GAY THEATRE FESTIVAL LAUNCH 2012

Senator Katherine Zappone

Wednesday 28th of March

Thank you for your kind and generous words Brian. I am privileged to launch the Gay Theatre Festival 2012. I am delighted to see the Festival approach nearly a decade in existence and I look forward to the celebration of its tenth anniversary next year. I am especially delighted to launching this LGBT Festival as the first out lesbian member of the Oireachtas. It is interesting to find oneself in the role of law maker having long been in the role of law challenger.

Brian referred to the significant social and legal changes that have come about in Ireland over the last number of decades and I am glad to say that during my short time in the Seanad I have been able to contribute to some of that change. Recommendations I made to the Minister for Finance in relation to the previous Finance Bill have ensured that Civil Partners are treated more equally in terms of taxation. And in the debate on the Finance Bill just passed last week I secured from the Minister a commitment to achieving equality of treatment between civil partners and married couples in the tax code. Other changes I have brought forward have achieved similar parity of treatment in the naturalisation and citizenship process. The story of equality is still progressing and we have a significant way to go yet. I hope, I believe and I know that someday, I don’t know exactly when, but one day Ireland will recognise marriage equality.

The Gay Theatre Festival occupies a unique position on Ireland’s cultural map. It is of vital importance that this space for cultural dialogue and exploration of identity is retained. Theatre critic, Jan Kott, was of the view that successive generations bring to their own productions of Shakespeare the particular concerns of that generation. Similarly it can be said that each successive Gay Theatre Festival programme reflects the preoccupations and concerns of our LGBT community and our collective consciousness. These stories often traverse the range of human emotions from stories of self-acceptance and love to experience of prejudice and discrimination.

I am so pleased to see the presence of more LGBT women in the Festival programme this year. It is wonderful to see greater inclusion of lesbian, bisexual and transgender experience and I look forward to even more representations of our diverse community. I am delighted too to see that the Festival has an award in honour of Eva Gore Booth. I very much enjoyed the play the ‘Countess and the Lesbians’ which was the hit of the Festival a couple of years ago. But Eva Gore Booth wasn’t merely Countess Markievicz’ sister. She authored no less than 19 volumes of published poetry, philosophical prose and drama. Her work played an important role in the Irish Literary Revival and yet she is often consigned to the footnotes of history. Dr. Sonja Tiernan, who has written about Eva, suggests that the misnaming of Eva’s sexuality by biographers and commentators has contributed to her work being ‘misread and ultimately overlooked’. One of Eva’s biographers, Gifford Lewis, upon finishing a biography of Eva, wrote to her great-nephew referring to Eva saying, “You will be pleased to know that I could not find a trace of perverted sexuality”. As people of minority sexual and gender identities we must present our lives, our truth to the world, have our stories told and our lives reflected back to us. Adrienne Rich warned against such stories remaining untold, cautioning that if untold they remain ’not merely unspoken but unspeakable.’ Adrienne Rich herself is an extraordinary example of someone who bravely told her story and spoke truth.

This year’s programme tells so many great stories, ‘Live, Love and Laugh’ looks at coming out in later life, ‘Elegies’ speaks about loss to HIV/AIDS and ‘Stop Kiss’ deals with new attraction and prejudice.

Telling our stories is important but witnessing our stories is equality important. That telling and witnessing and hearing is a critical cultural resource that will ensure a redefinition of what it means to be ‘normal’. That redefinition encourages a diversity of ways of being human so that we can continue to build a culture and society that includes us, that hears us and sees us. Though our art and with the power of our imaginations we will finally break the culture of sameness and create a culture of diversity with great imagination.