

Interview with Kaite O'Reilly

By Lizzie Ward

Tell us a bit about your work and what inspired you to write *In Water I'm Weightless*.

I'm a playwright, dramaturg, and theatre maker who works both in the so-called 'mainstream' culture and Disability arts and culture and Deaf arts. I've written extensively for radio as well as live performance, and tour internationally with The Llanarth Group, an independent performance company – I'm the resident dramaturg.

The play is my second production with National Theatre Wales. It brings together some of my long-term collaborators and old comrades – Mat Fraser, Mandy Colleran, David Tool, Sara Beer – and is inspired by the lives, experiences, imagination, and humour of Deaf and disabled people. It's an Unlimited Commission, inspired by my ambition to put Deaf and disabled experience, what I call crip culture, and disability cool centre-stage on a national platform, performed by some of the best Deaf and disabled performers in the UK.

What is *In Water I'm Weightless* about?

It's not a naturalistic drama with a linear chronology, telling the story of one individual. It's an ensemble piece - a montage of stories and experiences in signed and spoken languages, a fusion of text, dance, movement, sign performance, video and media projections. We have a stellar cast and a world class creative team: John McGrath, artistic director of National Theatre Wales, will direct, internationally respected Nigel Charnock will choreograph, and renowned New York-based media artist/designer Paul Clay will design.

How has it felt to create something for the Cultural Olympiad?

This Unlimited Commission has been a great experience. As lead artist I have been allowed to get on with the work and run the whole developmental process myself. I've felt trusted and respected. I'm delighted that with the Cultural Olympiad so many Deaf and disabled artists are being given this opportunity to make work as part of such a high profile event.

How do you hope the performance challenges perceptions of d/Deaf people and people with disabilities?

I hope the work will challenge and subvert stereotypes and misinformed preconceptions – we're not tragic but brave – we're not 'inspirational' individuals to

be patronized and put on pedestals – we’re not malingerers needing charity rather than our civil rights – we’re talented, sexy, witty, ordinary individuals just like everyone else, with full lives and blossoming careers and all the paradoxical complexities of other human beings, regardless of age, gender, sexual preference, cultural inheritance, and embodiment – whether typical or atypical. I hope the work challenges superficial notions of normalcy and limited definitions of what it is to be human. But that’s my personal perspective. The work is not a political manifesto – it would be disrespectful to the actors to lump them under one political banner – it’s about diversity and difference and validity and the opposite of hegemony.

Where do you hope to go next?

Generally, I hope to continue to grow and develop, take risks, learn new skills, face new challenges and opportunities – that’s where the joy lies. Once *In Water* appears at the Southbank Centre, I’m off to Berlin and Singapore for three months (I’m a Fellow of the International research centre ‘Interweaving Performance Cultures’, part of Freie University, where I’m reflecting on my work between Deaf and hearing cultures and ‘mainstream’ and disability culture). I’m completing my first novel and working on several commissions with theatre companies in the UK and beyond. Apart from the potential tour to Iran, Jordan, and Japan with the Llanarth Group in 2013/4, as a playwright I have a production in Copenhagen in Spring 2013 of *LeanerFasterStronger*, my cultural Olympiad project for Chol/Sheffield theatres.

For more information, visit: www.kaiteoreilly.com and www.kaiteoreilly.wordpress.com

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