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Within Limits

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Notes from the Field

Boundaries: Respecting authenticating limits in the production of a play on trans marginality

By Dónall Mac Cathmhaoill

Theatre works examining the unenviable position of LGBTQ+ people in Northern Ireland are by no means numerous. A single queer theatre company, TheatreofplucK, has been producing theatre of a high standard intermittently in Belfast since 2004, and the dedicated LGBTQ+ arts festival Outburst, established in 2015, stages theatre shows as part of its programme. Framing this is the context in which the work is produced: homosexuality remained illegal until 1982, and LGBT marriage rights were extended only in December 2020. To this day, LGBTQ+ rights are fiercely resisted by reactionary politicians, notably the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

TheatreofplucK aside, professional companies in Northern Ireland do not routinely address issues concerning the LGBTQ+ community, though there are exceptions. One such, the play *Boundaries*, produced originally by Tinderbox Theatre Company in 2015-17, is the subject of this article. The story of the play's development is an illuminating illustration of the pitfalls and possibilities of work that seeks to represent communities. Initially conceived as part of the Connect Programme at Tinderbox, it was developed in collaboration with the Rainbow Project, the leading NI LGBTQ+ advocacy organisation.

During 2014 and 2015, as director at Tinderbox, I ran workshops at the Rainbow Project with participants from across NI who had been victims of hate crimes. The initial aim of the project was to create a piece of advocacy theatre, following a set of principles I had developed in the Connect Programme: the work was to enable the agency of

participants, tell their stories, and result in public performances. We also decided to audio record participants' stories in their own words, as a useful tool for future advocacy and campaigning work by Rainbow Project.

As the project unfolded, it became clear that there was no interest in performing among the participants. The Connect Programme had previously established an actors' ensemble to provide this type of advocacy-through-performance, and the Connect Ensemble began working to develop a play from the material.

With Marina Hampton, a Connect Ensemble actor, I drew up a list of the incidents and events that were most dramatic in the anonymised audio recordings, and worked to shape a narrative. As a spinal story, we took the account of a trans woman (Diane) who had been attacked repeatedly by a group of transphobic youths, culminating in a sexual assault. Other incidents and details were drawn from participants' accounts to create a composite narrative that was, we hoped, powerful and authentic.

C. T. Onions notes that 'authentic' derives from *authentia*—the original authority (*English Etymology*). Thus, for a work to be authentic it must be derived from the original authorities: in this case, the project participants. Sarah Rubidge (219) maintains that authenticity is not an intrinsic quality of a performance, but is ascribed by the spectator. However, the nature of the values that are utilised to arrive at this ascription, both by audiences, and by the participants whose stories are being told is inevitably personal. Luule Epner argues that 'the notion of "authenticity" allows us to observe the familiar relationship of **fictional** to the **real** from a new angle' (111, emphasis in original). This implies Elizabeth Burns' 'authenticating conventions'—those elements that enable the spectator to determine the authentic in theatrical performance (32). These conventions—such as an authentic regional accent, ethnically-appropriate casting, or accurate description of a city quarter—are therefore essential in creating affect, through the ascription of authenticity. They allow the spectator to identify the relation between representation and reality, indicating the truthfulness

of what is being presented. Their limiting potential also ensures fidelity to the accounts of the participants whose stories contribute to the performance text.

The greatest challenge in navigating questions of authenticity occurred when it came to casting. With a trans woman as protagonist, we had, as we saw it, three choices:

1. cast a trans woman
2. cast a cis-gendered man dressed as a woman
3. cast a cis-gendered woman

None of the three was likely to be viable. For the first, a thorough scouring of available actors, agents, and networks failed to locate a Northern Irish trans actor suitable for the part. The second seemed ethically questionable, potentially offensive and/or ridiculous, and dramatically inadequate. The third seemed the least bad option, but still inadequate.

However, in grappling with the issue, Judith Butler's insistence on gender as a performative act of self-presentation seemed to open up another possibility. Consideration of Butler's 'stylised repetition' ('Performative Acts') directed our thinking to how gender is presented on stages. We therefore settled on the solution of staging two presentations of Diane: her gender identity as she perceives it, and her gender identity as it is perceived by others. We did this by casting two actors, one queer male, Rea Hill, and one cis-gendered female, Debbie McCormick. Identically costumed and made up, they looked very similar. The play was performed in Belfast as part of a three-night run of three short plays by the Connect Ensemble, in the Crescent Arts Centre, The Sunflower Bar and the Barracks queer performance space, in March 2015, with a running time of about 20 minutes. However, all agreed there was a much bigger, more impactful journey for audiences in the material, and we retained the intention to create a longer performance at a later time.

The Connect Programme culminated in 2017 with a large-scale theatre event where many of the works created during the 3-year project were presented, including six performances of *Boundaries*. Shortly

thereafter, Marie McCarthy, Artistic Director of the Omnibus Theatre in Clapham, London, expressed interest in programming a longer version of the play for the theatre's autumn 2018 festival of new Irish work. With the DUP newly installed as partner of the Tory government, and thus able to veto any extension of legislation for LGBTQ+ rights to Northern Ireland, it seemed the right time for a larger production of *Boundaries*, as a piece of performance as protest. I therefore rewrote the play, extending its length and exploring some of the issues that had formed part of the discussions in the original project. The dramatic structure of the play remained unchanged.

In summer 2018 we cast the play with two new actors—one male one female, as before—and began rehearsals. Then, with only five weeks to the opening, our female actor had to drop out. We recast, and rehearsals began in earnest with a new actor. With just over two weeks to go, our replacement actor was taken ill, and we lost her too. Faced with a difficult choice, either to pull the play or recast again, and knowing any new actor would be terribly under-rehearsed, Liam Tennant, our remaining actor who identified as non-binary, offered to do the whole show as a one-actor piece. Again, this was an unacceptable solution: potentially offensive and dramatically inadequate.

Once more, we went back to the drawing board. In considering our options, I felt that a more fundamental problem lay at the heart of any attempt to remount the play. By this stage, the original verbatim accounts of the project participants at Rainbow had gone through several layers of mediation. My concern was that the play was drifting ever further from the source material, and would cease to be authentic. Having travelled so far from the originating authority of the story, the validity of the work would be compromised.

With this in mind, I contacted Jennifer Clifford, a psychologist, rights activist, and trans woman with experience as a theatre writer. Jen agreed to get involved. Liam and I interviewed her, recorded her experiences, and asked about many of the issues that would become significant in the rewriting of the play which followed. The new play—and it was a new play—drew extensively on Jen's accounts of her young

adulthood, and her experiences with young trans people she met through her work.

The rewrite was set at an earlier time, when Diane was a young adult—pre-transition, on the point of change—and we asked Jen to perform. We shot a video prologue and epilogue, featuring Jen as the older, settled trans woman, appearing on either end of a flashback sequence where her experiences of hate crimes as a young person on the point of transition were recalled in the live performance. This idea determined the new play's form: the image of a gender-resolved trans person was permanently reified on film; in the diegetic past of the play, Diane as a young person on the cusp of transition was performed live: unstable, unresolved, and fluctuating. The play was performed in late October 2018 at the Omnibus, to appreciative audiences, and we completed the run feeling we had done the job right.

The story of *Boundaries* demonstrates a key challenge in creating advocacy theatre with community participants: incrementally, the work changes. The proposition that a work of art is made new at each iteration, each reception, means that not only is authenticity contingent, but that it is constantly challenged. Additionally, the desire to create work that advocates for rights and protests injustice is always in tension with the need to create work that is of an acceptable standard aesthetically. Work that fails aesthetically, that diminishes the affect experienced by the spectator in witnessing a participant's account of their experiences runs the risk of being ineffective as an act of advocacy. This tension between aesthetics and authenticity can lead to work that is tokenistic or worse, exploitative.

In *Boundaries*, the play-making process, and the concomitant upheavals, all had impacts on the script. The demands of live performance and of working with real people (who sometimes get ill or drop out) meant that the performance text was under pressure throughout. This is not uncommon: applied theatre is generally made in difficult conditions. *Boundaries* became a very mediated work, a work where the original stories and witness accounts had been filtered. It still hoped to advocate for its community, LGBTQ+ people, still hoped to be

effective as an act of protest while also having value as theatre—but by the end of its life, it risked the charge that it lacked authenticity.

The remounting of the play for a London audience in a professional venue created a crisis of authenticity. Baz Kershaw (39) notes that authenticating conventions are audience-specific. The play, in its successive iterations for different audiences and purposes, underwent inevitable changes. In response, the production sought to return to the limitations inherent in the authentic stories of the participants in the original process, by rewriting and restructuring the production in collaboration with trans participants.

By adding the additional layers in which Jen Clifford was present—the narrative material from her interview, the video in which she appeared, and the layering of a second, older Diane onto the performance—the production was bound more tightly to its authentic source material. More importantly, authority was restored to the originating community, and affective power to the play.

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