

Address by Brian Merriman, Founder of the International Dublin Gay Theatre festival at the launch of the tenth anniversary programme in the Hugh Lane Gallery, Parnell Square on March 19th at 5.30pm.

Distinguished guests,

I am very honoured to be present here in the Hugh Lane Gallery to launch our tenth programme. We like to make connections in Ireland and for us not only to launch here but to stage our first performances here in May is a great link to the home of Francis Bacon.

The Gallery, like ourselves are very grateful to Dublin City Council for supporting both organisations and its great to see us linking our scarce resources together in times of economic challenge. As those of you who have listened to me over the past decade know I value shared citizenship very much. Bacon though his career was developed abroad still valued his Irishness, perhaps part of his rebellious nature in England, and we too smile when some consider our mainstream event as in some way rebellious.

True, we didn't ask permission to put this biggest event of its kind worldwide, on in Dublin, but we didn't need to – art is for everyone and all our voices are valid and all our audiences valued.

We like to feel connected. Its good to note not just the association with Francis Bacon but with Hugh Lane, whose Aunt Lady Augusta Gregory was a founder of the national theatre, which too gave a voice and a channel for it to be heard, in a time of oppression, through theatre as an artform.

We established the Festival in the 150th anniversary year of the birth of Oscar Wilde in Dublin. We find ourselves this year marking the 40th anniversary in June, of the granting of the freedom of the City of Dublin to the most famous same-sex theatrical partnership Hilton Edwards and Micheal Mac Liammoir in 1973 – a time when they were both criminals! We mark the twentieth year since decriminalisation in 1993 and today we celebrate our tenth anniversary, as we launch a programme that will pass our 2,000th performance of gay theatre in Ireland, making Dublin the recognised home of this artform worldwide.

Not a bad record for a totally voluntary action by theatre professionals, that has had an impact worldwide, in that despite the recession, we still had 100 applications from five continents this year. The programme is packed with new writing, drama, comedy, music and events celebrating the positive gay identity today and making some amends for those whose history was never fully written.

Historical characters who feature, some because of the absence of history, in an imagining, include Roger Casement and Padraig Pearse, Eva Gore Booth, Wilde, Shakespeare, Benjamin Britten, Francis Bacon, George Frederic Handel, and even a character called Daniel Boone (no relation), and hear the music of gay icons, Judy Garland, Petula Clarke, Dusty Springfield, Lulu and Liszt.

We have free events a seminar on our ten years, play readings by a Polish Irish theatre company called 'Forbidden Love' and our Patron Terrence Mc Nally's classic 'Lisbon Traviata' in the community centre Outhouse. Director Michael Scott will host free Sunday discussion sessions with Alan Amsby (Mr Pussy), Chris Rowan (Bunny), Bill Hughes, Gerry Stembridge and others. We have a wonderful children's musical adaptation of 'The Happy Prince' by a musical family – a must see for young and old alike who love Wilde's fairytales and the magic of theatre.

We host our first ever lunchtime opera here in the Hugh Lane with the Francis Bacon Opera on Tuesday and Thursday May 7th/9th at 1.00pm. It's the transcript of the famous Melvyn Bragg TV interview set to music and is a must see in the home of Bacon's studio in the daytime, and in the

nearby James Joyce Centre at night. We have more music in 'Ego Quantum' from Debussy to Liszt, and 'Judy – A Tribute' our first production from Argentina.

The programme is relevant and issue driven too. Small town attitudes are unpacked in 'American Western', 'That's Her Way' and 'Lasting Sense of Sudden'. There is a distinct lack of a costume budget in 'Strip Search' – the story of a soldier stripper, 'Handel's Cross' 'Role Play' and in 'Unsex'd' the hilarious back stage story of boy actors playing Shakespeare's female leads. We have some great comedy in 'Undutchables', 'Breda Larkin', 'Brown and Out' and the 'Irish Shorts'. We have a glimpse at life for LGBT people before criminalisation and since in 'All I Wanted was the Dream', 'Lasting Sense of Sudden' 'BRB' 'Bash – Latterday plays' and 'My Second Self'.

We have an exciting programme of new Irish writing from Alan Flanagan's 'I Run, I Sing, I Swim, I Dance' – the life of Eva Gore Booth, Derek Masterson's 'My Second Self' and short plays from Kenny Moynihan, Sonya Mulligan, Vickey Curtis, Peter Smith and myself. In short, we look at gay and lesbians, bisexuals, footballers, parents, sons and daughters, drag queens, fetish, friendship, ageism, women, prisoners, latinos, teenagers, comedians, musicians, poets, physicists, composers and straight people in 35 plays from Ireland, UK, USA, Canada, South Africa, Australia, the Netherlands and for the first time, France and Argentina and performances which included 14 short plays in three separate programmes including an entirely Latino and Irish programmes of new playwrighting.

We have a theatre legitimacy after ten years. We have had many a talented artist onstage and helped new writers on their journey. Artists like Terrence Mc Nally, Emma Donoghue, and Adrian Dunbar have lent their support. Tony award winner Brent Carver travelled to see a play from the US last year, so did Juliet Mills and Maxwell Caulfield, some cast from 'The Clinic', Alan Stanford, have all attended with too many more to mention. We have had our citizenship acknowledged by the President, members of parliament, David Norris, Katherine Zappone, and successive Lord Mayors, Paddy Bourke, Catherine Byrne, Eibhlin Byrne, Emer Costello, and Naoise O Muiri's representative today. Government Ministers Eamon Ryan and Arts Minister Jimmy Deenihan TD have all graced our launches. We are greatly honoured by your presence here today and many for the past ten years despite the length of my speeches!

We are delighted to be here in the Hugh Lane, the James Joyce Centre, Oscar Wilde's alma mater in Trinity, the ever supportive Teacher's Club and Cobalt Café – with us from Day one, the Sugar Club, the Front Lounge, Pantibar, the Exchange, Outhouse and the new Jig theatre in the Top floor of the Powerscourt Townhouse Centre. Theatre, in the city, for the citizens.

We are grateful for the support of many of these venues and indeed from the start Dublin City Council Arts Section and Failte Ireland and the Arts Council and our commercial sponsors like Darling Cocktails, the Harold's Cross Health Centre and Bombay Sapphire and our welcoming accommodation hosts the Arlington Hotels.

This recession has not mirrored the previous ones. There has been no big jump in volunteering, as many of our skilled and valued volunteers have emigrated since the last festival. We are still entirely dependent and grateful for those who volunteer to help us and are delighted at the diversity of those who do so. We have volunteers travelling to the festival from abroad, to lend a much needed hand again this year.

The recession is hitting and we acknowledge the huge investment the individual companies are making to come to Dublin. They need an audience. At the height of the boom the average audience member booked five plays – they now book 1.5 plays. To combat this, we have grown our audience base and have taken initiatives to encourage and facilitate tourism. The ticket prices are accessible and people should book one a week, from now on www.gaytheatre.ie and not look to try to find all the money necessary in festival fortnight. We have few advertising resources, so we once again rely on you to spread the word and are proud to launch today our brochure designed by the ever talented Gerry Cleary as his massive and generous contribution to the festival.

Each year we have a great technical team who help stage all these visiting plays with skill and creativity. Each year we have people help with the organisation at the Executive level, fundraising, pr, volunteer co-ordination etc. I have had the honour of leading this and the artistic direction for the past ten years. I am exhausted and we have brought this event thus far with literally no resources at all. We have no back-up assistance in meeting the demands and expectations of audience and companies, when they see a festival of this calibre and scale. It runs from my front room and I have been sitting in a chair since mid November to today, six hours a night often seven days a week.

If the Festival, which is a roaring success, is to continue on, we need help and that is why this year, as announced last year, it is my final term as Chairman of the Organising committee. There have been many that could take over, but most have emigrated, the others see the amount of work involved and have infinitely more sense than myself. If the festival can find a new organising Chair, then I will remain as the Artistic Director in the short term. If not, despite the demand and its success, this could be the last one, which I would regret greatly. This has always been a small team effort led by my co-director Gareth Hurley and the Executive. It is not and can not be a one man band. I appeal to someone to carry the torch into a new decade of creativity and impact, that will keep our home in Dublin at the centre of this innovative and growing artform.

When Ireland is now debating whether it will give permission to all its consenting loving adult couples to marry or maintain the exclusion of some who happen to be committed to someone of the same sex, it is clear there is a job to be done to liberate the citizenry and to celebrate the differences that make for a respectful and vibrant society. I am delighted that the Festival has made a submission on equal marriage to the Constitutional Convention as we have explored that many times on stage.

There are new voices to be heard, new stories to be told, new audiences to entertain and inform, new assertion of our citizenship and our complete identity in theatre as an artform. We have a great programme and a great team. Some companies are investing in our work for the first time and travelling thousands of miles, others are returning from long distances as this festival is their one validation in a year of creativity. It is open to everyone – it is not an event for one community unless you call it the inclusive community of this city and this country.

To those who support us, and especially from the start ten years ago – please celebrate your own vision and contribution. To those who would wish us well, but exclude themselves from the programme – join us. To those who don't, open your eyes, life is a lot more colourful and meaningful than often summarised. We are in an artistic dialogue with the mainstream through theatre. We have always urged people not to attend just because it is 'gay theatre but to attend because it is good theatre'. It is – it is Irish and international. It is important. Stories, as told in these new plays, complete the cultural map of every country, but this is a country where they will be heard.

I have always challenged that is it not acceptable to 'laud the art and loath the artist'. We as a country have benefitted greatly from the heroism of Casement and Pearse and the art of Bacon, Edwards, Mac Liammoir, Wilde, Gore Booth and Handel even after they passed. That will not happen again, because we now live in a time where the artist can be who he or she is. At last more people can tell your truth through theatre and the arts, which acknowledge and values their complete identity and citizenship. The times have changed and the more we pursue our intercultural dialogue through gay theatre as an artform, the more we liberate art and the diverse society in which it is presented and appreciated.

I am very proud to thank you for a decade of creativity and support. I am honoured to present and commend to you the work of our Irish and international artists in this the programme of the tenth International Dublin Gay theatre festival from May 6-19th. Tell your fiends the box office is now open on www.gaytheatre.ie!