



**Address by Brian Merriman, Founder of the International Dublin Gay Theatre Festival at the launch of its 9<sup>th</sup> programme on March 28<sup>th</sup> 2012 at the Arlington Hotel, Temple Bar.**

Senator, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Times have changed and it is important, in the face of very tough times, that we still pause and recognise the positive changes that have occurred to make living in Ireland better today, than previously. The LGBT community is testimony to that. It is a great delight to us to have **Senator Katherine Zappone** here with us today to launch the festival programme. Senator Zappone along with her spouse **Anne Louise Gilligan** stood up to challenge the law, as it continued to discriminate against gay people who are married. Their leadership and courage is typical of the open and generous contribution gay people are making to the human rights agenda, which does and will make Ireland, a good place to live. We are honoured by her presence today.

On stage we are used to putting stories under the microscope. Good characterisation requires that we pry into all elements, the good and the bad, that make up the human psyche. Then we write and perform that analysis into a role or character, using these sometimes unseen or un-admitted attributes, to tell a story – an honest one.

Audiences love to be privy to the inside track. We are curious as to what makes a person tick, or a relationship work or how a love story unfolds. It's a totally different matter however, when you are being discriminated against, and the only way to assert your rights is to challenge the law and state your case in open Court. Here the public pries and you endure every element of your dearly held relationship being cross examined and reported upon in the media – its beyond bravery – but it brings about change – the enquiry is deeply personal – the result generously beneficial to all. That is exactly what Katherine's and Anne Louis's leadership achieved for many. We were delighted Katherine that you were appointed to Seanad Eireann becoming the first female representative of our LGBT community joining our esteemed patron **David Norris** and our two first time elected TDS **Dominic Hannigan**, whom we also welcome today, and **John Lyons** – the times they are changing.

Most particularly your work on human rights and your egalitarian perspective is what is needed in a politic that embeds a mantra that money is the only way to improve the quality of life. There is another way – you can treat people better - by validating their

citizenship through a culture of rights and respect. This is part of the ethos and mission statement that drives our event as we make a small contribution to that international debate. Our **President Michael D Higgins** this week reminded us of the nasty consequences of homophobia. It says a lot about Ireland to have the benefit of such insightful leadership and guidance – it's a theme we explore in this years programme.

This visible Oireachtas ‘invasion’ of LGB representatives happened in a year when the first generation of young Irish LGBT people reached the age of consent, not having been born a criminal. It also happened in the year when a form of our loving partnership, was finally legalised, leading to most in society already calling civil partnership - ‘marriage’, helping once more to reach the final equality ambition of equal rights for all. The notion that one section of society can prevent a fellow citizen from marrying is still shocking in a modern pluralist, republican democracy – as the people support equal marriage in opinion polls. We are glad you and many other decent representatives are in an important position to be heard when the Constitutional review begins to bring about a new Constitution that will give true meaning to all our children being born and treated equally.

This visible democratic ‘revolution’ in the Oireachtas, is much more than tokenism. These public representatives will do their job on behalf of the citizens and they also happen to be members of our community. They will be judged for once on their merits, not on their labels. This is yet another example of the leaps and bounds Ireland has made to undo the constructed shame imposed upon and endured by previous gay generations. That deliberately constructed shame, by the collaboration of Church and State, denied the fulfilment of the decent lives, the contribution of talents, and the secure foundation of family life, to so many LGBT people in the past. This truly shameful stain on our national identity is now being remedied. It is not all sunshine ahead, but it would be foolish not to acknowledge the great leap forward, unimaginable over a decade, and decades ago. And, has the sky fallen in because people can validate their love in the midst of family, friends and the law? No, it just means that there are more people happier, more young people can shape a future together, more families can celebrate the love of a son, daughter, brother, sister, father or mother. More people care and more people are included in the Republic of equals as it heads towards 2016.

It is the telling of stories through this artform, that offers the real counter balance to the untruth of constructed shame. In that, the International Dublin Gay Theatre Festival has played an important role. We have provided the platform for stories to be told, for people to write, perform and hear them and to discuss them in the safety of theatre. We bring to Dublin and for Dublin, national and international audiences to be entertained, to artistically express themselves, to learn, to network, to know and to understand. This recessionary year, we will stage **147** performances, by **83** performers in **22** new plays, **16** free events, over **14** days, in **8** venues, from **7** countries, in **2** new weekly programmes with **1** great diverse audience. We will edge towards our **1800<sup>th</sup>** performance as we aim to surpass out 2,000<sup>th</sup> performance in our tenth anniversary year in 2013.

What we have discovered is significant. Discrimination has common characteristics. The constructed shame is unimaginatively similar and narrow, be it from Church or State. There are six states that still have the death penalty for being gay and we Irish still do business with them. We are not an ethnic minority, our children are straight and gay just like our parents were, but we do have a common cultural identity that transcends national, religious and ethnic boundaries. We have a common culture which, as you will

experience in our diverse programme, needs no ‘translation’ whether the story is Irish, British, German, American, Canadian, South African or Australian as this year’s programme features. ‘**Lilies**’ coming from the UK is a fine example. The interaction of the secrecy of the Catholic Church and what went on behind closed doors in a seminary in 1912, explodes in a dramatic prison re-enactment of the life of St Sebastien in the Irish premiere of ‘Lilies’ – a Canadian play in a UK production - not to be missed.

In 2012, women finally come of age in IDGTF. Lesbian storytelling through theatre as an art form, still lurks in the shadows. Women write many books but rarely write plays. This year we turn the lights on! It has been a gradual emergence, led by the patronage of **Emma Donoghue**, the Ambassadorship of **Kathleen Warnock** and the naming of one of our annual awards in honour of **Eva Gore Booth**, playwright and human rights activist, culminating this year in the broadest programme ever.

**Mary Renault** the inspiring South African writer first explored gay themes by her writings on ancient Greece. In the Artscape production of Juliet Jenkin’s ‘**Mary & The Conqueror**’ we parallel her life and Alexander the Great’s with their partners in a return to the Festival by this talented company from Cape Town. We go from history to stand-up comedy with ‘**The F\*cking World According to Molly**’, to love being uncovered by a violent homophobic act in ‘**Stop Kiss**’, to the challenges that face many who try to endure depression, prompted by constructed shame, in ‘**Half a Person**’, to comedy in ‘**Womb Service**’, through iconic music from female vocal legends in the ‘**Queen B’s**’, to a magical wand bringing a family of women together in ‘**Outlook**’, the HIV stories of families and friends in **Elegies** and the world premiere coming out story of TV star Eilish O Carroll, daughter of a Labour party TD in ‘**Live, Love, Laugh**’. They are joined with our women writers, directors and producers Vickey Curtis and Ranae Von Meding, Lucy Danser, Susan Winter, Hazel Cullen, Lisa Saleh, Juliet Jenkin, Diane Son, our prolific and unequalled US ambassador, writer, Kathleen Warnock and our technical team led by Siobhan Killen and Ciara Nolan.

We do not segregate our programmes. Theatre is for all, but we would like to boost our female audiences and to encourage them to do as the men do – attend the entire programme. It is also noticeable how ethnically diverse our audience is. We are finally attracting tourists! But at home, like the LGBT community itself, we are very welcoming of foreign nationals living in Dublin. Straight or gay, they are comfortably drawn to this welcoming and inclusive festival which celebrates identity. Foreign nationals make up over 25% of our audience and are a valued, hard working cohort of our volunteers corps as we have a German (Jan), Belgian (Annick) and Pole (Dominik) on our Executive Committee as well as a guy from Galway! Our Festival manager Callum Cheatle is from the UK via Kenya!

Gay theatre is good theatre and it is diverse. There is some wonderful music ahead in ‘**Memoirs of a Gayshow – the Sequin**’, ‘**Elegies for Punks, Angels and Raging Queens**’ the uplifting songs of HIV from Bottom Dog in Limerick, New York’s Michael Lynch, singer/songwriter ‘**Living on the Real**’, Filmstar Lionel Jeffries’ son Ty in ‘**Miss Hope Springs**’, 2011 sell out Amy Fearon’s tribute to Barbra, Bette and Billie – ‘**The Queen B’s**’, and in our Gala concert and awards ceremony.

We had over 80 submissions worldwide this year and had we more resources, spaces and assistance, more plays would be here. We thank the international theatre community, especially the **Edinburgh Fringe Festival**, for recognising our Festival as the biggest of its kind in the world. We salute Dublin, the birthplace of **Oscar Wilde**, the

creative cradle of **Edwards and Mc Liammoir** in previous centuries, for welcoming and now hosting this 21<sup>st</sup> century unique event, at a time when gay writers are flourishing in their complete identity, like award winning writer/actor **Mark O Halloran** and the Abbey stages being graced by '**I Heart Alice**', and a new Irish musical '**Alice in Funderland**' by **Phillip Mac Mahon** this April. Bon chance!

We have our own Irish led programme this year, one of the strongest ever, with very varied themes. It is the **European year of Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations** and we do this very nicely indeed in the Festival! TG4 star **Cillian O Donnachdha** explores the present and previous impact of decriminalisation on a older gay man and his new young lodger in the world premier of '**Aul Divina and Me/I**'. **Peter Tate's 'Odd Man Out'** in the shorts programme is a wonderful study of an older man and isolation. **Eilish O Carroll's 'Live, Love, Laugh'** already our leading selling show, though not old, deals with coming out somewhat later in life.

As our President has warned this week, young people are still not safe from bullying, suicide or physical or mental violence. '**My Funny Valentine**' is based on the true story of a 15 year old boy who sent his classmate a valentine card. The other boy shot and killed him. '**Rock n Wrestle**' is a hilarious, alternative look at mental health challenges for the young, told through rap and comedy. '**Between**' coming from Germany via South Africa is a trilogy of stories dealing with adolescence and emerging sexual identity.

Sexual orientation and gender identity are entirely separate. Yet, because we have endured a similar negative culture, we embrace each other in empathy and solidarity forming the LGBT community. We share the common cause for human rights and the destruction of our masculinity or femininity in the name of heterosexism. We share the experience of imposed labels. This year there may be another important milestone for a Republic that values equally all its citizens. We hope to see the first **Gender Recognition Act** becoming law, undoing the harm of ignorance, obstinacy and hurt of many decades on the bravest community of people you will ever encounter. To celebrate this imminent event, we look at gender identity through many lenses.

'**Rachel's Café**' is a true story of a married trans woman, who could only live her true life, in her all welcoming café in another town. '**Living on the Real**' explores in song, what it was like to be effeminate and black in New York. Theatrical transvestism also appears in Drag which has long been an associated artform in theatre from Shakespeare to the present day. It features in the Irish play '**Aul Divina**'. We are delighted to welcome back sell out, comedy legends '**Drags Aloud**' from Australia and to welcome Kris Dal Vayse here today. We introduce UK cabaret star 'Miss Hope Springs' all adding some much needed colour in bleak economic times. All contributing to a celebration of the many aspects that make up gender and identity and sexuality, masculinity and feminism on the rainbow map of the modern world.

**Drama** continues to drive the Festival with '**Lilies**', '**Stop Kiss**', '**My Funny Valentine**', '**Between**', '**Odd Man Out**', '**Rachels Café**', '**Aul Divina**', and '**Mary & The Conqueror**'. Comedy triumphs in '**The World According to Molly**', '**No Fats No Femmes**' - our first 'bear' play, '**Live, Love, Laugh**', '**Tonight's the Night**' – our Irish short, '**Drags Aloud**' and '**Miss Hope Springs**'.

Proudly, the **Irish contingent** is strong and healthy from drama to music to comedy presenting many world premieres, which is exactly what the ethos of this cultural event is trying to achieve. From its consistent presence in the shorts programme with **Kenny Moynihan/Lynn Raftery's** new comedy '**Don't press pause because Tonight's the Night**', **Cillian O Donnachdha's** '**Aul Divina and Me/I**', a new sequel to '**Memoirs of a**

**Gayshow - the Sequin!**', '**The Queen B's**', '**Half a Person**', '**Live Love Laugh**' and '**Elegies**'. It's a wonderful proud line-up of Irish artistry this year.

I have led this event for the past nine years, but it would never have achieved anything if others were not generous enough to share the dream of making Dublin the international home of gay theatre. We have earned our spurs, survived our earthquakes and presented almost **1,800 performances** in the city, where in living memory, the City Council has evolved from trying to shut down the Project Arts centre for showing a gay play in the 1970s, to being the best City Council to support the holding of such an event, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our flags will grace the quays again this year and we are very grateful for the small, but vital financial support, from its innovative Arts Office, and from Failte Ireland, once again this year. I am delighted the Sunday Business Post has joined us as a media partner this year – thank you. Everything we do is voluntary. There is a small but dedicated team on the Board, it's hard working Executive and in its front of house, technical, pr, marketing and distribution teams, that are the rock upon which this event survives. I salute your generosity and your belief that by telling our stories through theatre as an artform, we are helping to complete the cultural map of Ireland.

Resources are at an all time low. My own, after 9 years, are depleting and I have indicated that next year – our tenth anniversary will be my final year. I appeal for secure resources to support the continuation of this unique event – celebrated abroad and creepingly so at home! This year, we inspired a young participant of previous years, to intern with us as Festival Manager. **Callum Cheatle** came to us from the Durham Arts Festival, and without his input, there would be no event this year. We do need administrative help and his generosity, commitment and talent has made an impossible task, possible. I remain unaware of any other similar employment creation events, to be so consistently unsupported, resources wise. We have so little funding that we truly do depend on the 'kindness of strangers'. They soon become our friends and the relationship between the **Arlington Hotels** and ourselves is warm, supportive, cooperative and truly valued. They can not do enough for us and our box office will once again take up their lobby space this year – thank you. Small businesses have come to our rescue with support this year and I welcome on board **Reinkarnated Tattoos**, **Harolds Cross Health Clinic**, **Bradburys** and **Brasseries 66**, aswell as **Pantibar**, **The Front Lounge** and **Speak Easy** bars for facilities and support. The **James Joyce Centre** once again supports us so well with their wonderful space, building our north city theatre hub with the **Cobalt Cafe**, **Teachers Club** and **Pantibar**.

This event remains as a fringe event, now purely because of the paucity of available resources. We have proven our worth. A streamlined programme of **22** plays will be produced this fortnight in Dublin that otherwise may not have graced a stage, employed an actor and thrilled an audience. We have placed Dublin as a centre of gay theatre and gay theatre itself is on the map as a concept and a valid theatrical and social, cultural identity here. Now we need you to support this event to get us through to our tenth and my final year. Audience is vital. We do not segregate. Men and women, young, old, straight and gay, open your eyes to the stories of your brothers and sisters. About half of our audience, and of our performers, writers and crew are gay – the rest share our requirement for good theatre and are most welcome. This is not just an exclusive event for our wonderful supporters in the LGBT community and they respect that – this is an artistic event for the theatre community at home and abroad – it is for Dublin, our arts, our city and all it's people and beyond.

This living intercultural dialogue is vital if the progress noted earlier is to build and to be understood. It is a relevant artistic contribution to developing new voices, new writing and performance opportunities in theatre in this severe recession. It is inclusive and uplifting. We also bring people to Ireland, actors, writers, crew and audience. We showcase the best in established and emerging Irish talent. We want our visitors to bring our Irish productions back home to their audiences. We place the experience of **Irish LGBT culture** at the heart of the international intercultural dialogue that is necessarily challenging, confrontational, entertaining, informative, educational and personal.

Help us to spread the word that so many Irish and visiting artists will perform two separate weekly programmes of great value, gay themed theatre, music and comedy from May 7 – 20th. Like our Facebook page. Book tickets for **10 euros matinees or 13/15 euros** performances 8pm and 9.30pm performances.

Join us at the nightly free Festival Clubs, at the LGBT community group '**Acting Out's**' play reading or at our seminar on gay theatre – all for free. Thanks to incredible voluntary effort, led by Company Secretary Gareth, and Board members Emma and Francis, to new recruits Joe and Jen, and considerable artistic endeavour at home and abroad, we have yet again produced a diverse and credible programme of good theatre – gay theatre – from May 7<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> next. All we need now is an audience!

For further information please contact Brian Merriman on 0876573732, [info@gaytheatre.ie](mailto:info@gaytheatre.ie) or for full programme details: [www.gaytheatre.ie](http://www.gaytheatre.ie)

Ends.