

The Genuine Article

Disabled people's lives are the focus of *In Water I'm Weightless* – a new production from National Theatre Wales. Paul F Cockburn interviews playwright Kaite O'Reilly about the origins of the piece

It's the most clichéd – and yet some would say most vital – question you can ask a writer: where do they get their ideas and inspiration from?

For the multi-award-winning playwright Kaite O'Reilly, the answer is simple enough when it comes to her latest work, created with National Theatre Wales as part of the Cultural Olympiad and London 2012 Festival.

Frustration!

"First of all, there's my utter frustration that there aren't more plays written from the perspective of disability, or with actual experience of impairment," says Kaite. "You can hardly find a play in the Western theatrical canon that doesn't have some representation of impairment, of disability or mental health – and they're always horrific, fearful, over-dramatised versions that have very little to do with the reality of that embodied experience. I identify strongly as a

disability artist, and that's something I wanted to start addressing.

"Also, there's my frustration that we still have what I called – back in 2002, in my play for Graeae Theatre, *Peeling* – 'cripping up,' she adds. "Non-disabled actors playing disabled characters is the 21st century answer to blacking up. It's slowly changing, but it's not as much as I would have hoped a decade ago."

The 'D' Monologues

The creative consequence of these particular frustrations is *In Water I'm Weightless*, described by the London 2012 Festival as a "Fusion of dance, words and attitude exploring the poetry of human difference". Performed by a cast of six deaf and disabled performers, the production will run in the Millennium Centre in Cardiff throughout July before briefly transferring to London. However, this was by no means an easy or quick commission.



The cast of *In Water I'm Weightless* (L to R): David Toole, Sophie Stone, Karina Jones, Mandy Collieran, Mat Fraser, Nick Phillips



"Non-disabled actors playing disabled characters is the 21st century answer to blacking up"

Back in 2008 Kaite was given a Creative Wales Major Award by the Arts Council of Wales to help her explore the form of the dramatic monologue. "Over the years, I have been very fortunate to have won quite a few awards both nationally and internationally for my writing, but I'd never written monologues," Kaite explains. "I wanted to write a body of work that was inspired and informed by the disability and deaf experience, and that would be written specifically for deaf and disabled performers. That's what really started the project."

Although some of these monologues were first performed at the National Theatre Studio in London, while she was there on 'attachment', it was not until Kaite successfully applied for an Unlimited commission from the Cultural Olympiad that she was able to build them into what she describes as "A real, stronger body of work" – *The 'D' Monologues*. "D is for disability, or deaf, or whatever."

During this process, John McGrath – whom she's known for many years, and who had always been interested in the project – became the Artistic Director of National Theatre

ABOVE: The 90-minute production features "Movement, choreography, visuals and all sorts of exciting stuff."



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Wales. Enthused by the project, he supported Kaite's application for a second Unlimited commission that, with funding matched by National Theatre Wales, enabled The 'D' Monologues to be developed for the stage.

From Monologues to Montage

In developing the project, part of the challenge faced by Kaite and the National Theatre Wales team has simply been the amount of material to hand. Given that there was nearly four hours' worth of monologues already written, the decision was made to create a montage. "I've been taking snippets and excerpts from the monologues and bringing them together, working in a very collaborative way with the creative team at National Theatre of Wales and our fantastic, stellar cast of actors," notes Kaite.

The resulting show runs to around 90 minutes, including "Movement, choreography, visuals and all sorts of exciting stuff". Working alongside John McGrath and Executive Producer Lucy Davies, Kaite is evidently thrilled by how far the project has evolved: "Through their engagement it's expanding beyond anything I would have thought of, if left to my own devices. It's very exciting."

At the time of writing, the process is set to continue and develop further over a month of rehearsals, thanks to the involvement of cast members Mandy Colleran, Mat Fraser, Karina

Jones, Nick Phillips, Sophie Stone and David Toole.

"I've got a rehearsal draft that was partly informed by a 'research and development' week held with the cast last November," says Kaite, speaking days before those rehearsals began in earnest. "I wanted to respond and write work specifically to that cast. I've now come up with a rehearsal draft that I'm sure is going to change and develop as everybody else's imaginations, experiences and skills are applied to the work during almost a month of rehearsals."

True Experience, Not Biography

While Kaite has seen what she describes as some "Incredible examples of 'verbatim', testimonial-based theatre," she's adamant that, although partly inspired by interviews she conducted with many disabled and deaf people, *In Water I'm Weightless* is wholly fictional. "Personally, I feel it's theft if you take somebody's story or experience and then use it under your own name," she insists. "Besides, a lot of the interviews I did were confidential, anonymous. We can make metaphors, we can make parallels, we can create things that are true to an experience, but not actually somebody's life story or their words."

"I'm a writer. I can write the words," she says. "None of *In Water I'm Weightless* is told verbatim; none of it is reproducing anybody's actual stories. I've been part of the whole disability arts and culture movement since 1986 when I first worked with Graeae. I believe I have a very informed notion of what's going on, even though I have very particular impairments."

So, how does she see *In Water I'm Weightless* in relation to what has gone before? "There has been some good disability work over the years," Kaite believes. "Vicky Featherstone at the National Theatre of Scotland has done some great work with disabled performers such as Robert Softley [*Girl X*]. And, years ago, Nabil Shaban was at the National Theatre doing *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. But there's never been something written by a playwright who identifies as a disability artist and is also a veteran of the disability civil rights movement in the UK – and which has a full cast of deaf and disabled performers."

Artist Biography

Kaite O'Reilly has won numerous awards for her work, including the Peggy Ramsay Award and Ted Hughes Award for Poetry 2010. She has worked extensively within disability arts and culture, including writing the groundbreaking production *Peeling* for Graeae Theatre in 2002, and is a fellow of the Berlin Freie Universitat's International

Research Centre, dedicated to investigating the interweaving of various performance cultures.

Kaite's work has been staged across the UK, featured on BBC Radio and also produced in Ireland, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Poland, Spain, Croatia and Australia. She has written for a variety of journals and anthologies, including the 1994 Mind/Allen award-winning anthology *Mustn't Grumble*, published by Women's Press.

Kaite works internationally as a dramaturg, mentor and tutor, working with theatre companies and educational institutions to develop the performance work of both emerging and established artists. She has been writer-in-residence at Essex University, Birmingham City University, and visiting playwright at Korean National University of the Arts.



Further Information

In Water I'm Weightless will be staged in Wales and London as follows:

■ 26 July – 4 August 2012
Weston Studio, Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff,
CF10 5AL. www.wmc.org.uk

■ 31 August-1 September 2012
Southbank Centre, Belvedere Road, Southwark, London,
SE1 8XX. www.southbankcentre.co.uk