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Arts

So what did happen at Oxegen 2006?

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WHEN rain pelted down on tens of thousands of fans at the Oxegen Festival in Punchestown, Co Kildare on Saturday 8 July, the promoter MCD was worried that for the first time in its brief history, the two-day show . . . the country's most popular music event . . . would be a wash-out. The festival had sold out of its 80,000 available tickets months before. According to gardai on site, 53,000 cars arrived on Friday, with 70,000 camping music fans keen to get the best spots in the campsite. But as water gushed down, the marquee tents in which stages had been located became so sodden that some revellers began to pack up and go home. Almost miraculously on Saturday night, however, the winds eased and the clouds lifted. Overnight, the mud dried.

The next day, the atmosphere was as optimistic as the sky was bright.

But almost as soon as the festival wrapped up, stories of what really happened outside the main music area began to circulate.

Tents had been burned, according to some eyewitnesses. Rampaging gangs of youths had caused chaos.

Some campers said they had feared for their safety while at the festival. The promoters deny claims of rioting and looting.

Confusion still exists about where and when alleged incidents of violence took place in the sprawling campsite, which was divided up into two sections . . . A and B . . . and then further divided into numbered sections. Some attendees maintain that the burning of tents began as soon as Saturday night.

Following interviews with numerous attendees who camped at Oxegen and witnessed violence and the destruction of property, it can be concluded that the worst incidents took place late on Sunday night and early on Monday morning. MCD initially maintained that just two tents were set alight, and the fires were quickly extinguished by security officials.

Eyewitness evidence, as well as videos from the campsite posted on the video library website YouTube by people at the festival, suggest a different version of events.

Shortly after the festival, MCD made a post on the main page of the Oxegen website. "Superintendent Tom Neville, of Naas gardai", it said, "stated 'the crowd have been very well behaved and our traffic management plan has resulted in free-flowing traffic to and from the site over the course of the weekend. The pre-event planning meetings played a major role in the success of the event.

There have been a number of seizures for illegal substances." This statement is remarkably similar to another made by MCD following the Hi: Fi music festival in Mullingar two weeks ago, which was attended by

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"Superintendent Padraic Rattigan, of Mullingar garda síochána, stated, 'The crowd have been very well behaved and our traffic management plan has resulted in freeflowing traffic to and from the site over the course of the weekend.

The planning meetings played a major role in the success of the event. As expected with a crowd of this number, there have been a number of seizures for illegal substances and a small number of public order arrests to date." Speaking to the Sunday Tribune, Superintendent Neville was slightly less positive about the success of Oxegen. At least two investigations are ongoing following incidents at the festival, he said. One common assault is being investigated along with a serious sexual assault. The superintendent would not confirm whether the sexual assault occurred in the campsite area. Other crimes at Oxegen included 386 drug seizures . . . mostly for personal use.

Around 50 people were arrested on site.

Last Friday, MCD released a statement entitled "The Facts", with the lofty heading, "Can we eliminate all anti-social behaviour? Well, that is a greater social question" . . . an attempt at preempting a flurry of Oxegen news stories. In the statement, the company acknowledged that it would assist the gardai with the investigation into a sexual assault. It also revised its figure on the number of tents burned from two to 23.

Denis Desmond, managing director of MCD Productions, was quoted in the statement as saying, "With all major events, there are always a number of lessons to be learned. Anti-social behaviour cannot and will not be tolerated at any MCD event. We will continue to provide a high standard of care for our customers. And our security team along with the Garda will provide all the appropriate protections and those individuals found to have caused any unnecessary distress for other customers will be dealt with appropriately."

The main criticisms of the campsite relate to a lack of visible security. MCD refused to respond to questions put by the Sunday Tribune regarding its security.

However, this newspaper understands that up to five security firms were employed by MCD to police the event, which was eventually attended by between 70,000 to 80,000 people. MCD told the Sunday Tribune that the gardai in charge of policing Oxegen received a list of each member of security staff and were able to conduct background checks on them. This assertion was refuted by a garda press officer: "We have no legal obligation to do that," she said, adding such a practice would be infringing on the rights of citizens.

Ronan Flynn from Cork stayed in campsite A (12) for the weekend. He claims that "many people arrived without tickets and walked in", a claim reiterated by others the Sunday Tribune interviewed. By Sunday night, Flynn realised he was situated in an area where some of the worst violence was taking place, "In campsite A, between midnight on Sunday and 6am on Monday there were an average of six to eight fires burning at any given time. . . I was camped right at the edge of one of the main tent-burning groups, watched them throw cans, knock fences and pull down the security tower, having bottled the staff until they deserted it, then tied ropes to it and tipped it over. . . On Monday morning, the security finally started making a proper presence in our campsite, but only in kicking everyone in our campsite area out at 6am. We had been packed up since 5am and our neighbours had already left; none of us felt safe."

From similar accounts, it appears security initially made attempts to extinguish fires in the area, but gave up late on Sunday night, only to return between 5am and 6am

on Monday morning to eject people from their tents.

Privately, MCD denies that people walked into the festival unchecked by security, but those who attended the event say otherwise. Peter Reilly from Dublin told the Sunday Tribune he still has the ticket he bought for the festival for the simple reason that security didn't ask for it.

"I nor my friend I was going with were asked for tickets, or searched. In fact, I didn't even notice any security guards. We just walked straight through without question. I still have my ticket untouched in the envelope I brought it to Oxegen in. After the gig finished up on Saturday night I went home, but I know a few people who walked straight into the campsite without being asked for wristbands or tickets or anything, who then stayed for the Sunday too, with only a one-day ticket.

This puts some perspective on the actual campsite trouble in my opinion. If literally anyone who wanted to get in could just stroll through and into the campsite, then you have to wonder how on earth they were expecting the event to be trouble-free."

Five days after the festival, the message board on Oxegen's official website . . . the forum of a heated discussion of events in the campsite . . . was shut down. MCD maintains that the message board was due to shut down at that time, and reopen when tickets go on sale for 2007's festival this November, but the move was interpreted by users as an attempt at censorship.

Outraged, many transferred their arguments to other message boards, namely Ireland's largest, Boards. ie. A post on its message board, which referred to an article written about the festival in the Irish Independent, prompted MCD to send a letter from its solicitors Arthur Cox, to Boards. ie seeking its removal. Boards. ie chief Dr John Breslin told the Sunday Tribune: "At the time, feelings were quite high and we felt it would be safer to remove any discussion relating to MCD."

The first solicitor's letter he received notified him of the correspondence MCD was having with the Irish Independent regarding criticisms of Oxegen. The second demanded an apology. It's an apology Breslin has yet to give. Breslin said he was confused as to why MCD decided to send a letter from its solicitor, rather than simply contact the website directly to remove the offensive post, something, he says, he would have happily done. When contacted a second time, Breslin said he "couldn't say anything" about the current legal situation, although a post on the Boards. ie website again warned users not to discuss MCD: "As of Friday, 11 August 2006, MCD Productions has entered into legal proceedings against Boards. ie Ltd. At this time we cannot make, or allow, comment on an ongoing legal action against Boards. ie."

When Boards. ie posted the initial notice on its site saying any discussion relating to MCD, any of its festivals or related bands would be removed, ire directed towards the company increased amongst music fans. Many believed it was simply censoring discussions and criticisms of the festival. "MCD has said it has no interest in censoring our discussion of anything it is involved in apart from discussions of the negative rumours regarding the Oxegen festival", the notice said.

"Unfortunately, as the administrators of Boards. ie, we cannot guarantee that discussions involving MCD in any way will not prompt a user to post something regarding the negative rumours. As our moderators are not full-time, paid staff members, we cannot guarantee that we can catch such references immediately to delete them.

Subsequently, we feel it is more sensible to veto all discussion of MCD and related bands, events, venues, dates, festivals, concert dates, ticket sales, competitions

and promotions, lest MCD be defamed during these discussions, " the post read at the time.

Many people contacted and interviewed for this article refused to go on the record.

Amongst some in the media, there is a reluctance to criticise the organisation, as many believe that such action isn't worth the hassle that inevitably follows. Given that MCD is by far the biggest music promoter in the country, one can understand such reluctance.

But such obedience is now changing. Music fans were outraged at how MCD handled the post-Oxegen backlash. Instead of acknowledging there were problems in the campsite, MCD initially went on the defensive, rubbishing claims of violence and damage to property and threatening those who repeated them with legal action. At least one national newspaper was sent solicitors' letters from MCD's legal representatives after it became clear that it would be reporting on allegations from those who camped at the festival. How welcoming MCD will be of online criticism when the official Oxegen message board reopens remains to be seen. Elsewhere online, ex-Oxegen messageboard members have moved to a rival festival's message board . . .

Electric Picnic . . . while other forums have been set up.

"We must warn you that in the event that an article critical of the event is published, we will take whatever action is necessary to prevent damage to the Oxegen event or MCD Productions, " was the response from Justin Green, publicity and marketing director for the company, and the man at the front line of MCD's inhouse PR machine, when the Irish Independent reported on the Oxegen festival, although no legal proceedings have been brought to date. Music journalist Jim Carroll mentioned the trouble at and after Oxegen in his Irish Times column and called it "the story which refuses to go away".

MCD refused to accept allegations made to the Sunday Tribune from people who were at the festival as truth. It asked for the contact details of those interviewed for this article to be forwarded to them. "MCD takes all complaints very seriously and fully investigates all such matters. Accordingly, we would kindly request that you forward contact details of the complainants, to enable us carry out such an investigation, " it said.

Following a further request from MCD, the Sunday Tribune contacted all those interviewed and gave them the opportunity to contact MCD about their Oxegen experiences.

Campsite B was not without incidents of violence too, according to those who pitched there.

Brian Kavanagh from Co Meath stayed in campsite B and witnessed "tents being emptied of all the bags, and then thrown up into the air so the tent flies through the campsite. I also didn't really see any security guards in our campsite for the duration of the festival." Joe Heron, who stayed in campsite B11, said: "Security in the arena all seemed more professional and better clued in than in previous years. But security and garda presence in the campsite was negligible."

The majority of those interviewed said the Oxegen campsite had been on a "downward spiral" over the past few years, and that this year was a manifestation of a more drunken, boisterous crowd that had been let away with much during past festivals. Most punters praised MCD for better toilet facilities, better food and other new elements that have been adopted from Pod Promotions' Electric Picnic festival in Co Laois . . . namely a cinema and 'silent disco'. Of course, part of the problem lies in personal responsibility.

You can't blame MCD for people getting drunk and causing trouble, but concertgoers who spoke to the

Sunday Tribune insisted that Denis Desmond's promotion company has a duty to maintain the safety of those who wish to enjoy themselves without the threat of violence or injury. "Why were the gardai not brought in?" Ronan Flynn asked of the violence in campsite A12. "Oxegen is a good event, " maintains Joe Heron who camped in B11, "but security is a key feature in any such large gathering. The gardai and MCD need to get this sorted. Otherwise it will either die off, or worse still, people will get really badly hurt."



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