

Former President of Ireland Mary Robinson gets ovation in Kilburn

There was a standing ovation at the Kiln Cinema in Kilburn for the sold-out screening of the recent documentary about Ireland's first woman President.

Former President Mary Robinson, 80, was present.

Hosted by IFTUK, the Kilburn screening was part of St Brigid's celebrations with other screenings taking place in Birmingham and Glasgow.

The film was followed by a Q&A with the former president chaired by newspaper journalist Anne-Marie Tomchak.

Asked what she thought of the film, *Mrs Robinson* said: "Aoife Kelleher, the director, did a great job.

"She did a job of capturing what was happening in a way I really liked, and she rightly covered my mistakes.

"That's important. Nobody is perfect. We all make mistakes.

"I made big ones - and they're covered well, I'm glad of that.

"It shows how Ireland opened up and moved forward but also shows the issues we were coping with and are still coping with.

"I'm hoping that young people will feel energised by the film to make a difference.

"I was a girl among four brothers, two medical doctor parents, nothing political in our family, and I didn't know what I was going to do.

"A lot of it was support from others, particularly my parents initially, telling me that I had the same opportunity as my brothers. It wasn't true (but) I was going to make it true if I could.

"You don't get elected as president of Ireland without a huge amount of support, not just from women, though the support of Mhá na hÉireann was very significant, but also from men and from young men.

"The truth is I didn't really want the film to be made.

"A very dear friend, Bride Rosney, that special friend who tells you the things you need to know, not the things you want to hear, said to me, 'You've had a good life. People need inspiration. We need to tell that story. I'll make it possible for you. I'll do everything'.

"And she did. She brought

me to the interviews. She did all the linkings with Aoife Kelleher, the wonderful director, and Loosehorse (Productions), the wonderful producers.

"I didn't do anything except just go along.

"Just after the film was finished, we'd literally seen the final cut of it, (Bride) slipped away in her sleep at the age of 74. The film is dedicated to her.

"She's in it, as you saw, protecting me from my own mistakes but Bride knew we all need inspiration.

"I was part of a wide number of people who fought for rights in Ireland.

"(The documentary) tells the story of how Ireland struggled and achieved a lot at a time when, sadly, a country that inspired me, the United States, is in much more difficulty.

"Especially for women's rights - with the Trump presidency, it's going backwards.

"It's not guaranteed that you hold on to what you have."

"You have to have eternal vigilance."

She said of her unpopular decision to relinquish the Irish presidency before the end of her term to take on a UN job: "I was under pressure from (then UN Secretary General) Kofi Annan to come earlier.

"That was a mistake. I thought Kofi Annan mightn't wait for me, might appoint somebody else.

"To be perfectly honest, I had no other option.

"When you've been president for seven years, you can't go back and practice law.

"I was offered a professorship to teach in the United States. I didn't want to do that, and I did want to do this job.

"I was very keen to get the job, and realised there was a very big campaign going on for the new president.

"It was all over the news. I felt nobody would notice if I left a bit early - but they did and they were right.

"I had committed for seven years. I should have stayed those seven years.

"So, for lots of reasons, it was a mistake."

Asked about her recent conversion to tackling climate change, she said: "I came very

late to understanding the impact of climate change, and I make that clear.

"I never made any speech about it in my seven years as President of Ireland from 1990 to 1997 and when I became high commissioner, another part of the UN was dealing with it.

"It was when I was working in Africa in 2003 on economic and social rights, rights to food, education, health, that I realised the impacts were already there.

No plan B

"They were devastated. They had no insurance, they had no Plan B and the rainy seasons weren't coming.

"Women were saying to me, 'Is God punishing us?' That's how they were trying to explain it.

"This is outside our experience - long periods of drought, flash flooding destroying the schools and the villages over, and over, again in various countries. That is why I came to climate justice.

"The moment I understood another important part of it, climate and nature, was when I was on a scientific expedition to Greenland in the summer of 2019.

"On the second last day, we were taken on a boat to a small place with quite primitive huts and told, 'Now, go out on your own and just listen to the glacier.'

"As I sat there, I realised the sun was very, very hot and I hadn't brought my sun lotion. It was beginning to burn me in Greenland.

"It was 26, 27 degrees and I could hear this iceberg, this glacier, like the noise of thunder and then, every now and again, like gunshots.

"I was on my own and I realised I was crying because this shouldn't be happening.

"This is what we were doing to nature. I've never felt so profoundly affected.

"We absolutely need to think about regenerating nature, biodiversity, the extinction of species we're responsible for.

"That was a gift to me, a gift of simply crying with nature, because I felt it in my soul and my heart.

"We must step up. Women leaders, in particular, at all levels, should step up

and give leadership, not women only, women leading.

"We don't have enough women's leadership in our world.

"We need a climate justice movement and women need to lead this movement, because we have the right way of approaching.

"Women's leadership is non-hierarchical.

"We don't think of 'the big man', the autocratic figure - you know who I'm talking about.

"We talk about collaboration, listening, problem solving. Everybody's voice matters.

"I'm a co-founder of Project Dandelion. I learned the power of symbols as president of Ireland from simply putting a light in the window in Aras an Uachtaráin because I had learned as a senator that we didn't care about our immigrants.

"I'd been to various immigrant centres in the US and in Canada and in the UK, in particular, and we didn't have any policies of care up to 1990.

"I wanted to symbolise

this, but I didn't know, that the light would take on a life of its own.

"That light is like magic. It worked 24/7 for the seven years and it created a sense of belonging, a sense of a diaspora, a sense of caring and the policies followed, we've got very good policies now, as a result of that, and some of the magic.

"So here we have the Dandelion, which when I was growing up was considered a weed.

"The dandelion is a beautiful flower. It grows on all continents. It is very resilient. You can't get rid of the damn thing if you want to.

"It's also got deep roots that go into the soil and regenerate the soil and farmers are learning this.

"It's the perfect symbol of magic, of reminding us of an important lesson which I learned when I sat listening to

the iceberg - we are nature. We're not separate from nature and that dandelion can guide us to a movement that helps us to see we're on the cusp of a much better world.

"We don't think about that world enough.

"That world would be

powered by renewable energy, will be much fairer, much healthier, much safer.

“It will make a huge difference in developing countries where they don’t have access to electricity but have the capacity if they get the investment.

“It’s shifting the money from fossil fuel into clean energy.

“It’s hard but very doable. The science and nature tell us we have to do it or face a world with more and more of these destructive, highly costly, storms, hurricanes, droughts, and wildfires.

‘Prisoner of hope’

“I was lucky enough to be part of The Elders, that wonderful group of human beings.

“Our first chair was Archbishop Desmond Tutu. I learned so much from him.

“We were together in New York about 20 years, in front of young people and Archbishop Tutu, when he was in front of young people, would tell them how great they were, how much he believed in them, how much he loved them.

“The moderator asked, ‘Archbishop Tutu, why are you such an optimist?’

“He looked at her, shook his head and said, ‘Oh no, I’m not an optimist. I’m a prisoner of hope’.

“I’ve thought about that a

lot recently.

“The glass may not be half full, there may be very little in it, but you work with what’s there, collaborate to make it better.

“Hope is action. Hope is taking the steps you can take, and we all can take steps, every step matters.”

Asked by a member of the audience to recall her reaction to being elected in 1990, she said: “Huge emotion, huge disbelief initially, to be honest. I was told, ‘You will be President tomorrow’ and I didn’t believe it.

“The emotion was unbelievable, and I still remember what everybody said to me, ‘When you were elected, I cried’, just that depth of emotion that showed that something had changed and Ireland had changed, and I was somehow symbolic in this.

“I had done something. I had been elected but there were so many other forces that were part of this that were showing in Ireland.

“I’m very proud of how Ireland went on.

“I was very proud of how young people took on same sex marriage, the removal of prohibition on abortion.

“No country is perfect - but Ireland has achieved a lot.

She added: “My reflection when I was president, when I was elected, was, ‘My good-

ness, this is a real opening up of Ireland that somebody with my background of fighting for issues of human rights, LGBT issues, all these issues, could be elected is a sign Ireland has moved forward.

“In my inauguration address I said I hoped to work at the local level, at the national level, but also, maybe, at the international level.

“I had no idea what might happen, and I remember just being very concerned that day how I would do what I pledged to do.”

She spoke out against what she said are lies coming from across the Atlantic: “There is no energy emergency in the United States. All lies. It’s all lies.

“The United States has produced more crude oil in the last six years than any country in the world. It is also the leader on gas, and it’s exporting. There is no emergency. It’s lies, lies amplified by social media.

“We have to realise this. We’re into a world where a lot of what is being said is not the case, and undermining policies that help make policies more inclusive, diversity, equity, inclusion.

“We’re in a difficult era, a very difficult time, but we have to know what are lies, absolute lies, not foundational fact, but promoted by algorithms and bots with social media.”

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PHOTOS:
ARCHIE FRIEND



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