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Queer Notions: New Plays and Performances from Ireland

Reviewed by Patrick Lonergan Published 30 January

Fintan Walsh's new anthology begins with a line that seems in danger of subverting the rest of the book. "There is strength in numbers, so they say," writes Frank McGuinness in his foreword – before adding "I've never believed [that], and I'm glad that I haven't." McGuinness is suspicious of the herd mentality, he tells us, and suspicious too of uniformity: he calls instead for a theatre that is subversive and true, that is as dangerous as it is inviting.

Those are strong words, probably easier to agree with than to practise. But they also critique the very idea of creating an anthology: they point out the risks involved in grouping disparate plays under one heading, and they remind us of the problems that arise when an editor imposes uniformity on plays that were written from a desire to rebel against other people's labels. One of the remarkable features of *Queer Notions* is that it manages to convey the subversive and individualistic qualities of the plays and performances that it collects: it gathers a group of works that are unified mainly by their determination to be different from each other.

The book includes conventional plays written in a realistic style, such as Loughlin Deegan's *The Queen & Peacock* (2000), Deirdre Kinahan's *Passage* (2001), and Verity-Alicia Mavenawitz's *The Drowning Room* (2006). It features performances that involve the narration of stories directly to the audience, as in Neil Watkins' *Cure for Homosexuality* (2005), Phillip McMahon's *Danny and Chantelle (Still Here)* (2006) and Una McKevitt's *Victor and Gord, Ali and Michael* (2009). And then there is a work that defies categorisation: Panti's *A Woman in Progress* (2009). Part autobiography, part polemic, it is included here as a "performance document" rather than a play to be restaged. Finally, the book also features a photo essay by Niall Sweeney, who has "been extremely important in the visual imagining and documentation of queer culture in Ireland" for nearly two decades, writes Walsh. Those images act to both complement and comment upon the performances collected in the rest of the book.

So, as Walsh states in his introduction, this is not an anthology of "gay plays". "For the purposes of this collection," he writes, "the word 'queer' seems to be the most useful term for holding in place the varied and shifting concerns of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer-identifying individuals... while extending an invitation of engagement to those who are curious, questioning, or just straight with a twist" (4). The book's title, *Queer Notions*, is therefore used to denote an "array of thematic, aesthetic and political positions that work in different ways to critique heteronormativity". That is, Walsh wants to use the plays themselves, and the process of anthologising them, as a way of subverting the reader's acceptance of the conventions and social practices that seem to mark heterosexuality and its associated values as "the norm" in Ireland.

Indeed, the first two plays in the collection, by Deegan and Kinahan, seem determined to make us think again about our

assumptions. Both are fairly traditional Irish dramas, focussing on such issues as emigration, alcohol abuse, and the dysfunctional Irish family – but they use their audiences’ awareness of those traditions in surprising ways. *The Queen & Peacock* is set in a London pub, where a group of Irish and English men have gathered to await the death of one of their friends. Sexuality is for most (but not all) of the characters an uncomplicated given: if anything, these men seem to struggle more with national identity. Likewise, in *Passage*, the central character is generally secure about her sexual identity; the trauma that she needs to overcome lies in her Irish family’s murky past.

'The Queen and Peacock' by
Loughlin Deegan.

By playing with familiar tropes, Kinahan and Deegan use homosexuality as a way of exploring the conventions of Irish society generally. One of Deegan’s characters suggests that “the war is over” when it comes to homosexuality in Ireland: “people are having a great fucking time at home [in Ireland]... Just getting on with it, you know? Having the craic, getting the odd shag – it’s no big deal”. In contrast, to quote one of Kinahan’s characters, “mainstream” Ireland remains at war with itself: “Incest, child abuse, selling babies, mad staff... It’d rock ya”. Both plays give us gay Irish characters who are at ease with themselves and their place in the world – and, by doing so, they show that, far from being a “norm”, Irish heterosexuality has a history of oppression, abuse, and confusion that (even now) hasn’t fully been resolved. The liberation of individual gay people in these plays is thus seen not as an exclusively personal triumph: rather, it is an example that needs to be followed by Irish society in its entirety.

Challenging the notion that the “war is over” in Ireland, Verity-Alicia Mavensawitz’s *The Drowning Room* considers the consequences that arise when a gay Dubliner is kicked to death by a group of young men. Her play also shows that the gap between rich and poor can sometimes be much wider than the gap between gay and straight, male and female, or young and old in this country. It’s also notable that, like Deegan’s and Kinahan’s plays, *The Drowning Room* uses the death of an off-stage character to initiate a consideration of sexual identity: sex and death never seem very far apart in this book.

These three plays are subversive precisely because they are so familiar: their authors cause us to form expectations which we must repeatedly reconsider. In contrast, Watkins’ *Cure for Homosexuality* is challenging because it is so unpredictable. Delivered directly to an audience – who almost become unwilling participants in the action – the play is a disturbing exploration of political and religious violence. Watkins gives us many different ways of thinking about power: the power of political leaders over their followers, the power that religious leaders use by invoking the idea of God, the power that one person might have over another in a sexual encounter, and the power that a performer has over an audience. Power, shows Watkins, ought to be accompanied by a sense of responsibility; instead it’s too often accompanied by fear. This is probably the collection’s most difficult work, and for that reason one of the most necessary.

Phillip McMahon and Georgina McKeivitt in 'Danny and Chantelle (Still Here)'.

Phillip McMahon’s *Danny and Chantelle (Still Here)* also uses direct address, with the eponymous main characters giving us a highly kinetic, poeticised narration of the events that transpire during a typical night out. It’s a play that reminded me of Enda Walsh’s *Disco Pigs*, in that its characters’ language is so visceral that it seems to build the drama’s landscape around us. The rhythm of the characters’ words allows us to picture their feet pounding along the streets of Dublin; a modulation of tone conveys the atmosphere of a city centre club on the one hand, or of a deserted early morning streetscape on the other. Again, we sense that power is more important than identity for these characters: they define who they are not with labels but through sexual conquest, and sexual possession. So what is fascinating here is that old concerns – about nation, religion, land, identity – don’t seem to be important for any of the characters. As the style of writing shows, their life is lived entirely in the present tense, even when they are recounting past events.

Victor and Gord, Ali and Michael also signals a shift from an obsession with the past. McKeivitt’s four characters tell us who they are, but for them identity is not really about being Irish, being straight or gay, being working-class or middle-class. Instead, it’s mainly a matter of the accumulation of the experiences that each individual has had over time. There’s also an interesting shift away from received ideas about authorship and creativity: McKeivitt is giving us the real stories of actual

people, shaping something that has already existed, rather than inventing something entirely new.

By including such work, Walsh reveals the extent to which Irish theatre (and Irish society) has changed since the year 2000. The plays by Deegan and Kinahan are thematically and formally very similar to many of the other Irish dramas that have been written in the last half-century: it's easy to see how *The Queen & Peacock* has its roots in Tom Murphy's *Conversations on a Homecoming* (1985), just as *Passage* can be considered part of a tradition that goes back to Friel's *Cass Maguire* (1965) and earlier. Yet the works by McKeivitt and McMahon reveal the mindset of an emerging generation: one that doesn't seem to feel the need to pay its dues to the past – or the big narratives about nation – in the way that Irish writers once did. Where Deegan and Kinahan turn tradition on its head, those younger writers suggest that personal history can be made from within, not imposed from without. They also show clearly the value of collaboration, community, and experimentation. It's fascinating to have this generation gap illustrated so clearly.

The book concludes with *A Woman in Progress*, a work that is very different from anything else in this book, even as it seems to tie together all of the other performances' achievements. It is on the one hand an autobiographical 'dialogue' between Panti and her alter-ego Rory O'Neill. It gives us the details of one individual's life because, as Panti says, "I'm not really qualified to tell you about anything else. I am my own, and only, specialist subject". Yet that focus on the individual gives this play a universal force. For Panti, "my gayness was making me question everything around me – everything I'd been told, everything that was expected of me". That questioning led to the development of a "self-realized life", based on an awareness that "you're not exactly sure what it is you're looking for. But you're right about needing to find it. You are your own pope".

'A Woman in Progress'. Photo:
Fiona Morgan

The story of Panti's liberation – from small-town intolerance, from internationalised religious bigotry, from consensus in general – is grounded in a willingness to ask questions, to use performance and pretence as a way of revealing truths. The play concludes with a call to the Irish gay community to reject the status quo, to rebel against the commercialisation and domestication of Irish homosexuality, to refuse to be comfortable in a situation where "your granny knows where The George is, and young gay boys in Mayo can friend-request any tranny on Facebook". Panti thus gives us a call to action, an excavation of the past, an exploration of one individual's life, and a celebration of an entire community – and in doing so, creates one of the most powerful pieces of writing I've read in a long time. So just as the book begins with a rejection of uniformity, it concludes with a rejection of conformity. This is exactly what we need from our theatre.

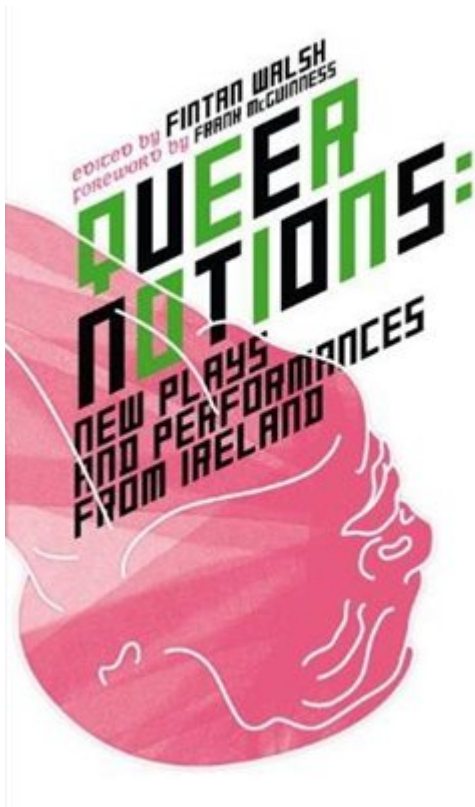
Queer Notions, then, is more than just an anthology. It is an archive of ten years' worth of performances, a collection of work that tells us something about a specific time and place, but which also has bigger and broader resonances. In its variety – its internal contradictions, its discordances, its contrasts – it challenges us to think and re-think what we know: about sexuality, about our theatre, about Ireland itself. It's an urgent and important book: inspiring as it is challenging, informative as it is surprising – and one that deserves the widest possible audience

Patrick Lonergan teaches at NUI Galway. His book of essays on J.M. Synge will be published shortly by Carysfort Press.

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