

OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

PROFESSOR LUKE GIBBONS, National University of Ireland, Maynooth on 2 December 2013 in the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*, on **LELIA DOOLAN**

A Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle,

Actor, activist, film and theatre director, producer, journalist, lecturer, anthropologist, environmentalist, writer, chairperson, force of nature – *Gael* force of nature – Lelia Doolan has been a visionary, and an inspirational figure in Irish culture, for over five decades. In her early twenties she won a scholarship to the Free University of Berlin, where she encountered Bertholt Brecht in rehearsal for his production of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*. This fusion of theatre and activism, the avant-garde and the artisanal, advanced modernism and the Irish periphery, struck a spark that has stayed with her throughout her life.



One of the key figures in the formative years of RTE, then Telefís Éireann, she was instrumental in bringing the pioneering television serial, *The Riordans*, to the screen, and was appointed Head of Light Entertainment. As a current affairs producer of the path-breaking *7 Days* programme in the late 1960s, she was to the fore in defending media freedom against the Irish government's decision to prevent an RTE film crew

travelling to North Vietnam to cover the other side of the war. The other side of the story has been an abiding concern in all her work in Irish theatre, film and television.

Subsequent clashes with authority culminated in series of protests in Montrose, and the publication in 1969 of the book *Sit Down and Be Counted*, which Lelia co-authored with Bob Quinn and Jack Dowling, and which carried an introduction by the distinguished cultural critic, Raymond Williams. This was a milestone in debates on Irish broadcasting, the book introducing Lelia to its eager readership as ‘an extraordinary mixture of middle-class niceness, bohemian mannerism and rural Irish boisterousness.’

Not one to sit on her laurels, Lelia was appointed Artistic Director of the Abbey Theatre in 1970, but after some years, returned to the academy to earn a Ph.D in Anthropology at Queen’s University, while being active in community video and adult education in Belfast. Remaining in education, she established the first third-level courses in media and communications in Ireland at the College of Commerce, Rathmines, now DIT. Continuing to deploy her energies in film, she was a founder member of the Galway Film Fleadh and produced Joe Comerford’s feature film, *Reefer and Model*, in 1987. When funding was in danger of falling through for the film, the story goes that she took the first plane to Los Angeles and door-stepped John Daly, the producer of the classic Vietnam film, *Platoon*, until he paid up. The thwarted journey to Vietnam proved successful second time around.

Such was her contribution to film that the new Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, Michael D Higgins, appointed her Chairperson of the reconstituted Irish Film Board in 1993. Becoming a board member of the Irish Film Institute, she can also lay claim to have put the motion literally back into motion pictures, placing movies on wheels through the use of cinemobiles for film exhibition in the Irish countryside. It was this that led one critic to quip that an Irish road movie might now justly be described as a ‘boreen’ movie.

In order to secure a firm base for film culture and exhibition in the west of Ireland, Lelia became the driving force with a committed group of film activists to establish the magnificent *Picture Palace*, now nearing completion in Galway. It houses three cinemas, a bookshop, a bar and cafeteria, and archive facility and meeting places - a fitting building indeed in which to sit down and be counted.

Returning to film making, Lelia directed and produced of the award-winning documentary feature, *Bernadette: Notes on a Political Journey*, in 2011. Bernadette MacAliskey's insight, that 'true creativity begins on the periphery.' might well be Lelia's own personal credo, as a peer model to women and others excluded from the centre. For her tireless work in bringing Irish culture back to the people themselves, her remarkable contributions to the world of film and television, and unfailing grace and courtesy in her dealings with others, we honor Lelia Doolan with the degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur, *honoris causa*, ad gradum Doctoratus in Litteris, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.