

*Address by Brian Merriman, Founder/Executive Chairman of the International Dublin Gay Theatre Festival at the launch of the 8<sup>th</sup> Festival programme in Copper Alley, Arlington Hotel Temple Bar on Wednesday April 6<sup>th</sup> at 5.30 pm*

Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We live in historic times. Yesterday I had the honour of being a guest at the celebrations of the first ever civil partnership in Ireland. Last week saw the acceptance of a gay couple as suitable foster parents in Ireland. Belong to has just launched the excellent Stand Up to Homophobic Bullying campaign. We have two openly gay TDs and perhaps a potential gay President in our patron Senator David Norris?

The times, since we started 8 years ago as an intercultural dialogue with Irish society, are changing. Our citizenship though hard won, is being recognised and we are playing our part in these challenging times. This year's festival programme is a true celebration as a coming of age for us as an artform with a presence in society. We celebrate Dublin being internationally recognised as a centre of excellence and a welcoming home for gay theatre.

It is also a very important day for us and marks another fulfilled ambition, as the new Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht Deputy Jimmy Deenihan has greatly honoured us with his presence. For the first time, the Arts Minister will launch our festival and we are deeply grateful for your presence, time and interest. Congratulations on your appointment – your commitment to the arts is widely known and respected. We wish you well in acting as a catalyst for embracing the positive change the arts can deliver, to a society that needs to heal and to believe in itself once more. Your support for our event reassures many that though economic matters are to the forefront, the just society, can not be sidelined, if we are to truly prosper as citizens, and as a nation, with something more than economy in our identity.

There are lots of good things about what we do or try to do. Firstly, in this the European Year of the Volunteer, we are entirely voluntary. This year, a staggering 81 people of all nationalities have signed up to give of their time and considerable skills in front of house, marketing and technical support. Thank you! This is by far the biggest number ever and includes volunteers from other countries, who are travelling here, at their own expense, to be a part of what we do. We acted as a dramaturg and processed 110 submissions this year – extremely good in a time of recession. These 28 plays have been selected on merit. The standard is high. Our event has settled into being an important part of the cultural calendar. It has not been an easy journey, but it is significant and important work that we do.

Rarely is an article printed on gay theatre without referencing in some way our innovation and work. Now all we have to do is to ensure it's more constructive and those quoted actually know something about what we do!

It is great too to see other interpretations of this field succeed, like Queer Notions, or gay theatre in the Dublin Fringe Festival or people who begin with us, who go throughout the country or abroad with a sense of confidence and achievement with their theatrical voices. The latest play now showing in the Project is by a young playwright Shaun Dunne who got

his first professional outing with us and was nominated at 19 for best playwright in 2009. We are building a resource network this year encouraging our plays to visit more theatres in Ireland and festivals on their way home.

I was so proud to see a production that began as a seed in our shorts programme 18 months ago triumph on the stage of the Olympia in February in 'Somewhere Under the Rainbow'. Our youngest playwright ever last year is now firmly on course to make an impact on the profession, in a leading drama school in London. Our best playwright in 2010 has had his works read off Broadway and in Canada since. We bring new voices to the stage and are not embarrassed by their rough edges. We are thrilled by the illumination new voices bring to the artistic discourse and they can do so without permission but on their own merits, in our liberating festival.

We are greatly honoured that so many companies worldwide want to be part of what we do here in Dublin. We are their partners and we will work to ensure they get a great welcome from the Irish theatre audience. They are travelling from all corners of the globe. We have our first play from South America, almost completing our global ambitions.

We are delighted to welcome the oldest established professional gay theatre company in Australia who travel with 'Sticks and Stones' joining our internet comedy blockbuster 'Buttboy and Tigger' from down under. As we lament the recent passing of pioneering gay playwright Lanford Wilson in the USA, two distinguished playwrights have given a special 'once off' permission to have their works performed in the Dublin Festival. Our reputation is gaining ground internationally and we appreciate this facility very much. We are collaborating with old friends The Actors Circle, London with the 'Little Dog Laughed' and in a new collaboration with Greenwich Theatre 'The Temperamentals' – the story of the first gay rights movement founded by US communist Harry Hay. Old friends are welcome back including 'Cloaked' a renaissance gender play about a man who was crowned and ruled as Queen Sofia starring our 2009 best actor winner Ricardo Melendez in the leading role.

We pay homage to gay Icons – Bette Davis in 'Bette/Cavett', Marilyn Monroe in 'An Actress Prepares', and the errant Lord in 'My Dearest Byron'. We have songs from Billie, Barbra, Bette, Kylie, George and Elton to name a few, and lots from musical theatre. We have rock star wannabees from Canada in 'Big In Germany'. We bring the silver screen to the stage with the adaptation of the iconic gay movie 'Mysterious Skin'.

Our commitment to new and young writing is as strong as ever, as is our commitment to women's writing and performance and to Irish theatre. Karl Watson looks at young people's relationships, boys and girls, in 'Bang Shoot Blast' and Blayne Kelly's world premiere of 'Interrogating My Mother' shows young writers are being heard and they have a lot to say. Our theatre shorts programme is entirely Irish this year, for the first time, with 'Pieter's Coming Out', 'Saliva', 'The Arrival' and 'Patty Cake' featuring in one programme in The Cobalt Cafe. Acclaimed director and our generous supporter, Michael Scott has written a moving play and it is premiering it at our festival – One – a passionate poetical love story and we are delighted to welcome him, on stage this year!

Like all other citizens, we take on the banking crisis and bring you behind the scenes of the market mentality in 'Righteous Money', and we are not afraid of the difficult subjects such as mental illness and HIV with plays from Jan Derbyshire 'Funny In the Head' and

'Lets Have Coffee 30 years Later' from Circulo Vertical from Venezuela, while Susan Jeremy gets into a right green card mess in 'Brazil Nuts'.

We would welcome more active support from the cultural departments of the various embassies. Your actors and writers go to great efforts to express their national citizenship to an international audience here in Dublin, and there needs to be a stronger manifestation of an inclusive cultural policy emanating from their countries' embassies in Ireland. For example, there is no visible change in the approach of the US embassy here to gay theatre today, than existed under George W Bush, despite the hoped for inclusiveness under our most anticipated visitor, President Barack Obama, and that is staggering! No other embassy is supporting their actors who travel to Ireland this year either, and that is a poor commentary on their pride in theatre.

Music abounds from mad-cap un PC cabaret in 'The Screw You Revue', a musical theatre West End feast 'Memoirs of A Gayshow', and in our first one woman songstress in 'Amy Sings The Icons'. We have a special film screening of Caravaggio and free events at 'April's Karaoke' in the Front Lounge and open mic at Bunny's 'Hutch' in our great supporter Pantibar. We have innovative dance with 'Giselle or I'm Too Horny to Be a Prince' and the most frenetic interactive theatre from Belt Up Productions with 'Lorca is Dead'.

I am indebted to our supporters abroad who assist me in formulating this programme, Kathleen Warnock in New York, Morten Ruda in Norway, Mark Pollard and Nick White in the UK and Dr. Kerric Harvey in the USA and many others who are always there to get a second opinion. We have a tremendously close association with the Edinburgh Fringe festival and that collaboration is important to us. This year we have also more formally linked with Queer Up North, Durham Arts Festival, and the Hereford LGB Arts festival. We have attracted tourism interest from abroad with travel agents in South Africa and Germany both offering week long tours to the Festival this year.

There is something of interest for everyone – we specialise in works that have never been seen in Ireland, comedy, music, dance and lots of drama – all for 15 euros maximum per ticket with ten euro matinees on bank holiday, Monday and Saturdays. This is an opportunity to open your eyes, in the safety of the theatre, to listen to stories of our own culture worldwide. It is possible to see the entire programme of 28 plays over the two weeks.

Whether you are young/old, straight gay, Irish or not, you are welcome to broaden your theatrical perspective, in our fortnight long intercultural dialogue, through theatre as an artform. We encourage our audience to respond to the productions and celebrate and interact each night in our busy Festival Club. At the end of the season, we will present six awards in the names of Oscar Wilde, Micheal Mac Liammoir, Eva Gore Booth, Hilton Edwards, Patrick Murray and the Dublin City Council Intercultural Dialogue award. These are of real artistic value as they are not populist controlled, but awarded by merit based adjudication.

In 2008, President Mc Aleese described our festival as helping to 'complete the cultural map of Ireland', just as acknowledging your sexual orientation completes your own identity. That has been a great challenge to us. We do not succumb to the negative predetermined, pre constructed, stereotype. If we are 'out' we are free to determine

ourselves, without becoming prisoners of the purely commercial, or apologists for tabloid sensationalist shame. We no longer need to hide behind the rainbow code that well protected endangered LGBT people in the past. In Ireland we proclaim the word 'gay' on the Quays of Dublin and we are grateful to the City Council for this important visibility and recognition. It really does impress our guests and our community! If we are free, we must as citizens proclaim and celebrate our identity and the gay theatre festival is one of the few opportunities to do so.

As gay artists and their friends, we must be generous with our gifts and contribute to the artistic discourse that often sustains a society under threat. We must be allowed to do so. The efforts we have put in to reclaim our own festival identity and financial security over the past two years, and to promote only the positive gay identity through theatre as an artform, have been supported, have endured, and have triumphed in the face of some adversity. The Arts Council actually increased our grant this year – what an important and appreciated 'shot in the arm' as we move forward, renewed by our vision and ambition. Dublin City Council Arts Office and the Integration office step up to the plate as always and Dublin Tourism certainly went the extra mile for us this year. These partners have been key to our development and long may that continue.

We have been tested repeatedly in the past seven years and when all the cheap shots are replaced by the next hot gossip item, our track record in producing 1700 performances of gay theatre, 600,000 euros of direct investment in the arts from a 10% State subsidy, introducing new voices, new writing and an appreciation of our hidden history, all voluntarily led by professional people, can not be fairly denied. The Executive has been enriched by all its members this year, including the increased presence of women through the sterling contributions of Emma Weafer, Siobhan Killen and Rachel Frayne. It is indeed timely after months of work, to celebrate all our achievements as we launch our 8<sup>th</sup> festival here this evening in the distinguished presence of you and the Minister.

We appreciate that in these times, the private sector is also under pressure, hence the innovation and welcome generosity of sponsors like our gracious hosts The Arlington Hotel and the Front Lounge, Pantibar, the James Joyce Centre, Outhouse, Brasserie 66, the Chilli Club, and we are happy to support The Children to Lapland Appeal, and all our venues, is truly welcome and vital for our continuance. The interest and support of Dublin Community TV and our media friends is equally valued. We have a secure online booking system which is now open and a daily box office from 1-3pm here in our new home – The Arlington Hotel Temple Bar.

We can not compete with mainstream commercial ad campaigns but may we rely on you to spread the word? The support of the media, online postings, our extensive mailing list, the gay and arts community is essential to the success of this year's event. We are also creating valuable employment in this strapped industry - that alone deserves effort and support. We must make the best out of very few resources and you are our best resource. Please take the time not only to spread the word now, but to keep doing so until our Gala Night on May 15<sup>th</sup>. It is vital for the industry that these professional companies can sustain their visit to Dublin financially, as like all artists, they are making great sacrifices for their opportunity to express their niche artform.

All of this began in 2004 – the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth in Dublin of Oscar Wilde. I would like to pay a tribute to all who have helped us to reach this stage in our history.

Your art, colour, insight, arguments, generosity, commitment and work have all made their mark on this unique event. My own commitment as a volunteer is 8 years old and it is fulltime and finite. My colleagues on the Board and Executive give of their time, talents and skills generously from Gerry Cleary our designer to those who are not afraid just to say a good word about us. Volunteerism is finite and I look forward very much to new perspectives guiding and driving this unique artistic endeavour in the short term. The foundation for the future has been renewed over the past two years and I encourage all who have a contribution to make to gay theatre to count on us to include you and to appreciate that contribution. Join us!

Minister, this diverse radical and innovative programme is, despite the recession, the biggest ever staged, at rock bottom prices. Our companies are our partners in this. They honour the gay and arts communities and Dublin with their work. The programme includes as many people as possible, in what will definitely be an unrivalled fortnight of good theatre and great entertainment.

Our finances are scarce, our ambitions high, our vigour renewed, our inclusiveness is at our core. It is time to celebrate a little in Dublin and in Ireland. We welcome groups and individuals from all over the country and invite you to put this festival in your schedule this May and visit us! It is time to celebrate our capacity as a city to bring diverse global cultural voices together. Gay theatre is the expression of a shared common global LGBT culture. It started here and it is thriving here in Dublin.

The 8<sup>th</sup> Dublin Gay Theatre Festival is a time to listen, laugh, cry, applaud, appreciate, discuss, remember and learn during a fortnight of first class gay theatre. It is time to showcase Dublin and Ireland as the home of quality Irish and international gay theatre. This fortnight of inclusive, great value, theatrical diversity is our recipe to lift the mood, and celebrate together an inclusive citizenship, as we make our small contribution to renewing a more just society for all our people.