
Reclaiming the Silenced History of LGBTIQ+ Activism and the HIV/AIDS Crisis through Irish Theatre. An Interview with Phillip McMahon¹

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Abstract. The playwright and theatre director Phillip McMahon is also co-founder and co-director of THISISPOPBABY, a Dublin arts company founded in 2007 and said to have redefined modern Irish theatre, ripping up the space between popular culture, counterculture and high art. Their shows have played and toured around Ireland, the United Kingdom, Australia, and beyond. THISISPOPBABY voices queer culture on stage making space for the history and stories of the LGBTIQ+ Irish community positioning itself between performance and politics. The first play written by McMahon purely with LGBTIQ+ characters is *Once Before I Go* (2021), in which he explores and examines the legacy of the AIDS crisis in Irish queer lives. McMahon does not only voice the community's historic pain, shame, and stigma, but he also foregrounds the fact that, despite marriage equality, the LGBTIQ+ rights movement has not come to an end. In fact, he claims that, after the COVID-19 pandemic, a wider society is ready to hear stories that have been long buried, forgotten, and suppressed.

Key Words. Phillip McMahon, Irish Theatre, LGBTIQ+, HIV/AIDS, Activism.

Resumen. El dramaturgo y director de teatro Phillip McMahon es cofundador y codirector de THISISPOPBABY, una compañía de arte fundada en 2007 en Dublín conocida por redefinir el teatro moderno irlandés rompiendo con el espacio entre la cultura popular, la contracultura y el arte elevado. Sus obras han sido presentadas en Irlanda, el Reino Unido, Australia, y más allá. THISISPOPBABY da voz a la cultura queer en el escenario creando un espacio para la historia y las historias de la comunidad LGBTIQ+ irlandesa posicionándose entre el espectáculo y la política. La primera obra de teatro escrita por McMahon, con un elenco enteramente formado por personajes LGBTIQ+, es *Once Before I Go* (2021), en la que aborda y examina el legado de la crisis del sida en las vidas de las personas queer irlandesas. McMahon no solamente desentierra el dolor histórico de esta comunidad, su vergüenza y estigma, sino que también

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ensalza el hecho de que, pese al matrimonio igualitario, el movimiento por los derechos LGBTIQ+ no ha terminado. De hecho, argumenta que, tras la pandemia del COVID-19, una sociedad más amplia está lista para escuchar historias largamente enterradas, olvidadas y suprimidas.

Palabras clave. Phillip McMahon, teatro irlandés, LGBTIQ+, VIH/sida, activismo.

Phillip McMahon, playwright and theatre director based in Dublin, has directed and toured several shows with Panti Bliss and was co-writer and co-producer of Conor Horgan's documentary, *The Queen of Ireland* (2015). His plays include *Once Before I Go* (Gate Theatre, 2021), *The Rock* (Abbey Theatre, 2020), *Come On Home* (Abbey Theatre, 2018), *Town Is Dead* (Abbey Theatre, 2016), *Alice In Funderland* (Abbey Theatre, 2012), among others. He has directed *The Year of Magical Wanking* (2010) by Neil Watkins, and Panti Bliss's repertoire: *In These Shoes?* (2007), *All Dolled Up* (2008), *A Woman in Progress* (2009), and the latest *If These Wigs Could Talk* (2022). His work has played at the Abbey Theatre Dublin, National Theatre UK, Irish Arts Center New York, Traverse Edinburgh, across Australia, Europe and beyond. McMahon is co-founder and co-director of THISISPOPBABY and co-created and co-directed *RIOT* (THISISPOPBABY), the international smash hit show and winner of Best Production Dublin Fringe Festival in 2016.

His latest play is the aforementioned *Once Before I Go* (2021), where he examines the thin yet resilient threads that weave Irish queer lives together over four decades in Dublin, London, and Paris. The story of *Once Before I Go* is set against the backdrop of both the modern LGBTIQ+ community and Dublin's developing gay rights movement in the 1980s and 1990s. The different characters and their stories revolve around the death of one of the main characters because of AIDS complications. When addressing HIV and AIDS in Irish theatre, Cormac O'Brien provides a critical survey of key productions, building the first Irish HIV canon, and finds the cultural and social discourse of AIDS as punishment a common denominator in all of them, whether as a central metaphor in the drama or as an element to be disrupted (2020: 123). Despite its secrecy, the history of HIV/AIDS in Ireland has affected many people's lives and claimed countless others. Regardless of Ireland's vibrant tradition of memory, these deaths are rarely remembered. In fact, Ireland's history with HIV/AIDS is plagued by political denial and reluctance (O'Brien 2016: 56). Against the success of the Marriage Equality Referendum in 2015, Ireland's history and traditional social attitudes towards the LGBTIQ+ community have long marked the lives of queer people, with secrecy and repression embedding HIV/AIDS "within a cultural discourse of stigma, sexual guilt, and punishment" (Carregal-Romero 2016: 371). In another study, O'Brien argues that the only way of removing shame is to disrupt the stigmatizing cultural narrative of AIDS in Ireland through truth telling (2013: 83). Relating to O'Brien's claim, Fintan Walsh elucidates how queer performance in contemporary Ireland communicates oppression and displaced experiences while fostering more inclusive and enduring practices of support and cultural identification (2016: 1). In the same vein, José Carregal-Romero has examined how the contemporary Irish literary landscape provides LGBTIQ+ struggles with a voice while revealing the constraints and hardships traditionally faced by this community (2021: 2).

The way in which Irish writers are reclaiming long silenced histories remains fundamental in invoking "memories whose preservation and recognition become most relevant for contemporary Ireland" (Caneda-Cabrera & Carregal-Romero 2023: 15). McMahon's work is not the only piece in Irish theatre to explore HIV/AIDS. New voices, such as Neil Watkins, Panti, Amy Conroy and Oisín McKenna, have emerged in the past two decades and are addressing shame and stigma strongly tied not only to HIV/AIDS and the LGBTIQ+

community but also to queer identities in Ireland. O'Brien claims that "resonating with Yes Equality, in its efforts to challenge shame, queer theatre in Ireland is currently characterised by non-traditional dramaturgical strategies that have disrupted the boundaries of narrative dramatic realism, a genre deeply entrenched in Irish theatrical culture" (2017: 251). In terms of the HIV/AIDS crisis, even though the narrative shifted from dying of AIDS to living with HIV after treatment halted the virus, the lack of representation and social awareness fosters a patronizing and stigmatizing discourse that is magnified by fear and ignorance. The real consequence of this can be seen in HIV diagnosis increasing in Ireland, almost doubling the European average back in 2019 (*The Irish Times* 2019). Productions such as *Once Before I Go*, and the previously mentioned selection, have been involved in a wider movement exposing silenced experiences of Irish queer people, while also subverting heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity, honouring the work of LGBTIQ+ activists in Ireland and encouraging audiences to keep fighting against social injustice. This interview was conducted in a coffee shop near Phoenix Park in Dublin on December 19, 2022.

J. Javier Torres-Fernández: When I first read *Once Before I Go* I was amazed at how the events take place in three different contexts across 40 years of LGBTIQ+ existence in Dublin, London and Paris. What were the challenges, if any, of bringing these aspects onstage successfully?

Phillip McMahon: In the text the scene and setting change dramatically. This poses a challenge for any theatre, but The Gate Theatre in Dublin does not have wing and backstage space, so dramatic changes are not possible. Challenges are opportunities for set designers. Our designer, Francis O'Connor, created an abstract set that could become each room mentioned with simple changes. The grand gesture was that each setting had giant numbers as a back wall – the year each scene is set in. This pop culture nod honoured the themes and tone of the play.

JJTF: In terms of characterization, did you have the chance to supervise the staging and acting work directed by Selina Cartmell? Is there anything, in particular, you would emphasize about bringing the script to the stage as the playwright of *Once Before I Go*?

PM: For me, handing a script over is a magic moment. When you trust a director, watching how the piece transforms under their guidance is electric. I watched many rehearsals. What becomes apparent is that there is a lot of research and learning for the non LGBTIQ+ members of the cast. I do not believe in only casting queer actors in queer roles, but I do believe that in this moment and this time, trans performers should get to represent their own stories, which is how it was in *Once Before I Go*. One huge challenge is finding older LGBTIQ+ actors. It is a small but fabulous pool – and tells us that it is even more important to tell their stories.

JJTF: *Once Before I Go* has been defined as sitting on the edge between comedy, tragedy and melodrama. Would you agree with this statement? Also, while delving into the play in a more thorough reading I was able to notice some traces of intertextuality between the canonical American AIDS play *Angels in America* (1995) by Tony Kushner and *Once Before I Go*. Would you say that *Angels* has influenced the contemporary representation of HIV/AIDS in Irish theatre?

PM: Yes – I do agree with this. For me, if you said, "Queer life has been defined as sitting on the edge between comedy, tragedy, and melodrama", I would also say, *YES!*, that is true. So, three genres seemed to reflect my community – the laughter, the drama, the fun, the camp.

Regarding *Angels in America*, there is no *Once Before I Go* without *Angels in America*, that play is the benchmark and I enjoy, and think you are right, that my play speaks to that play too. Your eagle eye caught the *Angels* Easter eggs in *Once Before I Go*!

JJTF: As a playwright, director, and co-creator of THISISPOPBABY, would you say theatre popularity in Ireland has risen in recent years? If so, why?

PM: I could not say for certain that it has. Theatre continues to be stuffy, elitist, boring and staid. THISISPOPBABY looks to disrupt that, and we have a very loyal audience, but theatre as an artform is not breaking through.

JJTF: Turning to the activist undertone in *Once Before I Go*, I inevitably must look back to Panti's Noble Call speech at the Abbey Theatre (February 1st, 2014) in response to the events surrounding the RTÉ controversy on homophobia, gay rights, and censorship, and the Same-Sex Marriage Referendum that was held on May 22nd, 2015.² As co-writer and co-producer of *The Queen of Ireland*, which among other things delves into Panti's role during Ireland's successful campaign for marriage equality; and long-time collaborator in Panti's theatre production, would you say that a connection or relationship can be established between theatre, activism, and politics?

PM: Yes, to speak personally within THISISPOPBABY, when we started making theatre together about fifteen years ago, we were just trying to create a platform and a space for our own voices and our own stories and the stories that we were interested in. It was about dance culture, rave culture, youth culture, queer culture, working class culture... All of these things that we did not see represented in Irish theatre.

For a while there was no agenda beyond "here's our lives, here's an invitation to view it". But as the years went by, we were able to see that what we were actually talking about was our own personal politics. As we grew and came into our own consciousness, our social politics grew too. I guess we were interested in active citizenship. We were interested in fairness and equality. This all coincided with two referendums happening in Ireland: marriage equality and the repeal of the 8th, which is to repeal the line in the constitution about a woman's right to bodily autonomy. We became very involved with both of those referendums and, at the same time, we were really being vocal about how we thought Irish society should function. For us, our work became its own kind of sense of civic activism in a way. We were collaborators with Panti, and still are, for 15 years, and Panti kind of emerged as a really fierce activist who worked with people like Tara Flynn, who was very prominent in the repeal the 8th campaign. It is not that we all share the exact same politics. In a way we did. What we did over 15 years was to build value systems together through the work and conversations with each other. We created a dialogue about how we wanted to live collectively. That has shown through in our work. This way, the work is very socially engaged these days. It is a gathering. Like everything is a party here, queer culture, that kind of party. But within that, we were able to bring politics into it as well. While we do stage plays about politicians and "here's how the Irish politics should work", we talk about civic society and how we might live together too. We also believe that the theatre

² The incident between Panti and RTÉ was popularly named Pantigate. On January 11, 2014, Rory O'Neill went on RTÉ's *The Saturday Night Show* where he discussed homophobia in Ireland and alleged that some Irish journalists were homophobic. O'Neill and RTÉ faced threats with legal action from those mentioned and RTÉ, because of this backlash, censored that part of the interview in their online archives. Brendan O'Connor, the host of the show, publicly apologized on behalf of RTÉ and the public service broadcaster ended up paying 85,000€ to those mentioned by O'Neill. Later, on February 1, 2014, O'Neill, as Panti, responded to the events surrounding this controversy with a Noble Call speech at the Abbey Theatre that achieved attention around the world and is now considered part of LGBTIQ+ history in Ireland.

is kind of an analogue town hall where we can discuss ideas and how we can collectively decide how we might look into future. I think that if you pay attention to the online discourse, everything is toxic at the moment. Clearly, something that maybe we could all do is to take a breath and think about humanity.

JJTF: After marriage equality, the LGBTIQ+ political agenda seemed to suffer from a collective amnesia regarding the AIDS crisis. Once the virus stopped being considered a death sentence, the problem was no longer considered a political issue. However, finding treatment does not mean that the community should forget about what happened. Does HIV/AIDS representation in contemporary theatre function as an educating tool for all society while also reminding us about our silenced history?

PM: This is really interesting, and I was speaking to queer historian Tonie Walsh, whom you may have met and whom we have also made some shows with. We are kind of talking about the absence of gay stories on our stages and in the literature. He also said that there is a feeling that we needed the 30 years before we could really process and understand what happened, and there is something about this time that is just allowing us to collectively unlock something about the AIDS crisis and how we might reckon with that time. This is a conversation that happened pre-Covid. I think a number of things happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. I believe society was able to understand what everybody was talking about in the 1980s and I think it was easier to talk about AIDS. I also believe that there was a lot of people making the link between the two diseases, right? I was also going to talk about ... What was the TV show that was done recently in Channel 4?

JJTF: *It's a Sin* (2021)?

PM: Yes, *It's a Sin*. Sometimes it just takes one gay cultural moment – to my mind it was *It's a Sin*. My play, *Once Before I Go*, which happened at the Gate Theatre, was already scheduled, but once *It's a Sin* happened, they were like, “oh, we know how to talk to a wider audience about it now”, and so sometimes it just takes these kinds of steps. But I think it is important for queer people and Irish society to speak about the place where we are now. There is still a lot to face up to, there is still a lot to be concerned with. My reason for writing *Once Before I Go* was that even though I was not around and I was not living in Ireland in the 1980s, we also have a responsibility to kind of pick up the mantle, right? And even though that story is not necessarily my story, I have always felt that it is historically locked in my DNA because we inherit our queerness, we run away from our families that are in small towns and we find our found family on dance floors and in nightclubs and we inherit all of those stories. There is a lot of documentation, but in Ireland a lot of the history and knowledge about AIDS is an oral history and people like Tonie Walsh and Panti are really important. We must get those stories out while we can. There is an AIDS memorial to be erected in Phoenix Park soon. There was a competition this year, I think, for somebody to design it. This is really important because I think what people also do not understand is the kind of the different communities that share the AIDS story: working class families whose kids were drug users, haemophiliacs, people who get transfusions and this kind of people still do not understand what they consider to be a gay disease.

JJTF: Following up an article published in the *Irish Times* (Dec. 1, 2019), I found that in 2019 HIV diagnoses increased in Ireland, almost doubling the European average, with higher numbers than during the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s. It seems like the long battle against stigma is still ongoing and we see that prevention programmes are not

efficient enough. If the discourses around HIV are strongly stigmatized, and shame is still ingrained in society, how can cultural manifestations or representations of HIV/AIDS help in fighting against political silence and relative inaction?

PM: I think the lack of political will around HIV and AIDS is, to my mind, that you can first of all say it is a contained group. People say, “Oh, well, this is a gay issue”. Second is that we still live in a kind of massively Catholic hangover country where people are able to moralize about how people contract HIV/AIDS. So, what was interesting about the COVID-19 pandemic was just how it was for everybody and so the action was quick. It is about bringing cultural manifestations. It is about like a collective effort, is it not? About bringing a human story that kind of breaks down. It is not even about breaking down stigma, it is about creating more nuanced knowledge around the disease and the effect of it. You always ask yourself, and we theatre people we are very keen to say, “well, art changes the world and people want evidence of that change”. However, this change is incremental, right? You come and see a play and you are like, “oh, I know a little bit more”, and then you see, “oh, there’s an AIDS memorial there”. You kind of know a little bit more. This builds your understanding. Thus, I think cultural manifestations are, for me, a softer way for people to absorb knowledge. They are not going to read a book. They will go to a night in the theatre and say, “oh, that was great”, and they know a little bit more, or they link back to a character, because essentially you are talking about humanity. So, what can art do? Art can create conversation. It can shift the needle on knowledge. It can entertain while at the same time bringing human embodiment to something that can often feel academic with people. The politicians feel like they probably never meet anybody living with HIV/AIDS, and their knowledge is from advertisements of the 80s, or else they might be Catholic, and they have this bias that they do not even know about. This way, seeing a play in one of our main houses, and the thing that is really worth noting is that, like, Ireland only has two what we consider main stages. To see these plays arrive on one of them is really important culturally because if people believe they can sell tickets to a show about AIDS, that is more people wanting to hear about it and learn.

JJTF: In *Once Before I Go*, we observe the legacy of trauma and homophobia from the early AIDS crisis up to contemporary Ireland. How would you say that the kinship established among members of the LGBTIQ+ community helps in providing a system of support and education on queer matters?

PM: I think we kind of touched on it a little bit in the last question. I think it was like in Armistead Maupin’s *Tales of the City* (1978-2014), which was made into a recent TV thing (*Netflix*, 2019). It is from the 70s, it’s basically this queer diary of living in San Francisco. The author talks about your biological family, but your queer family is your logical family, right? So, these are the found family that you come across on dance floors and nightclubs and things like that. Those relationships for me have always been important in terms of knowledge sharing, but also passing down histories. I think it is interesting, as the rise of social media and the decline of the gay bar, how actual history and knowledge become really skewed. We are all talking shit about RuPaul rather than kind of hearing about, “here’s what happened in this bar five years ago”, or whatever. But I think that is what I have always loved about gay spaces, queer bars, LGBTIQ+ venues. It is just how democratic they are in terms of who you will see. There will be an 18-year-old and then there will be like, a 50-year-old. That mix has always been really important for the community. I have been relooking at the question: is there something that I should have said there? Yeah, I do worry about young people not knowing their queer history or there being no appetite to learn queer history.

JJTF: I have recently had the notion of feeling like there is a sense of everything being already achieved, that we don't really have to keep going on with the fight... like a collective amnesia, having the false believe that we are fine.

PM: It is interesting because if there is a matter put in front of their faces, for instance, marriage equality, the energy that was happening, especially from young people, was incredible. Social media is so infectious that people really felt, "I can make a change here". So, if it's a current matter... But I do not know if there is a huge appetite to look back. And I think that we have not reckoned with the AIDS crisis as a society, right? Especially here. To expect your people to know any intimacies of what happened, but also to be flippant if you have to say to like, a 20-year-old, "do you know Judy Garland?". They are like "who?". And you are like, "right, okay". How do we kind of link all of these threads, you know? I think the nice thing about Ireland is that we are a small community, and so it is impossible not to bump into some of this knowledge at some point, which is nice.

JJTF: We live in the so-called Golden Age of Media and Communication, where we see more obvious representation of minorities in mainstream media and more so in streaming services. LGBTIQ+ related content, such as *Pose* (2018-2021) and *Veneno* (2020), has thrived globally. However, increasing representation does not necessarily mean positive representation. Unfortunately, a lot of content falls into stereotypes such as the coming-out story, or tones down the struggles of the community in order to appeal to a wider audience. My question to you is, as a playwright, director, and producer, what makes a story remarkable in its representation of LGBTIQ+ topics?

PM: This is really interesting. You add a little context before: representation does not always mean a positive representation. I think that if we see one more coming out story on stage we will pull our hair out, right? But it is interesting because it is what is urgent. What is worth putting on stage is what is urgent at any given moment or what is urgent in any given year or any given decade. It changes. For instance, in two plays that I directed, one was called *The Year of Magical Wanking* by Neil Watkins, and the other was called *All Dolled Up* by Panti Bliss. One was in 2007 and the other in 2008, I think. In both shows, Panti first and then Neil, both talked about their HIV diagnosis. If you set that down, it would just be another fact, but in the theatre you could feel the energy this brought. These were stories. Now, if you think this is only 15 years ago, these are stories that have never been told. No one had said this on stage in Ireland before. And there was kind of this discretion, especially around Panti's show first... if you went to a bar and you asked "what is the Panti show about?". Nobody mentioned the HIV thing because there was this respect, but not even a stigma, there was a respect of witnessing it in the room. Which is the great thing about live performance, right? People were like, "no, I heard that, and it was shared and I'm not sharing it". Right. That would not happen now because who would care? And then, Neil's play is much more confrontational. It is beautiful for that. Both plays felt really urgent at the time. Panti, if she said it now on stage, the reaction would be like, "yeah, we know. You've been telling us for 15 years". Now there are stories that feel more urgent, which for me it is *Once Before I Go*. It was important to try and introduce a trans character, that them being trans is not their story in the play. However, that also raises the question: do you have ownership over that story? Can you *tell* that story? Is it *your* story to tell? And so, for me, it was. I could tell that much of that story because within my community I am hopefully representing my friends, but I am not in a position to tell that as a lead story. That is not my story. I am side-tracking here... The question was what makes for a good LGBTIQ+

story? Urgency. Stories that we have not heard before. I have worked with Panti and Tonie Walsh, and you think “it’s really important to platform these voices now while we have these people”. Helping these artists to steal a whole life into 60 or 80 minutes that people can sort of get is bombing.

JJTF: As someone heavily involved in LGBTIQA+-related narratives, have you encountered problems when looking for funding?

PM: I think what is really interesting about this question is that we carved out our own path in theatre and in Ireland for a long time. You do not get funding until you are like five years established or something like that. What is interesting is that for our recent show, which was kind of a queer variety thing called *Wake* (2022), which was at Dublin Fringe Festival, we sold 7000 tickets. Twelve years ago, to our festival, which was called Queer Notions, it was very hard to sell 100 tickets because you know the way everyone now goes around saying like “I’m queer, I’m queer”. The word, when we were using that word in 2009 and 2010, even LGBTIQA+ people were kind of afraid of that word, were afraid of attending. The challenge has not always come from funding bodies. Sometimes the challenge has come from the community itself. The discourse has changed so much. We really felt like we were outliers around that time. And now, of course, if you see Dublin Fringe Festival, it is mostly queer work. That is kind of exciting and interesting. But yes, we had built such an audience following that the funders really could not ignore it.

JJTF: Is there always a political undertone to making a statement through art?

PM: In general? No, not necessarily. But I think, for me, the work that I have made is mostly working through a queer art thing. I think that as soon as you present queer bodies on stage you are making a political statement because they have been politicized. This is the case especially in Ireland where, in terms of queer people, I would imagine we have a lot in common with Spain when being taught to hate our own body. There is a real need to help people negotiate sexual and romantic relationships, which has been really challenging. And for it to feel like this kind of mass, this other kind of coming out of sexual liberation ten years of marriage equality will help with that. All of this art has always fed into this because it has just felt like that we have needed to tell our own stories on our own terms in order to be fully accepted members of society. Does all art have a political angle? No. Does mine? Not always intentionally, but yes.

JJTF: The COVID pandemic has inevitably drawn parallels of fear and stigma with the HIV/AIDS crisis. The virus does not discriminate. Would you say that the pandemic has brought back buried stigmas and collective traumas for the LGBTIQA+ community?

PM: I think it has; I do. But I believe that there is a negative and a positive here. Because it has allowed people to tell their stories more. Even if you think about *It’s a Sin*, because of COVID, people were able to hear that story and I think that it has allowed other stories to be told about that time. However, I do think that with the mass deaths... You realize a lot of people have buried a lot of shit over the years and there is something about coming to terms with that, about being able to tell those stories, and for me it is through art, but it also requires finding people who can voice them. Yes, I think the wider society, because of COVID, will be able to hear more stories about HIV/AIDS.

JJTF: Thank you very much for your time and invaluable insights, for sharing your art with us and continuing to foster much-needed cultural representation of LGBTIQ+ history and stories.

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