



**THE IRISH
ENTREPRENEUR
ROLE MODELS
FOR A NEW IRELAND**

01

Moya Doherty

Tyrone Productions

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Dancing the Dream

Moya Doherty surveyed the animated group of guests enjoying the party following the premiere of her new show, *The Pirate Queen*. Five years of work had culminated that evening with an enthusiastic standing ovation from the audience. However, her experience told her that there was still work to be done before *The Pirate Queen* would gain the status of her most famous production, *Riverdance*. This, and many other thoughts, crowded her mind as she watched her guests. Back in 1987, Tyrone Productions was involved in the small Irish domestic market only. The landscape was very different then. The unprecedented success of *Riverdance* in 1994 changed all that. Taking €100 million per annum in its first five years, *Riverdance The Show* had enabled the company to invest in serious development and to become the leading independent production company in Ireland. An impressive portfolio includes many familiar TV titles including *The Big Bite*, *Open House*, *Ros na Rún*, *The Mentor* and *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*. The *Riverdance* phenomenon continues unabated, with three different troupes playing continuously to large audiences in Europe and the US.

Looking back over her career to date, Moya recalled many other achievements - becoming a founding Director of Today FM, serving on the Board of the Dublin Theatre Festival, winning the Veuve Clicquot Business Woman of the Year and Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Awards and honorary degrees from the University of Ulster and the National University of Ireland.

The five year gestation of her latest major production, *The Pirate Queen*, had just culminated in the pre-Broadway premiere. It had been well received by an enthusiastic first night audience of over 2,000 at the Cadillac Palace Theatre in Chicago. Moya felt a certain degree of relief and satisfaction but was also well aware that there was further work to be done prior to the show transferring to Broadway the following April, and emulating the success of its prestigious predecessor.

Early experiences and career decisions

Moya Doherty was born in Donegal. She recalls the family moving to Dublin *“just after my First Communion”* and the joy of subsequent annual summer holidays back in Donegal. In a household where both parents were teachers, education was perceived as extremely important. Moya, however, did not share this perception. Although she enjoyed drama studies and English, she was not stimulated by the other subjects. Even at this young age she adopted a principle that whatever she decided to do, she would do it well. She was also certain that her future activities would be in the fields of drama, theatre or TV. Her interest in the performing arts was stimulated by two teachers at the schools she attended in Dublin, Belgrove National School, Clontarf and Manor House, Raheny. She was left with a strong desire to act and no inhibitions about performing to live audiences. Unlike her two sisters and two brothers, she opted out of third level education, having flirted with the idea of taking French and Irish at UCD. In the 70s it was difficult to get into acting, so Moya took a secretarial course and applied for a job in RTE. She reasoned that this move would bring her closer to what she really wanted to do. She acknowledges that luck played a part in this process and claims that she has been very fortunate in the choices that she made. Her experience in RTE was stimulating and she moved quickly through departments, from secretary to broadcasting assistant. She also worked on current affairs as a production assistant and describes the thorough training she received as *“the best possible training I could get for my current job.”* Her work as production assistant exposed her to many different types of programme including drama, features and entertainment.

It was during this period that she met her husband, John Colgan, working as production assistant with him for about a year. The couple decided to move to the UK and Moya had resigned from her job, in preparation for the move, when she was offered the opportunity to present an RTE television programme called *The Live Arts*. She decided to accept the job and remained in Ireland for a year and was then able to move to London with valuable presenting experience on her CV. Her time in London was fruitful and she spent five years working as a reporter and producer on TVAM. Becoming increasingly less satisfied fronting programmes, she decided to concentrate on production and applied for another position back in Dublin with RTE. She joined a production training course in RTE which she found to be stimulating and challenging. She recalls that she met many very talented people on that course and learned a great deal about the delivery of creative material. Consequently, she was soon in action as a producer, working on the *People in Need Telethon*, followed by the challenging documentary on child abuse, *The Silent Scream*. Moya recognises that that the experience she gained as a producer and in all the other jobs she held in RTE has contributed significantly to her knowledge and to her ability to get things done, either by herself or by working effectively through other people.

Despite her different opinion on the merits of formal education, Moya also cites her parents as major influences on her life. In particular, she says that her mother made her very aware of the importance of standards. *“I am still impressed by the standards my mother set for herself and they have guided my own actions ever since. However, my parents never took a risk and thought I was mad in the early years for taking the risks I did.”*

Tyrone Productions

In 1987, with a strong background in production and related fields, Moya and John decided to establish their own production company, Tyrone Productions. They perceived the company as a vehicle for expressing their own creativity, offering a platform for fresh and innovative thinking. Tyrone Productions is now Ireland’s leading TV production company, with more output hours, drama, documentary and entertainment programming than any competitor. In the years since 1987 other companies have been established, each having responsibility for different aspects of the group’s business. These include¹ Abhann Productions, established in 1995 to produce the touring *Riverdance* show, River Films Ltd, a feature film production company, River Productions, a stage production company, and more recently, Riverdream Productions Ltd, which develops and manages new projects. Joan Egan is Group Executive Chairman of Abhann Management Group,

¹ www.tyroneproductions.com

established in 2001, which has overall responsibility for the group companies. Moya modestly attributes the success of the group to Joan.

The Riverdance phenomenon

The 39th Eurovision Song Contest, held in The Point Theatre, Dublin on April 30th, 1994 lasted for three hours. Ireland won the contest for the sixth time, with a song by Paul Harrington and Charlie McGettigan called "Rock 'N' Roll Kids". The Polish entrant, who came second, was nearly disqualified for delivering her song in English. It is probable that many people don't remember these particular facts. What almost everyone who saw it does remember is the spectacular interval event, *Riverdance*. Lasting no longer than six minutes and forty seconds, the act held the rapt attention of an estimated global audience of some 600 million people. It concluded with an unprecedented standing ovation by the live audience at The Point. How did *Riverdance* come about? Moya recalls, "I was asked to produce the Eurovision Song Contest which has a fairly standardised format. However, I thought that the interval stage of the show had astounding possibilities for creativity. I wanted to put on something that would demonstrate the best of contemporary Irish music and dance. I wanted a group of dancers with two leads and a new piece of music from an Irish composer. I sketched it out on a piece of paper at the time." Moya had seen two Irish-American dancers in the National Concert Hall in a show that her husband John had produced earlier in the year. She felt that Michael Flatley's fusion of tap, flamenco and Irish dancing, together with Jean Butler's beauty and grace, would make a powerful partnership. The composer for that show was Bill Whelan and he agreed to become involved in the Eurovision project. Another friend and acquaintance, Mavis Ascott, took on the choreography. In this way the now famous interval act was conceived and brought to fruition. What ingredients are required to bring such a project to fulfillment? Moya's analysis of the process is quite succinct: "Having the right idea, having the right vision and delivering it to a high standard." Today, *Riverdance* has achieved the status of a global Irish brand. It has been cited as one of the defining events that, along with Ray Houghton's goals against England and Italy, and Mary Robinson's election as President, redefined the meaning of being Irish for many people.

Translating an idea into reality

Following the success at Eurovision, RTE proposed a *Riverdance* television special. This was a great production opportunity but Moya was convinced that an expanded live show offered greater potential for creativity. The extraordinary reaction from

Eurovision audiences around the world was sufficient evidence for this potential. She was well aware that Eurovision had been a powerful marketing platform for the production. Millions of people were now familiar with the *Riverdance* title.

However, even though the concept was highly attractive, she still had to face the business realities. She needed to raise the finance and explore the complex logistics of what would be an extremely challenging project. Turning a short interval programme into a full scale theatrical production is a major undertaking. As she describes, "It was moving on, from turning six minutes and forty seconds into a commercial show that would make financial sense and would have a future." The Eurovision was held in April 1994 and Moya knew that she had to complete the project by May 1995, before the next Eurovision production.

Raising the finance and facing the risks

Even so, she felt that she and John were taking a major personal risk when they decided to book The Point Theatre, one of Ireland's largest venues, to stage the new show. The artistic and logistical decisions associated with a large production of this nature are themselves extremely demanding. It is necessary to create a format for the show, commission the music, carry out auditions, hire dancers and musicians and undertake a host of other tasks. None of these activities can be attempted without the necessary financial support. This was a new challenge for Moya, presenting unfamiliar legal and accounting issues. Previously, in her experience in RTE and elsewhere, these were background issues and were managed by other experts in the organisation. Now, in a small company, she had to deal with financial and budgetary matters herself, a task that she found to be quite daunting. She enlisted the support of Joan Egan, by now a key figure in Tyrone Productions, to identify potential investors.

The process of raising the money to back her project brought Moya face to face with the realities of risk. She and John mortgaged their house, which many would regard as the ultimate financial risk. This decision was not made recklessly. Careful calculations were carried out to establish the number of seat sales necessary to achieve break-even and to move into profit. She had moments of doubt but recalls that her personal conviction, together with John's faith in the project, carried her through. Their confidence was well founded. *Riverdance The Show* was completely sold out and has sustained its impact ever since.

Creativity and production

One of the challenges that theatrical entrepreneurs face is the ongoing tension between creativity and production. Creativity must be tempered by the demands and constraints of production possibilities. Often the creator and the producer find that they must challenge each others' perceptions. As Moya describes it, *"There is constant conflict between the producer and creator. The job of the producer, while still being creative, is to manage the budget and make decisions about where to spend the money and get a return"*. Consequently, management and administration are crucial aspects of the business and must co-exist with the creative process. Moya sees day-to-day management as absolutely critical and returns to the management theme frequently. *"The Riverdance management team are superb and have mostly been with us for the last ten years. We have assisted them in setting up their own company. We have outsourced the management of Riverdance to them. We will also outsource The Pirate Queen. We plan to do the same with Tyrone Productions. There are only 8/10 people at head office."* Moya describes such outsourcing as equivalent to a management take-over. This approach suits her purposes well and she is content to do the creative thinking and let others run with it. *"Decisions around the idea are critical. All these decisions have huge implications, where you cast it, how you manage it, in what theatre, and with what deal."* Clearly, in a business where creativity is essential, the ability to work in a diverse team environment is critical to theatrical ventures.

Working with a talented team

Moya, John and Joan Egan form the management team, while an appropriate creative team is established around each individual project. Moya estimates that it takes some five years to roll out a creative theatrical project. After the necessary rights to an idea have been established, the creative team is put in place. Moya states that it is absolutely essential to find the right people for this team. In fact, if anyone she wants is not available due to other commitments, she is willing to wait until they can join.

Moya is adamant that it is not possible for one person to solve all the problems that arise. Her business employs many independent thinkers and producers. These people are experts in their fields and, if a problem arises, she always consults with them. She also works very closely with her husband, John. She describes the process, *"He usually comes at the problem from a completely different angle, and we distil the information and then reach a consensus. I find that working with John means that I have a partner I can trust in the business,*

something I find essential. I'm a firm believer in playing straight games; no double dealing." Trust is important to her. She likes people to be straight and she herself is perceived as being very up front and honest. *"I don't play games and I don't like people who engage in game playing. Managing our projects to the best of our ability is what we focus on."*

She is certainly prepared to delegate and to allow others to take responsibility for the things they do well. She states that, *"In this situation the entrepreneur becomes the instigator, the creator, and most importantly, has to stand over the quality of the finished product. Within this framework it is possible to delegate."*

Personal traits and attitudes

Moya is specific on the traits and characteristics that she brings to the business, as her responses to some fundamental questions illustrate. She believes that she is driven to achieve success in business by the desire to do the best possible job. Surely, even the most creative entrepreneur finds it difficult to feel motivated all the time? *"Sometimes you do get weary; it can be a lonely position. People want to put forward their own views, which they are entitled to do, but I need to make the final decision. When making difficult decisions, sometimes I find it best to get a bit of distance – physically moving away from the situation by taking a walk. It is crucial not to make key decisions under pressure – to take time and get good advice."* Does she feel that she is a visionary in terms of the business? *"I don't have a great vision for the business as such – I simply want to do good work on an international level."* Nevertheless, vision is important at the project level, as she indicates when she identifies the skills that she brings to her everyday work - *"It's all about clarity of vision, leadership and making decisions. People working with you must feel that whoever is in charge knows where they are going, even if they don't like the direction."*

Moya claims that she makes her business decisions based on the best information available but admits that, *"You don't always know if it is the right decision to make – you only find this out in time. This is one of the challenges of running your own business."* A relatively small organisational setting suits her personal style well. She has no desire to work in a large entertainment business such as the Disney Corporation and feels that she would suffocate in such an environment. She is extremely clear around this topic. *"I am not about building an empire. I want to do good work and I like to outsource. We are not a factory with routine production"*. Moya claims that there is a huge risk in attempting to bring a creative idea to the market. She is in the business of creative

ideas and these usually take a long time to come to fruition. However, she feels that the risks involved are manageable, stating, *"We are fortunate that we can underwrite the risk; we do not have any interference at creative level."*

Being a female entrepreneur

When referring to the specific issues related to female entrepreneurs Moya, like many others, has more of an issue with the term itself, than with any of the associated challenges. *"Entrepreneurship is a much abused and overused word. It means someone who takes a risk and pushes the boundaries. I see myself as a woman working in the Arts on the international stage and the Arts is not traditionally a place where entrepreneurship survives."* When asked about the qualities that distinguish her as an entrepreneur per se, she states, *"Visionary is a grand word but everyone starts from a blank sheet; having the stamina to sustain in the long term is the real test."* Moya feels that she competes only with herself and she sets high standards for herself. She feels that passion is the central driver. She is erudite on this topic. *"For me and from my limited experience it is about a passion, it's not about a business. I have to want it profoundly, otherwise it won't work. If there is a passion and an opportunity there are so many gaps in the marketplace. I completely and utterly love what I am doing; it is a fantastic mix of the creative and the business. I couldn't absorb myself in something that was only creative; I need a good smattering of both".*

Advice for young entrepreneurs

With an obviously clear insight into her own traits, it is not surprising that she is fairly specific about the personal requirements for entrepreneurship. *"Clarity of vision is essential; you must always interrogate your own vision. Stamina is certainly needed – it's a long road and it doesn't happen overnight. Overall, you need energy, commitment, optimism and staying power. It all involves hard work."* She smiles and adds, *"The words 'hard work' should be in capitals; there are no short cuts."* She is at pains to emphasise the learning process. *"The wonderful thing is that you never stop learning. It can be tough but I'm glad it hasn't come easy – you are always learning"*. She is very clear on her own most significant lessons. She knows that she does not have all the answers and must decide when to listen to the experts and when to rely on her own judgement. Finally, Moya advises entrepreneurs *"Do your thinking; look at all the pitfalls before going forward knowing you have amassed all your information."*

Working in international markets

One of the interesting characteristics of *Riverdance* is its ability to travel well. The show has now reached over 600 million people in the UK, Germany, Australia and the USA, where it was produced at Radio City Music Hall, a venue that holds 6,000 people. At any one time, there can be three *Riverdance* productions running simultaneously. There is one on Broadway, one that tours North America and a third that travels to Europe, Australia and Asia and returns to Ireland each summer. Nine years after the first performance in Dublin, *Riverdance* became the first Western theatrical group to perform in the Great Hall of the People in China. Moya states, *"We dipped our toe in the market with Riverdance. It's a challenging market. The business partner was the Chinese government's Arts Department."* Although the show was seen by capacity audiences each night, she is frank and characteristically honest in saying that she is still not sure about the Chinese market and that it remains something of a mystery to her. Nevertheless, she is prepared to work at it and she has engaged a creative person there who is looking at pulling the necessary ingredients together. *"For international expansion, we do deals with a company or individual who knows the local market very well. It's the only way to do it. We will possibly expand into China with our Magick Show concept that has been developed for the Las Vegas market. The advantage is that there is no language barrier with magic. The company will go with a local promoter rather than the government again."*

The US also presented its own particular challenges. Moya describes it as a different environment with a new trade union landscape. The North American market is the strongest for entertainment and, of course, the company has the pedigree of *Riverdance* behind it. Moya states that producers on Broadway are generally advised to appeal to the typical Broadway customer, who is described as a 50 year old woman! She would like to think that *The Pirate Queen* has broader appeal. Based on Irish mythology, with a strong 16th century Irish chieftain, Grainne O'Malley, as its central character, the production combines many of the elements that made *Riverdance* a success. The score has been written by French composers Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schonberg, who also wrote the music for *Les Miserables* and *Miss Saigon*. Moya hopes that *The Pirate Queen* will be perceived as a family show and will appeal equally to sophisticated New York audiences.

Moya emphasises that there is nothing certain in the entertainment business. *"With the fluid nature of entertainment you aim to get the right venue in*

the right town. Even though it is a busy market, you work with smart producers, who won't put you up against another similar show. It's a busy and crowded market, but you have to be clever and know how you sell yourself. Once you hit opening night, that's when the real work begins! It's a waiting game as you are waiting to see how the audience reacts. You need to listen to audience responses, look at box office receipts and assess the reaction of reviewers."

What next?

Moya feels that she and her colleagues have the possibility of a classic with *The Pirate Queen*. If it succeeds, she could be dealing with multiple productions of the show, as with *Riverdance*. In such a situation, they would sub-license to a producer in, for example, Australia while retaining creative control.

With cost estimates for *The Pirate Queen* running at some €15 million, she will again, take the necessary actions to spread the risk. *"If we partner and share the risk it will take pressure from us. We are linking up with an American company who are talking to players in the US market who may, strategically and financially, partner us for future projects"*. A similar partnership approach will be adopted with the planned Las Vegas magic production, *Macabre Magick*. Moya describes the process thus: *"We know where to get the investment. We know who to talk to. That is part of the Riverdance journey. If you deliver an international success the figures are in the trade journals. We have put huge investment into these projects. We are now really working with the best in the world. We are also collaborating with a top horror director, Wes Craven, who directed Nightmare on Elm Street and Scream, and has become an established brand name in Hollywood"*.

Moya is looking at the West End and feels that *The Pirate Queen* will also work in Germany, Spain, France and Japan. A group from Japan attended a preview of the show and has expressed interest in the licensing. There is a heavy workload involved in foreign language productions, including the need to translate the script.

Moya describes her business succinctly, *"Managing the idea from page to stage."* Living an exciting and busy life, and having achieved great success, Moya Doherty knows she must be future-oriented and that her immediate challenge is the successful migration of *The Pirate Queen* to Broadway and New York.



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² Global Movies and Entertainment Industry Profile – Datamonitor 2005

Industry Profile

The market sector that Moya Doherty and her team operate in is wide and varied. Broadly titled the Entertainment Sector, it encompasses Tyrone Production's interests in television, film and theatre.

This market has seen significant growth in the past number of years, particularly as consumers have had more disposable income to spend on entertainment. The market has seen a shift in some areas, for example, although cinema receipts have decreased in some countries, markets for videos and DVDs continues to expand. This is evidenced in the huge popularity of some of the products linked to Moya, such as the *Riverdance* video and the Special Olympics Opening Ceremony in 2003. One interesting trend is the growing sophistication of consumers. With a vast array of entertainment options literally at their fingertips through the internet, expectations have continued to increase as consumers demand more and more sophisticated products and services.

Given the wide range of activities in this area, specific market data is hard to find. Datamonitor, in research completed in 2005², were able to estimate the size of the film and entertainment market at \$129.3 billion in 2004, representing an increase of 6.7% on the previous year. The same report predicts a further 33.9% increase up to 2009. It should be noted that these figures do not take into account the television and theatre subsegments of the market, although they do help to indicate the general trends in the overall entertainment industry.

The continued expansion of this market seems inevitable. The challenges for companies include managing to find a niche where the big industry players are not dominant, as well as being flexible and adaptable enough to respond to the changing needs of the marketplace.

Company Details

Company Name: Group holding company is Abhann Management Group, with Abhann Productions Ltd being responsible for *Riverdance*, and Tyrone Productions Ltd responsible for television productions. The group also has a number of other companies established to manage particular projects.

Address: 27 Lower Hatch Street, Dublin 2, Ireland

Sector: Entertainment, Television and Stage Production

Shareholders: Moya Doherty and John McColgan (100%)

Turnover: Net Group Turnover €40m

Staff (including founders): 46 (Group staff which does not include outsourced operations)

Established in: 1987

Main Products: TV productions (entertainment, drama, documentary, current affairs, special events, daytime and childrens) and stage productions

Website: www.tyroneproductions.com