can play a significant role in giving voice to marginalised and minority communities in Irish culture, particularly in relation to artists who produce work for children, to children, and in relation to gender and class.

The Politics of Marginalised Voices

In his edited collection *Navigating Ireland's Theatre Archive: Theory, Practice and Performance* (2019), Houlihan acknowledges the potential and the challenges of navigating, accessing and understanding Ireland's archives. Included in this collection is an essay by Brenda Donohue on 'Women and the Archive', that mentions The Ark and its archive. This is a significant essay as it is one of the only examples of an academic discussion of The Ark within the context of Irish cultural studies more broadly. Donohue draws on a 2017 report for the Arts Council of Ireland – *Gender Counts: An Analysis of Gender in Irish Theatre*

2006-2015 – on gender in Irish theatre and highlights findings from a survey. She claims that 'Women were best represented in the Ark, Rough Magic, and Dublin Fringe Festival' (Donohue, 2019, p. 171) yet argues that:

Although Rough Magic's Archives are now securely held, it is worth noting that no official plan is in place for the Archives of Dublin Fringe Festival or The Ark. Both companies employ significant numbers of women in their creative roles, and yet their participation is in danger of going unrecorded, given the methods of recording participation present in these organisations, and the seeming lack of institutional interest in preserving their legacies. (Donohue, 2019, pp. 176-177)

Donohue's work is significant in that it highlights the importance of these archives and of investing resources to maintain them. However, seemingly unaware of the careful archiving processes at The Ark and its retention of particular types of material from workshops, exhibitions, performances and marketing she also frames The Ark's approach to archiving as problematic and suggests that it risks occluding women from the historical records of Irish theatre. Because The Ark archive is a closed archive and was inaccessible to Donohue, her claims were based on anecdotal reports and limited information available on websites rather than on evidence from the archive itself. This resulted in general assumptions being made about the nature of the archive. The early work of the LA-TRAC project, therefore, allows for a problematising of Donohue's claim of 'lack of institutional interest' with archivist, Rebecca Casey noting in her report that:

There has been a clear interest in record-keeping since the early days of The Ark. There is evidence of attempts to establish/preserve The Ark archive, with references to it in these terms. Across different years, certain records contain notes to demonstrate that they were earmarked for the archive. (Casey, 2024, p. 6)

As an example, Casey makes reference to a post-it note attached to a Cork Midsummer Festival brochure that reads 'Sarah, don't know if you want to keep this for the archive? Jo' (Casey, 2024, p.6). Therefore, contrary to Donohue's view, the archiving practices evident in the archive point to a recognition on the part of The Ark and its staff members of the importance of constructing and maintaining (in some form) a children's cultural archive over the past three decades. There is clear evidence of a desire to preserve legacies.

Access to and analysis of this children's cultural archive also provides opportunities to complicate histories of Irish theatre, specifically in relation to gender. In the report *Gender Counts: An Analysis of Gender in Irish Theatre (2006-2015)*, commissioned by Waking the Feminists and Funded by the Arts Council of Ireland, Donohue writes of the challenges that researchers faced when trying to gather information for the *Gender Counts* project, noting that:

In the case of theatre organisations dedicated to theatre for young audiences, particularly The Ark and Barnstorm Theatre that featured in our sample, a programme is often regarded as superfluous, given that many of the audience simply cannot read, or would have no interest in reading one. (Donohue, 2019, p. 173)

In this instance, assumptions about childhood interests and a homogenisation of childhood experiences devalues the potential of the children's cultural archive. This is a view that can only be challenged by opening up the archive and providing evidence of over thirty years of material, including programmes, produced for interested young audience members attending productions at The Ark.

This children's cultural archive can also contribute to debates regarding class in Irish culture. While Houlihan writes that 'Working-class theatre and community groups are also vastly underrepresented in generally accessible collections of performance records' (Houlihan, 2019, p. 12), evidence from The Ark archive demonstrates a direct engagement with children who come from communities that are often marginalised in terms of class. There are many examples in the archive of The Ark's work with children from a diverse range of backgrounds – from inner-city communities, from rural communities, from Direct Provision centres and so on. As Casey notes in her report, 'This shows the Ark's desire to be of benefit to the wider community and to reach as many children as possible.' (Casey, 2024, p. 8) One notable example is the ArkLink initiative (2000-2006) which was a collaboration between The Ark and the community in the Fatima Mansions area of Dublin, a socio-economically disadvantaged local authority housing estate, that was demolished and rebuilt from 2005 to 2007. The Ark archive holds extensive material related to this project, from plans and mission statements, to the works of artists in residence, through to children's artwork, feedback, and videos. This material sheds light on the challenges as well as the successes of a project that aimed to build a sustainable infrastructure for children in the area to access arts and culture.

Conclusion

The above discussion demonstrates the important role that the archive – as a space in between – can play in contributing to, and also leading, discourses on the poetics produced for children, on the politics of archiving, on childhood, on Irish cultural heritage, on canonicity, on gender, on class, and on children's voices. The Ark archive is, therefore, not simply a record of the past but a valuable source for informing debates in the present moment; as McIvor argues, we must recognise 'the archive as a political tool of the now, and not merely as portal for reflection on the past.' (McIvor, 2019, p. 6) It is also an opportunity to look to the future. As we catalogue, develop, enhance, and find ways to make the archive accessible, how do we create an original knowledge organisation system that allows input and facilitates encounters from teachers, researchers, artists, and children of the future?

Our long term goal is to move away from a tradition where, as Emily Gallagher notes in her writing on collections of children's art, these materials are 'hidden in plain sight' (Gallagher, 2023, p. 386) to one where children's cultural archives are actively visible. Creating a European database of children's cultural archives is one approach, where critical mass and collective strength can draw attention to the specific value of each institutional archive. As part of our research on the LA-TRAC project, we are creating a list of children's cultural centres across Europe that are comparable to The Ark and that also hold children's cultural archives. To date, we have identified a significant number of children's cultural centres but, so far, only a few have indicated that they hold archives. Examples include: The Estonian Children's Literature Centre (Estonia); ABC House (Belgium); Hetpaleis (Belgium); Bibiana (Slovakia); Kulturhuset Stadsteatern (Sweden); Kruunupää Centre for Children's Culture

(Finland); and Lasten ja Nuorten Taidekeskus/The Art Centre for Children and Young People (Finland). Given the unique nature of The Ark archives, it is often difficult to draw direct parallels with other institutions. Therefore, we also hope to identify important children's cultural archives more broadly, and not only those connected to cultural centres. This will provide us with a more complete picture of children's cultural archives across Europe. To fully realise these ambitions of building a European database, the LA-TRAC project will have to secure substantial funding as well as to connect with academic partners and establish a European network. It is hoped that, as the creation of The Ark inscribed children's culture on Dublin's city space, a European database of children's cultural archives will someday occupy a digital space. This will lead to a living archive of immense possibilities that could be accessed by teachers, researchers, artists, and – most importantly – children.

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Biography

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