

'It's hard to sell an abortion play, but easy to sell one about 1980s Ireland'



1

Repeal drama: Eva O'Connor and Stephen Jones in *Maz and Bricks* which she penned because of 'a need to write about the current situation for women'. Photo: Liam Murphy.

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In the flow of ordinary conversation, Eva O'Connor curls up in her seat, her feet resting underneath her like some extreme athlete's stretch. It isn't surprising, given that O'Connor originally trained as a dancer. Fast-talking and refreshingly honest, she takes me through an impressive biography, from her award-nominated acting debut in Manchán Magan's 2009 drama *Broken Croí/Heart Bristle* to her new play, *Maz and Bricks*.

"When I got to university in Edinburgh, I had just been nominated for Best Supporting Actress at the Irish Times Theatre Awards," she says. "I was 19. I didn't even know what it was. So I thought Edinburgh will be great. Then I didn't get a part in the freshers' play."

O'Connor got over the rejection by writing her first one-woman play for Sunday's Child Theatre Company, which she runs with director Hildegard Ryan. In *Clinical Lies* we found a 19-year-old woman waiting in an abortion clinic, pledging to murder her rapist. It cemented O'Connor as an unabashed author tackling the pain and turmoil of young people.

On stage, she is often utterly transformed, whether wearing heavy lipstick and mascara in *Clinical Lies* or a bodysuit in her last play, *Overshadowed*, in which she crept around the stage as an embodiment of anorexia. That was shaped by her own experiences overcoming an eating disorder as a teenager.

"My therapist back then said to me, 'Imagine it's a cloak, a thing that's separate from you so you are not the problem. Something that you'll shed and be free from'," she says. "It made sense to personify it then in *Overshadowed*, to show that when people are freaking out about food, it's because they have this internal monologue talking to them every second of every day, telling you how shit you are.

"Everybody said we needed to bring this into schools," she tells me. "When we performed it in *Siamsa Tíre* (in Tralee), a girl had been let out of hospital especially to see it. She cried, her mum cried. She said it was her experience put on stage."

The idea continues to grow, with O'Connor and Hildegard currently adapting *Overshadowed* for television in the UK. Both are on the BBC's current hotlist of young artists to watch. O'Connor's agent is busy setting up meetings.

Her success is imaginably attributed to the standard of honesty she's struck in talking about young people's issues. Even O'Connor's close friends were shocked when she disclosed her own abortion experience while promoting her 2014 play *My Name is Saoirse*. The protagonist of that piece is a young woman struggling for connection in 1980s rural Ireland. O'Connor insists *My Name is Saoirse* isn't an in-your-face play about abortion. Instead, it's a development that feels organic.

"It's never divided people, really," she says. "It's highlighting an issue through a personal story. People can see why she's made this decision. Even the pro-lifers can be like, 'I feel sorry for Saoirse having to do that'.

"I wanted to write about the issue in a way removed from me. So it's set a few decades over, a few counties over. People actually really like that older world. I've found that it's hard to sell an abortion play but it's easy to sell a play about 1980s Ireland."

In *Maz and Bricks*, O'Connor finds a more contemporary setting for the same issue. The play comes off the back of *Overshadowed* winning the Fishamble Award for Best New Writing.



"I thought that I totally messed up this great opportunity," she says. "Jim Culleton of Fishamble said he needed to see the new play at some point. I sent on this whacky and rhyming script with no ending. He said he wanted to commission it."

The play follows a meeting between two strangers on the day of an abortion-rights protest: Maz (played by O'Connor), an on-edge protester working through her trauma; and Bricks (Stephen Jones), a relaxed man whose focus doesn't

extend past his young daughter.

"I felt a need to write about the current situation for women," she says. "I think a lot of people want the Eighth Amendment repealed. But working in the arts world, you're preaching to the choir." O'Connor is determined to find a new angle.

And it seems like her writing is set to break new ground. Her next play, developed with Hildegard Ryan, The Friday Night Project, is an interactive one that sounds like a serious piece of forum theatre, allowing the audience to step in and change the fates of the characters they are watching. It had a work-in-progress showing at First Fortnight and will play the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August.

O'Connor's plays often deal explicitly with emotional states but she believes they are not exceptional in that respect. "Most plays focus on mental health," she says. "It's kind of intrinsic to being a human being." That fits within her view of art as something less highfalutin, more practical. "I feel that if all I'm doing is making art, I might as well make it something useful."

Maz and Bricks runs at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin from Apr 25-May 13, and the Lime Tree Theatre in Limerick from May 17-20

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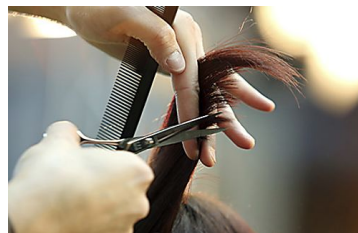
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