

New stage show inspired by Glasgow school kids tells how young Scots are stepping out from the shadow of sectarianism

THIRD year pupils from Rosshall Academy in Glasgow inspired playwright Martin O'Connor's new theatre production with their refreshing insights in to sectarian behaviour.



Drama students from Ross Hall Academy

SCOTLAND'S children are emerging from the shadow of sectarianism . The teenagers believe bigotry is less about green versus blue than it is about cultural clashes and homophobia.

That's what came out of a project that sent playwright Martin O'Connor into a Glasgow secondary school.

Third year pupils from Rosshall Academy opened his eyes with the insights in their own plays.

Tonight, professional actors will bring their words to life on stage at the city's Tron Theatre.

It's part of the theatre's Football Colours Allowed – a multi-stranded, week-long response to the issue of sectarianism in Scotland.

Martin, 36, said: "It feels like the young people are on the verge of moving on from this. It's the older generation who are perpetuating it.

“It’s not that they’re ignorant about it, it’s just not as much a part of their daily thinking any more. A lot of them don’t go to the football.



Playwright Martin O'Connor

“One thing that has been really clear is that it’s a generational thing, which I see as a positive. You wonder how aware of it young people are, unless they go to the football or talk about it with their family.

“I went to a Catholic school but wasn’t interested in football so I didn’t actually have to deal with it much.

“And not everyone who goes to the football engages in violent or sectarian behaviour.”

Rosshall teacher Kirsty Murphy, 29, echoed the hope that school workshops – part of the theatre’s Progressive Playwright initiative – hint that positive times lie ahead.

The school's head of performing arts said: "I've worked in Catholic schools as well as Rosshall Academy, which is non-denominational, and I can say from experience that it's not so prevalent among pupils now as it might have been previously.

"This project has helped our pupils explore beyond that traditional viewpoint. We're looking at the issue as a whole, not narrowing it down.

"Pupils have written their own short pieces, individually or in groups, and the ideas have been developed in rehearsals.

"For 14 and 15-year-olds, it's a real undertaking and, with Martin's support, the work is great quality and has been a great experience for them all. It has been very hopeful.

"More theatre companies should engage with schools on this level."

But playwright Martin voiced fears that moves championed by Scottish Labour leader Jim Murphy, specifically reintroducing alcohol in stadiums and repealing the Offensive Behaviour at Football Act, could derail the progress. He said: "The work we've been doing is really relevant now, especially when politicians talk about lifting the ban on sectarian singing at matches and also introducing alcohol at games.

"It feels like we're almost out of the woods with the younger generation. But those moves would be a step in the wrong direction."

Football and religion formed part of the pupils' response but the project spawned a far wider awareness of bigotry in modern Scotland.

Martin said: "They tapped into some really interesting things, writing about generational differences, people coming from religions which don't permit wearing certain clothes and drinking alcohol while still trying to fit in with the other children.

"One story was about two boys in a relationship trying to keep it quiet." For Tron Theatre associate producer Michael John O'Neill, the Football Colours Allowed project has a special resonance.

Growing up in Co Londonderry, Northern Ireland, he thought nothing of the windows in his aunt's house rattling when bombs went off at the Army barracks down the road.

But when he moved to Glasgow, he couldn't fathom why people were fighting in religion's name here, too.

Michael, 26, said: "The issue exists in Scotland like a memorial to sectarianism, a sectarian theme park, where all the rides are green or blue but you can get off at the end and go back to your life.

“Before I moved to Scotland in 2007, I wasn’t even aware there was a problem with sectarianism here.

“I was surprised and annoyed. Something that didn’t make sense to me at home didn’t make sense to me here either. You’re actually stealing our embarrassment.

“It feels like an activity for people here and was a strange thing to encounter.

“But I now realise the sectarian issues in Scotland are like cousins of ours in Northern Ireland. They have the same starting points but have grown up in their own cultures.”

Michael has brought together a wide programme of events around the issue, running all week in the theatre.

There is an appearance from author Alan Bissett, reading from his upcoming play about Graeme Souness, and a performance from west Belfast theatre company Man In The Moon.

Glasgow Women’s Library will host Mixing The Colours, an event exploring how sectarianism in Scotland impacts on women.

Michael said: “I do think they’re running the last few rides at the theme park before the whole thing collapses on itself.

“One guy at the Tron is a Celtic fan and got really angry that we were associating football with sectarianism. He hates the fact that something he loves, something about sharing traditions of community and family, is labelled under sectarianism.

“It was great to get that reaction because that’s exactly what we want people to do – question it and talk about it.”

Football Colours Allowed, until March 7, Tron Theatre, Glasgow. Visit tron.co.uk for full programme details.