

Tectonic plates and pressure cookers

by Shannon Sickels (Yee)

Britain and
Ireland **Lives**
Entwined



Shannon Sickels (Yee) is an award-winning playwright and producer whose perspectives as an immigrant, ethnic minority, queer artist–parent with a disability living in Northern Ireland are deeply embedded in her work.

Her *Reassembled, Slightly Askew* uses binaural sonic arts technology to immerse audiences in her autobiographical experience of nearly dying and subsequent acquired brain injury. *Reassembled ...* has received numerous accolades and has toured internationally since 2015. It has been used in medical training, most recently in New York City's Mount Sinai Rehabilitation Hospital.

Shannon was a 2017/18 Arts Council Northern Ireland Major Individual Artist Awardee for her project, *Starf*cker*, exploring popular culture, social media and video projection mapping to tell a story of what makes our stars fall. Her recently published short story, *The Brightening Up Side* (Belfast Stories, Doire Press, 2019), tackles racism and new motherhood.

Shannon is also an LGBTQ+ activist; in 2005 she and her partner, who are currently taking legal action to bring same-sex marriage to Northern Ireland, were the first public civil partnership in the UK.

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I arrived on the island of Ireland on 4 July 2004. My jet-lagged self fell asleep on the drive up from Dublin Airport, but when I woke up, I knew we had crossed into the North. The road signs had changed font and tarmac texture had changed colour. The air felt different, heavier.

This length of time in Belfast is perhaps my fault. My partner, Gráinne, gave me the choice to decide if we would live in Dublin, Galway or Belfast, appreciating the massive culture shock that moving from New York City was. I chose Belfast. I felt an exciting potential, bubbling under the surface – I don't think it was simply the summer's sectarian tensions – there was community, kindness, goodwill, strength and a dedication to creating a better future.

I am now here in Northern Ireland longer than I have lived anywhere else; growing up in a US military family, that isn't difficult. In the process of resisting full cultural naturalisation, I still say car 'trunk' for 'boot', I refuse to call anything 'wee', but I've had to surrender to 'trousers' instead of 'pants' as I'm now a parent. I find myself explaining Northern Ireland's complications when I'm outside it: 'No, you can't use euros in Northern Ireland, you use sterling ... but you can't use Northern Irish sterling in England ...' I confess, there are times when I bite my lip and inch away from large groups of American tourists in search of their Irish heritage.

'Outside' is exactly what I am when I'm here. I am an immigrant, biracial, ethnic minority, queer artist-parent with a disability. Negotiating these multiple minority experiences while living in Northern Ireland is deeply embedded in my work as an artist. Depending on where I am, who I'm with, how much I want to delve into things, my internal borders and identities shift and reshuffle.

'What brought you here?' is a popular question from taxi drivers.
'It must've been love. A man.'

It was for love (but also, it's none of your business).

'Fate,' I usually answer. 'Belfast has been good to me.' I find a neutral place that gives a polite amount of information away, and shift.

Often I'm struck with the out-of-body experience of, 'What am I doing here?' on this island within an island, an island squared, existing between Ireland, England, Europe and the United States. I can feel the tectonic plates of change here, shifting between stagnation and progress, grating against each other, creating a pressure cooker in Northern Ireland.

Previously, I was teaching English and history in New York City public schools. As an educator, I've always been passionate about the importance of storytelling in child development and healthy identity formation, particularly for those whose experiences are hidden or silenced from the mainstream, deliberately or not. I believe child development and language development are journeys of self-determination, expressions of freedom¹ to be supported and facilitated by a nurturing education system and teaching practices that utilise students' diversity as strengths. This is particularly relevant in storytelling. 'Children, like adults, use narrative to shape and reshape their lives ... stories, then, have interrelated evaluative and social functions.'² We use language, and story, to articulate who we are to ourselves and each other.

This applies to my work writing theatre. Increasingly, the theatre I'm excited about creating is that which breaks down artistic borders. By putting audiences at the centre of the experience to actively construct a narrative,³ versus passively digesting information, theatre makes use of our neurological hardwiring to create meaning and make sense of the world around us, and our place in it. Identity is part of that relationship-making process, the relationship we have to ourselves and each other.

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1. Paulo Freire wrote about education as a practice of freedom in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968).
 2. Dyson and Genishi (*The Need for Story*, 1994 National Council of Teachers of English).
 3. Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed' practice of the 1970s is heavily influenced by Freire, applying Freire's theories to theatre as means of promoting social and political change.

Being half-Chinese and half-Caucasian from the United States, I'm used to the 'hyphenated identity', the challenge of identity in a third space, identity by default – where you're 'both' yet 'neither', you're 'other' and as defined in contrast to others. This 'third identity' seems prevalent in Northern Ireland; I've heard from friends here that they don't feel Irish – after all, you can't even get RTÉ on television up North – or English, despite how they are labelled when they go travelling.

In artist conferences and events, I often hear colleagues say, 'I want to be known as an artist first, not a queer artist, female artist, artist of colour, an artist with a disability.' I disagree. All those aspects are part of who I am, they inform the way I perceive the world and the way the world receives me. These aspects and the way they intersect form my voice. I am proud of every one, but the act of nurturing each as a minority in the minority has made me weary. I am weary of and livid about the stories of the many communities I'm a part of being carelessly sidelined, purposely omitted, or insidiously silenced.

My journey has been one of self-expression through writing and creating theatre.

To me, the personal is inherently political. My arts are a form of my activism, the largest aspect to date being LGBTQ rights.

Same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland was the last place in the UK to decriminalise homosexuality in 1983, after an individual, Jeffrey Dudgeon, took a case to the European Court of Human Rights. Years later in 2004, despite relentless hard work by activists, the civil partnership legislation only came into Northern Ireland because the Northern Irish government had collapsed and was under direct rule from Westminster. If Northern Ireland had been run by its local politicians at the time, the legislation would have been blocked, as evidenced by the lengthy track record of abuse of the Petition of Concern, a mechanism designed from the Good Friday Agreement to protect, not persecute, minorities. Paperwork processing times were shorter in Northern Ireland than in England, landing Northern Ireland in the history books. Gráinne and I had the UK's first public civil partnership in Belfast, followed by Chris and Henry Flanagan-Kane. Our supporters outnumbered the haters, literally, who chanted 'Sodomy Is Sin' on our way in, sang church hymns during our vows and blocked our black taxi from leaving the grounds of Belfast City Hall afterwards.

Consequently, the last place in the UK to decriminalise homosexuality became the first in the UK to have a public civil partnership and currently is the last in both the UK and island of Ireland to allow same-sex civil marriage. Over a decade passed, with no further progress in Northern Ireland. Stagnation.

Shift.

In 2015, the grassroots marriage equality campaign in the South came to glorious fruition. I will always remember the great diaspora of Irish young people arriving at the airport to vote, to create change, to know that they could do so, to actively shift the narrative they wanted to be a part of for their future. I remember being at Dublin Castle for the results of the referendum, standing next to a straight couple, baby-wearing their daughter all day. 'We don't know what's ahead for her in life,' they explained to Gráinne and I. '[By voting 'yes'] we are in a position to make her life better. How could we not?' I remember the following morning, when Gráinne and I held hands on our walk into Dublin city centre, that we felt braver, stronger, justified, unabashedly visible in a way we hadn't realised we weren't. I remember returning to Belfast and slumping back into invisibility out of cautious habit.

Shift.

Around the time of civil partnership, there were rumblings of a need for a queer arts festival in Northern Ireland, to showcase the talent here and broaden the inspiration of what queer artistic expression here could be. I was one of a handful of queer artists who co-founded OUTBURST in 2007, a ten-day multidisciplinary arts festival which has grown from programming local, UK and Irish queer artists, to expanding its reach and legacy beyond those borders, building connection and community by proclaiming LGBTQ stories through artistic self-expression. Validating and celebrating LGBTQ stories is a matter of life or death for many; as of 2016, more people have taken their own lives than the number of people killed during the Troubles, and 35 per cent of the LGBT community self-harm, compared to 13 per cent in the rest of the UK.⁴

4. Murray, N (2018) 'Suicide rates in Northern Ireland are rising—it's easy to see why, yet the government is doing little about it.' *The Independent*.

Building community in the Troubles

One of the story-based projects I premiered was *Trouble*, an interview-based theatrical archive, about growing up LGBT during the Troubles. It was produced by Theatreofpluck, the only publicly funded LGBTQ theatre company in Northern Ireland, and performed by over 40 of the province's well-known actors.

These were stories I had always wanted to hear since arriving, and felt even more passionate about capturing since the civil partnership legislation had passed. I was uncertain about my place in running the project; being American, I had already received my share of 'Who does this American think she is?' backlash doing a few community development projects. Then I was told I was actually well placed to run the interviews because the very outsider status I was concerned about was a strength; people would open up to me because I didn't have an unconscious bias from growing up here.

I learned that the LGBT scene thrived during the Troubles; when nobody dared to venture into the city centre, 'the gays did'. Nobody cared what side you were from, everyone was invested in a good night out. Every single person I interviewed of the 46 said the Troubles and violence and bigotry stayed out of the gay scene. These stories of camaraderie and community are the antidote to the dividing and conquering narrative too often passed down through history, that the media perpetuate. So I wanted to archive these stories for not just the LGBTQ community, but for the historic record, to combat the limited narrative about the Troubles with true-life testimonies of LGBTQ people who have navigated more than 40 years of living, loving and building community in Northern Ireland.

An education researcher, Jerome Bruner, states, 'a life is not "how it was" but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold.'⁵ The stories shared with me from the LGBTQ interviewees were universal – we all are on individual journeys discovering who we are, who we love, and why we matter in this world, regardless of our sexual orientation. A version of *Trouble* was exhibited in Belfast City Hall, during December 2015, the ten-year anniversary of the civil partnership legislation, broadening the visible history of the Troubles to new audiences.

5. Bruner, J (1994) 'Life as Narrative', in Dyson and Genishi (ed.) *The Need for Story*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

While Gráinne and I weren't part of LGBTQ history during the Troubles, we joined the narrative after being the first public UK civil partnership in 2005. We didn't want the media attention or personal risk of making history; we did want to do our part to address the gender imbalance in LGBT visibility, and to give homage to the tireless work of activists who came before us to make that moment possible. On a personal level, we especially wanted the rights and recognition of 'next of kin' status if anything tragic happened to either one of us. Little did we think that only three years later, we would have to use it.

Reassembled, Slightly Askew

Writing was always a way to make sense of myself, the world around me and my place in the world. When I suddenly woke up in the acute neurosurgical ward of the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast in 2008, paralysed down the left side of my body, with a section of my skull beneath the skin of my abdomen, I knew I would eventually write and create art about it.

Reassembled, Slightly Askew is an autobiographical, audio-based artwork about my experience of falling critically ill with a rare brain infection and my journey of rehabilitation with an acquired brain injury. Audience members experience *Reassembled* ... individually, listening to the audio via headphones, while lying on a hospital bed. The audio technology makes the sound three-dimensional, causing listeners to feel they are inside my head, viscerally experiencing my descent into coma, brain surgeries, early days in the hospital, and re-integration into the world with a hidden disability. It was a new kind of storytelling, never done before about this topic in this way, that places the listener safely in the first-person perspective.

Theatre director Anna Newell, sonic artist Paul Stapleton, dramaturg Hanna Slattne, choreographer Stevie Prickett and I set about a five-year creative 'stumbling forward with confidence' (as Anna accurately put it), to try and integrate sonic arts technology, sound, drama and movement to capture my experience. It was the first piece I made after having my disability, and about my disability. During the five years it took to make, the artistic team and I found new ways of communicating across artistic disciplines. I ran focus groups with the general public, arts and medical professionals, and collaborated with

my medical team, all the while securing funding and support from the Wellcome Trust, the University of Atypical, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Queen's University Belfast, and the Metropolitan Arts Centre. Since its world premiere at the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival at the MAC (2015) in Belfast, *Reassembled ...* has toured across Northern Ireland, England, Canada, to Hong Kong, to Dublin, to London in arts festivals and as medical training for doctors, surgeons and healthcare professionals to improve their practice and empathy for their patients.

While *Reassembled ...* takes audiences through the first 18 months of my being 'disassembled, and reassembled, slightly askew', audience feedback has been that *Reassembled ...* is also a love story. Gráinne and I were catapulted into a world where she witnessed my potential death, became my carer, and we adapted to my newly acquired brain injury world together. It is a story of terror, discovery, humour, but above all, hope. I didn't set out to make a piece about a queer couple facing trauma. It was a facet of the emotional journey of the story. Audiences left *Reassembled ...* with not only greater empathy for hidden disabilities, but also for LGBTQ relationships.

The working title of *Reassembled ...* was Recovery. As I progressed along that journey of shifting my identity and learning how to manage my new 'askew'-ed brain, the word 'recovery' implied a medical model of deficit – something is broken, it can be fixed and return to the way it was. I will never be back to the way I was; at best I have learned how to manage my disability. Despite my fear of never being able to work, or even walk, again, I began the challenging and humbling journey of identifying as an artist with a disability.

Shift.

My disability became a strength when I was commissioned to work with Replay Productions under the brilliant vision of Anna Newell, who is revolutionising access to theatre for the most overlooked – babies and children or young people with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD). Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states children have a right to engage in play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts.⁶ This 'right to play' is often denied to children with additional needs, where physical interactions, usually

6. <http://ipaworld.org/childs-right-to-play/article-31/summary-gc17/>

personal care, are primarily transactional, and the PMLD child/young person has things done to them rather than with them. As part of the artistic team, my sensory sensitivities from my acquired brain injury helped set the pacing and craft the story of *BLISS*, an immersive theatrical production that came into special schools in Northern Ireland, bringing PMLD students into the dome-performance space in individual boats and immersed in beauty, through song, visuals, textures, and play. The actors tailored their interactions with each young person, deferring to them as audience members at the centre of their own theatrical experiences as they actively constructed them.

So I Can Breathe This Air

As an ethnic minority writer, I've always been passionate about broadening the stories told in Northern Ireland theatre, but there are limited opportunities to do so, particularly as Terra Nova Productions, Northern Ireland's only professional intercultural theatre production company, has had its funding cut.

The opportunity to highlight stories from fellow immigrants came about with *So I Can Breathe This Air*, an outreach initiative and audio-based theatre project which shared various stories of LGBTQ ethnic minority individuals who live in Northern Ireland. It was run by Dean Lee of the Rainbow Project's Gay Ethnic Group (GEG), a Northern-Irish born Chinese licensed counsellor, in partnership with Theatreofpluck. GEG provided year-round social activities to build community for LGBTQ individuals who also were from ethnic minorities, many of whom, but not all, were seeking asylum in Northern Ireland because of their sexuality.

GEG members participated in a range of arts-based workshops, went to see theatre, and had the option to be interviewed anonymously by me about their experiences as a 'multiple minority' living in Northern Ireland. Many of them wanted to share their stories, but didn't; they didn't want to revisit the traumatic experience of being smuggled from their home country, or jeopardise the delicate stability they were trying to create in Northern Ireland against the barriers of being denied proper work, housing, and safety in political status.

So I Can ... blurred the borders of race, sexuality, nationality and gender through an escorted soundwalk that layered the audio-based narrative with the physical surroundings of Belfast city centre to create additional meaning to the intimate stories from the interviews.

The project was showcased in Belfast, Newry and Derry Pride in 2018, and in the Eastside Arts Festival, but also in academic research and conferences within 'Sounding Conflict: From Resistance to Reconciliation' carried out by Dr Stefanie Lehner (Queen's University Belfast) to better understand how sound, music, and storytelling practices can contribute to conflict transformation.

The importance of story

We are neurobiologically hard-wired to create meaning from what we see around us, and through story, our brains have the ability to mirror each other in basic acts of empathy and understanding. 2019 marks the 50th anniversary of the start of the Troubles, and these stories continue to dominate, as people grieve, purge and try to heal. The Northern Ireland 'Peace and Reconciliation' agenda is fundamentally to promote compassion and understanding for difference and foster strength in diversity, rather than the sectarian binaries that are presented in the media and hardened by Northern Irish politicians. Contemporary Northern Ireland feels like it is viciously struggling to construct its identity, one that is defined by itself, rather than by default and by that which it is not.

In *Hatch*, a short comedy I wrote in 2007, a group of post-conflict chickens who have gone from battery cages to free-range living negotiate the mental effects of the removal of physical borders. At one point, they argue about whether the distant landscape contains a mountain or a molehill. Different realities may be perceived, but they are realities nonetheless. Today in Belfast, the new purple Glider bus connects working-class Lenadoon in west Belfast to trendy Ballyhackamore in east Belfast: how many people from those neighbourhoods (or north Belfast's Ardoyne or south Belfast's the Village) truly feel comfortable socialising anywhere in Belfast, year-round? From what I can see, the borders remain, internalised and self-censoring, but can be changed by our children and young people as they are creating our future through their daily construction of their lived stories.

Shift.

As the world appears to crumble around us with democratic processes corrupted, media impartiality and credibility weakened, rainforests on fire and the worst of humanity making nightly headlines from war, violence, and torture, it is time for a drastic reset.

How often do we consume instead of critically think, bully instead of constructively critique? How can we consciously co-exist, collaborate, and improve? We have the DNA of pack animals – we rely on each other, whether we like it or not. We are afraid of each other at first, and must wrangle with the power of the group, with all its cruelty and kindness. The arts enable us to collectively celebrate, grieve, purge terror, and combat the isolation that allows us to be divided, told a different narrative, and be conquered.

Fundamentally, we are emotional beings and we are the same – vulnerable and resilient, caring and selfish, terrified and courageous, arrogant and unconfident, thoughtful and thoughtless.

Artistic experiences provide us with the grounding journeys that remind us of this. Through artistic expression, we can connect to our shared hope, our terror, our fear and a gathering of our courage. The arts and the function they serve for storytelling and self-expression are essential to our adult lives, but especially to our children's as their identity formation is more nascent, delicate and vulnerable. We must diversify the stories that are told and develop the diverse voices out there, for as theatre director Anne Bogart points out, 'those who can formulate the stories that make the world understandable will redefine the experience of those who live in it.' To make art, to tell our stories, and to hear each other's, is a radical and essential act, for us alone, for us together as a society, and for our future so that we may survive the shifting tectonic plates and change the course of events exacerbating the global pressure cooker which is about to explode.



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