



(<http://thehonestulsterman.tumblr.com>)



(http://hum(4g).tnc//f(4a)(4d)sp//p(4a)(4g).tnc//p(4nse)(4g).tnc//o(4use)(4g)tnc//p(4ndwest
Features

Select Edition

Page 1 of 8

March 2018 following the international tour of *Scorch* (premiered in 2015 at the MAC in Belfast), Gregg's critically-acclaimed monologue play exploring the politics of gender non-conformity through the lens of a legal case of 'gender fraud'. What our conversation reveals, and what makes Gregg's work as a playwright from Northern Ireland so interesting, is an ethic of questioning those who would pass judgement upon others they refuse to understand. As Kes, the gender non-conforming protagonist of *Scorch*, tells the audience: "it's just as likely you are all aliens, and I am the earthling. There's just more of you." [3]

Like many of her female contemporaries, including Lisa McGee and Abbie Spallen, Gregg's career has been shaped as much by the theatrical tastes of Dublin and London than the North. Her career to date reflects the push and pull of creative experimentation and established notions of what 'Irish drama' is supposed to look like. It was at the University of Cambridge that she wrote her first play *Ismene* (2006), a play inspired by the McCartney sisters that followed in the established tradition of Northern writers adapting Greek drama to address issues relating to the 'Troubles' and its aftermath. [4] Despite beginning with the familiar, Gregg's breakthrough successes were the product of a failure to get more ambitious work produced. In 2009 she wrote *Shibboleth*, a Brechtian exploration of masculine anger and the socio-economic forces contributing to the expansion of Belfast's 'interface barriers'. The play failed to find a home, perhaps because it constituted a rare critique of the social and economic inequalities that underwrite the post-Agreement settlement. Gregg instead wrote two pieces that cleaved closer to the established tastes of Dublin and London audiences. *Perve* (2011), described here by Gregg as "the most commercial thing" she had written at that stage, avoided the North entirely in its realist exploration of moral panic about the impact of pornography on the sexualisation of children. *Lagan* responded to the penchant in London for Irish monologue drama. A poetic survey of contemporary Belfast life, the play consisted of a series of interweaving plots, with characters voicing their interior monologues via direct address. Not only did these productions launch Gregg's career, but they paved the way for work of formal and thematic ambition, including a science fiction play *Override* (Watford Palace Theatre, 2013) and *I'm Spilling My Heart Out Here* (National Theatre Connections, 2013), a play for young audiences. *Shibboleth* was finally produced in updated form in 2015 when Abbey director Fiac Mac Conghail launched a programme of writing about the North. Produced alongside Owen McCafferty's *Quietly* (2015), Jimmy McAleavey's *Monsters, Dinosaurs, Ghosts* (2015) and David Ireland's *Cyprus Avenue* (2016), it was the only play in the series to be written by a woman. Remarkably *Scorch* (2015) was the first of Gregg's plays to receive its premiere in her hometown, thanks in large part to the emergence of the Outburst Queer Arts Festival, an annual event which has since its inception has pushed the boundaries between queer performance, live art, and drama.

The play that perhaps exemplifies Gregg's theatrical practice is her most troublesome: *Shibboleth*. Centring on a group of brickies tasked with extending an interface barrier in their local community, it is a play about the kind of sectarian and gender based resentment that can develop amongst those who have seen little of the credit-driven prosperity that has reshaped central Belfast. Produced and set in times of austerity, and in the wake of the 2013 Loyalist Flags Protests, the play could not have been less austere, and it is easy to see why it was regarded initially as too expensive. Gregg placed a ten foot 'peace wall' centre stage and gave it a persona of its own, voiced in operatic, female form. It is the sympathetic interactions between The Wall and the men onstage that Gregg figures the false promise of xenophobia and misogyny. Underpaid and precariously employed, those onstage understand the limitations of Northern Ireland's social, political and economic 'normalisation'. A local councillor argues that, in lieu of state support, the 'peace walls' will ensure the growth of land value and tourism, the benefits of which will "trickle down" to the rest of the community. As one member of the group saltily replies: "trickle down my arse". [5] Hijacking this discontent, the Wall re-emerges as Capital in seductive guise, a force that feeds on such anger, binding the group to its interests through the promise of protection from the outside threats of migrants and "themens" over the wall. Here xenophobia, prejudice, male anger are not backdated to the sins of previous generations, but are symptoms of the post-Agreement settlement itself. However, despite this rather pessimistic account, the over-the-top form of the play itself embodies some degree of hope. Its refusal of moderation and modesty is reflected one the children of the brickies: Darren, who has just been enrolled in an integrated school by his father. Throughout the play he stands out for his irrepressible desire to dance, sing and generally perform. It is a desire snuffed out in Darren's elder counterparts, either as a waste of time or in homophonic terms as "gay". To use your body in a way that is not productive in a narrowly economic sense is to fall short of the expectations capitalism (and the need to work) ties to masculinity. But Darren persists despite judgment, and by the end of the play he comes to model the theatrical ideal Gregg hints at in the following interview: that of the performing arts as embodying the possibility a different, queerer post-conflict future, one in which success is not measured simply in terms of normality, efficiency and productivity.

Since 2015 Gregg has gone on to work on additional single authored pieces: the Abbey produced her play *Josephine K and the Algorithms* for the 2016 Dublin Theatre Festival and in 2017 *The Guardian* commissioned a short film, *Your Ma's a Hard Brexit*, an exploration of the impact of leaving the European Union on Northern Ireland. But like many performance practitioners from working class backgrounds, Gregg continues to face the difficult task of maintaining a sense of joy and abandon in an industry defined by a lack of resources and an oversupply of talent. Out of frustration, she recently wrote: "It's become a bit of a running joke among my friends that I regularly denounce "theatre" and retire." [6] Under austerity the arts in Northern Ireland have undergone another wave of economisation. Funders expect artists to 'do less with more', an axiom that is reflective of a broader trend in cultural policy of achieving economic and cultural development through arts as a relatively low cost way of attracting inward investment, stimulating tourism, and driving consumption. [7] Competition over scarce resources has come to enforce the principles of efficiency and value for money upon theatre practitioners, tying them closer to such hegemonic political-economic aims. Rather than retiring from the theatre, however, Gregg has carefully negotiated a system that, in the words of Brecht, increasingly exploits "the brainwork (in this case music, literature, criticism, etc.) of brainworkers in order to gratify the appetites of their audience organisations". [8] She has of course diversified her output by working as a writer on television series such as *The Innocents* (2018) and embarking upon socially

Genevieve Jagger

(prose/the-hypnotists)

 **Observatory**

(observatory)



HUMAN ARCHIVE

The HUMAN ARCHIVE!

(observatory/human-archive)

engaged theatrical work, but she has done so with a Brechtian emphasis upon the role of theatrical reflexivity in unsettling the instrumentalization of cultural production. In 2019 she developed *Inside Bitch* at the Royal Court with live artist Deborah Pearson and Lucy Edkins, Jennifer Joseph, TerriAnn Oudjar and Jade Small, a group of female former prisoners. Rather than following the conventions of prison drama, the play saw the performers devise onstage a version of those shows, such as *Orange is the New Black*, that circulate commodified, inaccurate and clichéd versions of carceral experience. The production was designed to provoke its audience into questioning how theatre is implicated in exploiting the apparently authentic stories of vulnerable people in a way that glamorizes a deeply flawed prison system.

Interviews with artists such as Gregg offer a nuanced perspective on the notion that cultural work has come “to resemble that of the sub-contractor”. [9] Conducted in the context of research rather than evaluation, they can give us an insight into the complex of material conditions under which the writing and production of theatre takes place, and the ways artists negotiate their instrumentalization as “brainworkers”. It was Raymond Williams who first urged cultural historians to look at art not as a series of objects but as the outcome of those social practices through which they are conceived, produced and received. [10] Sitting down with Gregg in 2018 helped me, at least, to understand the significance of the crucible of political and economic pressures out of which her work has emerged. This kind of insight strikes me as particularly important at a time when funding for the arts is again under threat, this time thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Gregg’s narrative of her creative process and career the pressure of such circumstances on theatrical form and content becomes apparent. Our conversation raises questions concerning the latitude for experimentation in a context where to ‘make it’ as a Northern Irish playwright often means getting produced in London and Dublin. The interview makes clear that, though leaving Belfast broadened Gregg’s artistic horizons, enabling her to come into contact with cultural forms and opportunities unavailable in the North, like many of her contemporaries this mobility wasn’t without the risk of compromising with established tastes, particularly where a certain forms of theatre remain synonymous with ‘Irishness’. It is precisely this dynamic of mobility that animates her work, whether in the opening scene of *Lagan* where a closeted gay student returns home to his conservative Belfast family, or in the cultural hybridity of *Agnieszka*, the Belfast-born child of a Polish father, in *Shibboleth*. Appropriately Gregg refers to the form of *Lagan* as “a halfway house”: somewhere between the more recognisable Irish monologue and her preference for multi-vocal, expressionist plays. Ultimately the interview reveals that, while the relations between form, content and social history are never straightforward, their complex interaction can illuminate how artists from Northern Ireland have carved out spaces of creativity, both at home and elsewhere.

— — —

Alexander Coupe: What continuities do you see across your work?

Stacey Gregg: It’s always a weird thing to try and analyse your own work, so forgive me if it’s a bit unreconstructed. I’ve realised that my body of work often looks at language. I think that part of that comes from the fact that I’m from a non-academic, working class background and access to education and a presumption of eloquence troubled me, particularly in the rarefied, quite bourgeois world of theatre. Quite often I seek to question that as an assumption. Obviously a play like *Shibboleth* addresses head on how language can unite and divide or transmit violence, literally or symbolically. It really bothers me when people from an educated, bourgeois background eviscerate someone who has a good intention but has used the wrong language. I think I am probably particularly sensitive to that because I’m queer, and so language is very sensitive around those things. The older generation often get it wrong but it doesn’t mean that they’re bigots. I feel really impatient with that attitude. So *Shibboleth* is very much rooted in a working class context, and also that addresses the suicide rate among young men, and young working class men in Belfast have a disproportionately high suicide rate. Inarticulacy and aphasia is... for me one of the challenges of writing for theatre has been how to do you make the inarticulate heard.

AC: How is the performing body working in relation to voicing inarticulacy?

SG: It’s a bit like listening to music: what listening to music is to other forms of art. It’s seeing the body before language, so on a really base level, the one thing that live art and theatre can still do is present you with a living, breathing body, and that’s the first thing that you engage with, and then secondarily what comes out of the mouth. I never want my work to be a mouthpiece for the playwright, even though there’s an inevitability to that, but I wanted to present something that is porous and polyphonic and ideally not trying to impart some truth.

I like messy bodies as well. I’m not interested in tidy, stiff performance. I think if you’re representing young people there’s an even greater onus to be truthful to that sense of possibility and potential and spontaneity and mess; beautiful, glorious mess!

AC: Talking about possibility and mess... perhaps we could go back to how you began to write, or started as a theatre maker. Were you kicking against something?

SG: I think not consciously, and I’ve come to understand better through the process experience and exposure the kind of work that I’m interested in and how to make it. Starting out I probably wasn’t versed enough or experienced enough to know what I was kicking against. In fact there was a blissful ignorance in many ways. So the way that I started and the expressionistic quality to some of my work wasn’t trained out of me.

AC: Do you think there’s more acceptance for experimental work in Northern Ireland from when you started out?

SG: I think things have changed, I do, for lots of reasons. If you look at what the big arbiters of taste are programming, there's a lot more live art and experimental work going on, particularly in London. Not to make it hierarchical, but there's a kind of ripple effect around what's considered mainstream or normative. So I do think things have changed. But of course it cyclical and we'll probably have a wave of realist theatre soon. In Northern Ireland I think things like the Outburst [Queer Arts] Festival inviting a lot of queer acts and cabaret acts has had an effect of opening out what theatre is possible. I love the idea that had I had the opportunity to go and see a play like *Scorch* as a teenager it might have been a very different journey. I'm really excited by that.

AC: Now for a boring question. I don't want to be deterministic, but as a practitioner who grew up in a particular part of Belfast from a Protestant background, do you feel like that influenced you taking up theatre?

SG: I think I was always difficult and there was nothing in my background that pointed to theatre. There were more obstacles than encouragement in terms of going to theatre and being exposed to it. For example the only theatre group that existed at the time was on the other side of town and had fees, and my parents said I couldn't go. And being in school plays I tortured my parents and lied about where I was so I could be in a play because my parents had been working all week and didn't have the time. Not to judge them at all: they were two working parents! It's just when I hear the encouragement other people got, that wasn't something that I had.

I'm always really careful about this stuff because I don't want to make assumptions. By and large there was an appreciation of culture and the arts among my nationalist, Irish friends that just didn't exist in my unionist, loyalist background. There was a lot of mistrust about all that stuff. It's like: if that's your thing then we're going to be against it. Which isn't to say that there isn't a great and rich heritage. All those fantastic Anglo-Irish and Protestant artists. But perhaps at my intersection of class and loyalism there was a particular suspicion of the arts.

My encounter with theatre was ultimately literary. I read plays and the plays I read were the likes of [Harold] Pinter, Sarah Kane, [Steven] Berkoff, I was drawn to the wilder sort of in-yer-face expressionism. I've always instinctively been drawn to disruption. The theatre that I'd read about but that I hadn't seen was work that was really challenging and poetic and concerned with ideas and dissonance.

AC: Theatre historians like these questions but it's never neat to think about where you fit into a tradition.

SG: I think my first love was language, and that's what I mean about the literary. But along side that I encountered conceptual art. In my art class I found something about the Saatchi *Sensation* exhibition and I always remember it was an exciting moment. I thought all art was conceptual! So that was my starting point: the visual and the conceptual and in terms of the language and literary things, in the poetic. I've never been particularly interested in realism or naturalism or literalism. It was the convergence of those things. Little did I know I was fitting into some kind of tradition.

AC: We tend to think of influences only in terms of theatre, but you've touched on some non-theatrical influences here. Are there any wider influences on your work?

SG: I can only talk in generalisations, but I think I never set out and was never interested in being a career playwrights. I wanted to make art. So my interest in poetry, visual art, conceptual art: all those were there before I contemplated writing for theatre. A lot of my trajectory has been a journey of resistance. The first thing I had produced was *Perve* which was the most commercial thing I'd written to that point. It was a bit of a... poisoned chalice is too strong a term... mixed bag is probably better, in the sense that it was great because it launched my career. I subsequently then was expected to write in that form and that tone. I didn't realise that and I'm not cut out at working in institutions or in the narrow confines and machinery of commissioning. This sounds really wanky but it's literally the truth: I was really pursuing the sublime. I loved poetry and was fascinated by the sublime in photography because it was so immediate. I didn't want to sit about for three hours to figure out what a play was about, or be told or whatever else: that experience wasn't ever on my radar. It seemed really obvious to me when I started writing that it should have some kind of conceptual framework and that it should somehow operate like poetry, or somehow transcend: so the idea of a body coming apart halfway through a play, for example, was obvious to me and I couldn't understand why anybody else had questions! And that's never gone away. I still don't understand theatre that doesn't reach beyond the literal because we've got Netflix. Not to judge anyone's taste, but personally I don't get it.

Certainly when I first started writing there was a cynical weariness in London with all the Irish monologues. I never understood it because the best of that writing is so alchemical and intimate and transcendental. I was always told when I was starting out "oh no, direct address, don't break the fourth wall" and all these weird rules. For me that is fundamental to most of the work that I do and I have always done it almost without realising because you're unsettling the contract with the audience. You're saying: "I don't want you to just sit back and be told something, you need to acknowledge the artifice of this moment and work a little bit harder thinking about why we're here." And I think the best monologues do that.

AC: You started to write *Shibboleth* in 2009 but, after failing to get that produced, turned to *Lagan*. In *Lagan* you were trying to do something unconventional with the monologue. What motivated this decision to turn towards such a form?

SG: I was not that interested in monologue plays, because I was too busy ripping limbs of people and writing eleven handers, of which *Shibboleth* was one. But I wasn't being produced, and I was pretty bummed out even though I kept being told I had lots of promise and so on... So I went to Berlin, sat down and wrote *Perve*. I wrote it very quickly in a week and it got programmed. I

suppose it was the pressure to at least address the fact that I was never going to get my 15 hander plays produced: was there something to write that was kind of a halfway house.

Lagan had started as dialogue and modernist short stories and *Shibboleth* was at that stage a draft and I had basically a bit of a breakdown just before *Perve* was programmed because by that stage I had written five plays and hadn't had any produced and they had passed on *Shibboleth* initially. I didn't know what I was doing and I was broke. For *Lagan* I wanted to make it as immediate as possible and I had already the nuggets of things I found quite fascinating and challenging in the stories. It wasn't a big step to weave them together. I some of the parts of *Lagan* to be greater than a naturalistic monologue. I wanted to somehow (and this was very ambitious) I wanted to invoke the sound and the feel and the clamour and the dissonance of what it felt like to be in post-conflict Belfast. So that was the ambition of that, even as I was aware I was writing in a more traditional form than I had up to that point. Meanwhile *Shibboleth* was just in the drawer; *Shibboleth* had also instinctively come from knowing that I wanted to hear the poetry of the voices and to try and go after that sublimely poetic thing: how can you evoke something for the audience the somehow transcends the words.

AC: So it is about the sound and affect of language rather than simply communicating?

SG: Exactly. Some people found *Lagan* too dense or not narrow enough, and of course it was never designed to do those things. There was no sense of some kind of satisfying formulaic tale. I wanted to evoke a feeling, after Faulkner or Woolf. And there's something out-of-body about *Lagan* that I still feel when I re-read it, and the same way with *Shibboleth*: I knew from the start that Mo was going to be eaten by this wall [interface barrier]. Although a lot of the time I will start with an image or a feeling. With *Lagan* it was this sort of out of body poetic experience of the sound of the voices. With *Shibboleth* I knew it was this young man who we would read as a suicide that was ultimately swallowed by this wall. With *Override* (I know it's not in the Northern Irish context) it started with the idea of a guy trying to make love to an inanimate object. A lot of it starts with an image or emotion - a lot of it's sublimated.

AC: Which goes back to the conceptual aspect you mentioned earlier.

SG: Yes. One of my favourite responses that I've got over worrying about it people saying "I don't know what that was about but I cried." Great! I've never been frightened by the idea that audiences will have different readings and different experiences. I'm always a bit disappointed whenever the critical reception of something implies that you don't know what you're doing, because there isn't an obvious, explicit and overriding message.

AC: But it also seems you have an idea of what you'd want to change, politically. How do you square this with your desire for openness?

SG: I think that I wade into political territory, but I work very hard to present a question rather than an answer. It's also a complete fallacy that in some way that I can be objective.

AC: Do you think the reluctance to present answers relates in any way to the Northern Irish context?

SG: In a funny way, yes. Feeling a bit older than when I started, I remember posting on Facebook about Brexit that it can't be that half the country is just wrong, we can't operate like that, and I don't believe in it anyway. There are different positions and usually there are interesting reasons that people take those positions. We need to be bit more nuanced about that. I think growing up in a society that was so divided and knowing that we can transcend that and there's a will to do that and you can have totally opposing views and sit together in government: I'm actually repelled by work that assumes a dogmatic position.

As a writer you expose yourself. As an actor, I get adrenaline but I already know what I think about the work and I do my best to serve it, but as a writer, you feel responsible for everyone and you serve yourself up. I do poke around on the frontiers of morality because it is scary and vulnerable and I'm interested in it. I don't think people are being truthful if they don't admit that we all poke around there. I don't trust virtuous, sanitised voices.

AC: Perhaps it's useful to talk in more detail about the process behind a specific play. How did you alight on the form of *Scorch* (2015), and how did the Outburst Queer Arts Festival influence what you thought to be theatrically possible?

SG: I wanted to write about it since the case in 2012, and initially I had actually gone to a broadcaster: I thought it might be a telly idea. They quickly wanted to make it into a horrible 8 part crime series. That was not the kind of sensitivity I thought was required, so I pulled it. Then my heart was set on Outburst because growing up at home in Belfast there wasn't anything like that and there wasn't really any LGBT expression apart from the Parliament [bar & nightclub]. This arts festival had popped up while I had been away and university and I was kind of in love with the programming. It felt really ambitious and classy. I contacted Ruth McCarthy, who runs Outburst, and I said: "I have this monologue" and I sat down wrote it in one sitting. She very quickly said that this is the sort of thing that the festival would be interested in and asked whether I wanted to workshop it. I said "great, I will perform it as a kind of test run". We did two performances, and that was a brilliant experience because as a performer, in that early iteration of the play, and having made a contract with a very intimate audience at a queer festival, that was the perfect litmus test in terms of what felt appropriate. When I was performing it I was actually editing at the same time in my head, so 80 percent of it was doing the lines, and about 10 percent was editing, and the other 10 percent was just having an out of body experience. After that Prime Cut came on board and Outburst and Prime Cut agreed to co-produce for a proper run at the next festival in 2015.

To rewind a bit in terms of the form: when I sat down to write the monologue, there were a couple of things I knew I wanted to achieve. I wanted to humanise the character as much as possible. I wanted to ensure that an audience felt active and not passive. More than that, my hope for the piece was to make people feel accountable for that young person. So when I started writing the monologue I knew that they [Kes] were sharing with the group and that the group would be the audience. So once that was in place everything else came naturally, so when it came to the court case it felt like we were judge and jury, and when it came to the press and the media, it felt like we were responsible for that. I knew the monologue was small and relatively easy to produce – the first five plays I wrote were for like fourteen people, it was ridiculous, and I very quickly came to realise that those things have a lot of limitations – so I knew with this I wanted it to be a one person show. I wanted it to be intimate and vulnerable.

AC: What do you think the politics of staging the play in Belfast was at that time?

SG: I think there's something kind of fascinating about Belfast. I think it was best illustrated by the Q & A we had after that first run. We had a Q & A with a really lovely and diverse panel. Ruth was on it and we had a number of people from Anchor, a trans-masculine group that had organised around the same time we were building the play, and we worked in consultation with them, and Ellen Murray, who was the first trans candidate representing the Green Party. The entire audience, more or less, came back and stayed for the Q & A for about the same amount of time as the duration of the show. I just felt it was one of those moments where you go: we're doing something right. We were in Belfast and the reasons people stayed is because they were curious and engaged and actually there's a sort of really delightful scale of trans organisation in Belfast that feels very different to how it felt for me growing up as a kid who had questions about their own gender, and not the language I have now of being agender. This was in the wake of the marriage referendum in the south.

I think for me there is a dissonance between the expectations young people now have growing up in Belfast and how they are represented at a governmental level, and that's starting to finally be untenable. Something is going to give soon - I feel hopeful about that. And this piece just landed on that fault line.

AC: Do you think with *Scorch* you were seeking to intervene in the male-dominance of Northern Irish political culture?

SG: It goes without saying that behind the scenes of Northern politics are a lot of women. The recent Good Friday Agreement commemorations have been a wall of male faces that isn't at all true. There is an underrepresentation of the work women have been doing. For example if you look at the work being done around interface barriers, a lot of those community groups are run by mothers and women, and a lot of the time they are not from high income backgrounds. I'm from a very working class background as well, and I by default often write female strength into my plays. On another level, there is something about the whole idea of 'gender fraud' that I think problematises not just transphobia and homophobia, but also misogyny. It seems to me there's nothing more threatening to the patriarchy than what is perceived as a woman usurping ideas of masculinity. One of the things that is most challenging of *Scorch* is that this teenager has this masculine expression of desire. And I wonder if one of the reasons the cis women who identify as such in these cases of gender fraud have had such vilification in the press is because of a very deep rooted misogyny. Coming out of 30 years of civil conflict in Northern Ireland that sort of ossified paternalistic and patriarchal flavour is under threat. When you get the biggest kick-back is when something is under threat.

AC: Taking account of that specificity, how do you feel about how the play has travelled?

SG: It's been to Australia, Edinburgh, Sweden and London. It travels because ultimately it is a universal story of teenage love and heartbreak. That was all intentional: I wanted to make it feel accessible because I know I was going to be dealing with these complicated issues.

AC: How did you feel about the play's reception?

SG: Generally, really delighted. Particularly when it went to places in rural Ireland: a lot of people would stay after to talk to Amy or Emma. We've encountered a lot of kids who are going through their own questioning of gender, for example. There's been a couple of amazing stories of young people who have come back and seen it multiple times, and set up their own company and written their own monologues. If the piece was intended ever to do anything then, my God, that would be it.

As anticipated, there has been the odd questioning voice. For example, there's an activist in Dublin who wrote a blog a few years ago about trans performers needing to be able to tell their own stories and so one of the ambiguities around this piece, that was intentional, was that the piece could be interpreted or 'read' or owned as a queer piece, as a trans piece, as a cis piece. So [it] invite[s] a trans reading, but not exclusively. It's that very sensitive thing about representation and creating space and not trespassing when telling other people's stories. This was inspired by cases involving people who identified as cis female with a great care for how that intersects with trans stories. There's no monolithic experience.

The only other recurring criticism of the piece is Josie's story, something I address as best I can in the published script. I've been at pains not to undermine her experiences. The play isn't designed to do that. I don't know what went on and I've got no interest at guessing at that. I wanted to look instead at how discussions around consent and disclosure talk to each other. So on one level everyone is welcome to their criticisms of the piece, but it can't be everything to everyone. I hope I've done my best to honour Kes's story, that character and that character's experience.

Occasionally there were good reviews that were written badly. A journalist who shall not be named wrote a "review", which was basically a poor synopsis of the play, and it was as though they hadn't received the concern with language and sensitivity that the play invites. Consequently their review, I find, really tasteless. So sometimes I ask us not to quote from positive reviews because I

don't think they've been written in the right spirit. And luckily we're spoiled with good reviews to choose from, which is a great position to be in.

AC: To go back to this idea of getting stuff produced. Your work often contains characters that are mobile, socially or otherwise, and often for reasons of escape. Do you think that interest comes from being pushed about geographically as a playwright?

SG: It might not be as literal a connection as that, but there is something I think itinerant about my work, in terms of where it's found its home and consequently where I've found my home. I think that I'm probably a bit more settled now, but I was searching really hard for that and I was definitely feeling very lost when I was writing through my twenties. A lot of that was probably about me trying to place my own identity. I felt like trying to work in Belfast, and not being able to be produced or find my home there, and then being quite well received in Dublin, and being educated at Cambridge and going down to London and working there and starting a relationship, and finding it quite difficult to fit into the theatre ecosystem there too, for lots of reasons, but particularly my class background and then probably my queerness. The queerness has changed: I feel much more confident and settled. Lots has changed in the last decade but the class thing is still a huge taboo. The kind of class strata you get in London is probably most echoed in the Protestant sense of hierarchy and deference, which I'm deeply uninterested in. Which is why it's been so cool to embrace the fact of my Irishness there.

AC: It's fairly common for writers from the North to find work elsewhere. But do you think there's something gendered about this experience?

SG: It's really boring on one level: men were trusted as the voice of authority and their plays were commissioned and programmed and given main house runs and published and remounted and then written about in critical reviews. All of that just adds to the cultural commodity of male output. When I started writing I remember being part of some very well intentioned projects where there were five or six women writers co-writing one play. That sort of thing happens a lot and it did feel occasionally like a box ticking exercise.

AC: Do you think things have changed in the last three or four years?

SG: Yes, but only very recently. There's a huge internalised gender bias. It's hard to pin down and there are so many nuances to the conversation. The second play I wrote that was never programmed was *Grand Tour* and it was about two female travel writers, one Irish, one English, with a sort of queer post-colonial through line. It just felt the kickback on it was always the question of "how can we sell this". If they have an authoritative, male, confident figure attached it seems to be not a problem. I'm so nervous of generalisations! But it seems that women were often writing in this less dictatorial 'state of the nation' way. I think that stuff was smuggled in. There's nothing that's not 'state of the nation' about *Scorch* but it's sort of smuggled in under something that doesn't announce itself as such.

Without a doubt, *Derry Girls* could not have been made before the last year or two. Lisa McGee has been grafting away and she's brilliant. And she's always been brilliant; she didn't just become brilliant a year or two ago, but she finally got the opportunity and we were ready for it. That piece is about ordinary girls and they're funny and we're ready to accept that and it doesn't need to be some kind of niche lady programme. That's a sort of triumph! I was happy for Lisa's success as I would be as if it was my own. It was like: "yes, finally!" It's not just significant that people finally realise that Lisa's a genius but it's more that people have finally realised female experience can also be universal experience. I think the one thing I would say is that despite stormy weather I've tried to hold my nerve, which hasn't always been an easy thing to do... persisting.

AC: You must have been pissed off at various points. You haven't talked much about anger. Usually it's the boys who are angry in your plays.

SG: There's been some! I think anger is palpable in my work. My family background is male heavy and the particular vulnerabilities experienced by young working class men in Belfast have been very real and personal. And, as a side note, my experience growing up as a tomboy I suppose and I guess a word I didn't have growing up that feels resonant, even though I'm very cautious about language and labels, but agender as a sense of not being very strongly female or male has I think been my experience. So I identified a lot with "masculine" culture growing up. I think you can feel it in *Perve* my interest in sci-fi, fantasy and sports: it'd be so crass an generalising to gender those things, but there's something there.

AC: These are difficult experiences to translate.

SG: I think I probably feel defiantly mercurial. When I came to London people couldn't place me because of my accent. I came from a working class background but went to Cambridge. I've been embraced as an Irish playwright, but I'm from a Protestant background. Constantly I feel like it's not been a useful process to reach for labels. Mostly, people do it to me.

[1] To take a recent example of this view: north Belfast playwright Gary Mitchell argued that growing up he thought theatre "was for Catholics and homosexuals." Quoted in Susan McKay, *Northern Protestants: An Unsettled People* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2005), p.117.

[2] See Wallace McDowell, 'Overcoming Working-Class Ulster Loyalty's Resistance to Theatricality after the Peace Process', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 23, no. 3 (2013), pp.323–33.

[3] Stacey Gregg, *Scorch* (London: Nick Hern, 2015), p.36.

[4] See, for example, Tom Paulin's *Riot Act* (1985), Seamus Heaney's *Cure at Troy* (1990) and Owen McCafferty's *Antogone* (2008)

[5] Stacey Gregg, *Shibboleth* (London: Nick Hern, 2015), p.61.

[6] Stacey Gregg & Deborah Pearson, *Inside Bitch* (London: Oberon Books, 2019), p.23.

[7] See Phil Ramsey and Bethany Waterhouse-Bradley, 'Cultural Policy in Northern Ireland: Making Cultural Policy for a Divided Society', *The Routledge Handbook of Global Cultural Policy*, Toby Miller, Dave O'Brien and Victoria Durrer eds (London: Routledge, 2017), pp.195-212.

[8] Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: Third Edition*, Marc Silberman, Steve Giles & Tom Kuhn eds (London: Bloomsbury Methuen, 2015), p.62.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso, 1980), pp.31-49.

Share Via:

A company
Copyright © 2021 **Honest Ulsterman**

Verbal Arts Centre
Stable Lane and Mall Wall, Bishop
Street Within, Londonderry, BT48 6PU

Tel: **028 7126 6946 (tel:02871266946)**
Email: hueditor@theverbal.co
(<mailto:hueditor@theverbal.co>)