

Remarks by Brendan Howlin at the opening of Siren by Ursula Burke

I am delighted to- if not introduce myself, then present myself, as the relatively new Chair of the Arts Centre Board.

I'm acutely aware of the great reputation of this Ireland's first regional Arts Centre. A reputation built on the hard work and artistic excellence of previous Boards and most especially superb CEO's. Elizabeth being an exemplar in this proud tradition.

I'm also as a native Wexford man naturally excited when autumn comes and Wexford Festival Opera moves into view. This amazing annual event created by a band of dreamers in 1951 led by Dr Tom Walsh – in the words of George Bernard Shaw “dreamed of things that never were and said, why not?”.

Why not a world class celebration of art and music in this beautiful corner of Ireland.

The Arts Centre was always at the heart of things- as with all aspects of the Arts in our country. And so, it continues with this magnificent exhibition of work by Ursula Burke.

In Greek mythology- Mnemosyne (Memory), was mother to nine highly creative daughters- the muses; A word which gave us our words music; amusement and museum. Each of the nine sisters represented their own art form.

Melpomene- represents tragedy and is usually depicted as the tragic mask with it's down-curved lips. She was mother of the sirens. They with their irresistible voices lured ships into danger. The sirens were used as a symbol of dangerous temptation down the centuries.

Of course, a siren is also a warning of danger- a sound set off to alert us to take care; to be aware of a hazard or threat.

Ursula's work in all its beautiful facets is a siren; to alert us of the reality of intergenerational trauma. We have known it well on this island. Many say that we the Irish still suffer the pain and the loss of the Great Famine, passed down the generations.

We are aware too of the vicious conflicts of our time. Which even when the physical pain ends, the trauma will not only scar those that suffered directly but will pass onto generations not yet born. Ursula's imagery makes tangible the flow, of hurt; passed like mothers' milk from parent to child. As Homer wrote in the Odyssey “We know all the pains that the Greeks and Trojans once endured on the spreading plain of Troy”.

Being aware arms us to the danger and perhaps guides us to healing. While the transmission of trauma is real, it surely can be addressed if not entirely erased.

In Homer's famous tale Odysseus had all his sailors plug their ears with beeswax to block out the siren call and saved his ship and crew from disaster.

Our solution perhaps is actually to listen and hear the siren and seek to use the beeswax to soothe the pain.

Enjoy this wonderful set of works.