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CULTURE: THEATRE

Seeing life in a different light

Playwright and actress Eva O'Connor reveals how her work draws on the dark experiences of dealing with anorexia and an abortion

Pavel Barter

April 9 2017, 12:01am, The Sunday Times



Looking up: O'Connor's writing has given her a more positive outlook
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On a damp evening in Dublin, a procession of people leaves the boardroom of the Fishamble theatre company. First comes the artistic director Jim Culleton, followed by his producer and art designer. At the back of the party, assembling a script at the

26-year-old is happy to escape the fictional world for a few hours.

There are photographs of protest marches and street characters on the table — visual references for her story about two damaged characters who bond over the course of a day in Dublin. There's also a miniaturised model of the stage design.

From the age of 18, when she co-founded her own theatre company, Sunday's Child, at Edinburgh University, O'Connor has been strictly DIY. Not by choice, but due to a lack of options. "It was such a frustrating scene as a young actor and writer," she recalls. "There's so much talent everywhere, but not enough stuff going on. I wasn't going to wait around."

She printed flyers at the college library for her first play, Clinical Lies, in 2010, and booked her own countrywide tours, organising publicity, accounts and production details. "I'm not particularly good at admin, but I've done it," she says. "I learnt on the job, and it wasn't easy. Working with Fishamble is the first time I have surfaced from that."

The relationship between the playwright and theatre company began in 2015 when Culleton presented O'Connor with a writing award for Overshadowed, her play about anorexia. O'Connor sent him a "mad, half-written" story, which evolved into Maz and Bricks. In the play, Maz (played by O'Connor) is on her way to a Repeal the Eighth demonstration in Dublin when she encounters Bricks (Stephen Jones), who is meeting his former partner and young daughter. An unconventional love story ensues.

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worlds in a day,” explains the playwright. “They have different life stories and mad chemistry. I’m interested in that idea of people being attracted to each other who shouldn’t be. They have both gone through really dark stuff.”

The same might be said for O’Connor, whose own experiences inform her writing. Ireland’s restrictive abortion laws loom large in *Maz and Bricks*, drawing comparisons to *My Name Is Saoirse*, O’Connor’s one-woman show about a girl in 1980s rural Ireland who travels to England for an abortion. O’Connor says the two plays are separate, even though the issue remains the same.

When *My Name Is Saoirse* made its debut in 2014, O’Connor revealed she had an abortion in Edinburgh the previous year. “I was lucky in that I knew it wasn’t the right time for me to have a child, so I didn’t have to make an agonising decision.

“But telling my parents was difficult, and it was difficult for them when I started speaking about it in public. I felt guilty about being the black sheep of the family, about what your mother’s neighbours are going to think.”

She describes those emotions as remnants of Catholic guilt but doesn’t regret sharing her experience. “I got loads of messages from friends at home saying, ‘Are you joking? Talking about this in public is brave, but also insane.’ So many more people are now coming out and saying, ‘This is my story.’ I’m such a believer in stories. Stories change other people’s minds.”

She realises the abortion issue is not clear-cut for everyone. “It’s easy to live in your London or Dublin bubble and be like, ‘My friends wear Repeal jumpers. Life is great.’ The reality is quite different. I have friends who had abortions and decided not to say anything about it. They campaign to repeal and their

Growing up in the rural hamlet of Ogonnelloe, Co Clare, O'Connor filled notebooks and diaries with stories that her mother stored in bin bags in the attic. "I wrote a lot as an unhappy teenager. I was going through a bad eating disorder. Writing helped me make sense of my life. I felt, if I didn't write, I hadn't lived. Writing down things made it feel like my life had happened and was more orderly. It's crazy how low you can go when you're 15 and you've had a happy childhood. It doesn't make sense on paper."

She dealt with her eating disorder in *Overshadowed*. She wanted to explain a condition that people struggle to understand and often dismiss, depicting anorexia as a type of possession. "It's a demon on your shoulder. It colours everything you see. It's the voice in your head. It's an extreme, disruptive version of the internal monologue. If it was here right now, it would be saying, 'You're disgusting, you had a biscuit at lunchtime. You need to run 5k. Why are you in here? Get outside. Exercise. Make yourself sick.'"

In her transition year, she wanted to start a dance programme in Inchicore. O'Connor's parents allowed her to go on condition she checked into the Marino Therapy Centre in Dublin. It saved her. "I was so lucky. All I wanted to do was dance. Having hobbies, a passion, a dangling carrot, to use an unfortunate pun, was good. I need to get better in order to do my thing."

By the time she started university, O'Connor had overcome her illness, but her early work — *Kiss Me and You'll See How Important I am* (2012) and *Substance* (2013) — explored characters trying to exorcise demons.

Maz and Bricks is surprisingly humorous for a playwright whose oeuvre also includes *My Best Friend Drowned* in a

become. The playwright is clearly starting to disentangle herself from her characters. “Maz massively bottles it up. She’s an example of someone who is not particularly sorted. I don’t think I’m sorted, but I am lucky enough to have had really good therapy. That and really good friends.”

First Fortnight, a Dublin festival that explores mental health issues, helped bring O’Connor’s work to a wider world. The festival includes post-show discussions and conversations. The writer prefers to let her work do the talking, though. She doesn’t consider herself a social activist or a self-help guru. “People often email me and say, ‘I’ve read your play. No one’s ever described what I’ve been through.’ People who are in a really bad place ask how I’ve recovered. I can’t deal with those letters. I thank them for seeing the play, but recommend they get help from a specialist.”

This year she has toured Australia with *My Name Is Saoirse* and the experimental play *Nuclear Family*. *Pol na Mone*, another new play, featured at First Fortnight in January. And she is adapting *Overshadowed* for British television with Hildegard Ryan, her partner in *Sunday’s Child*. “I’ve been hustling for so long; I think that’s the good thing about starting young. I started doing all this when I was 18: putting on plays, saying, ‘Friends, gather around.’ I can still only barely rent. Let’s face it, I’m not making a killing from this job — but at least I can live.”

Maz and Bricks is at Project Arts Centre, Dublin, from April 25



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