

About a Boy

Posted by Martin O'Connor, Wed 30 Sep 2009

Better known for his one man quip-filled specials, **Martin O'Connor** is bringing on the family in a Glasgaw commission.

Can you talk a little about your route into theatre?

I started as a jobbing actor, working with a few small companies before landing a season at the Citz and from there worked with a Norwegian company on a tour and TAG. Then it all went a bit quiet until *I Confess* in 2005 where I performed my own 5-minute monologue in a one-to-one set up. The piece went down really well and I approached newly-appointed, fresh-faced programmer Jackie Wylie to turn the 5 minutes into a more substantial one-man show. This was *Manifesto* which I performed to a small audience in the boardroom at the Arches (the first such use of the space). Then for the Arches Theatre Festival I wrote and performed *Zugzwang* - another solo show about therapy and male identity crises. From there I started to carve out a process for making and creating my own theatre.

What influences your work these days?

Influences tend to come mostly from newspapers and media - I have been responding to current situations and reports dealing with masculinity/gender issues, the influence of TV, what it means to be Scottish and the perception of young people.

In the past, you have dealt with issues of masculinity, usually in hilarious one man shows. How was it working on a script-based piece, with more actors and being the director?

I suppose I started out looking at these themes, yes, but I think that was because people like to put a label on you when marketing and so it became "Martin who does the stuff about men" when actually I think at that point I was just starting out - trying out the ideas that interested me rather than trying to make a political statement. Where I am now with the themes that interest me is where I think I've been heading to all along. My previous shows were also script-based and this is the medium that I prefer to work in. I see no difference to writing a piece for myself to perform and writing a piece for others to perform - and this is very important as I don't want to suddenly feel that I have to now become "a writer" - I'm still looking at the same themes in the same language and presenting them in a similar way. Obviously there will be differences but I want this piece to be seen as a development of my work - not a radical change. The actors will be telling stories - plainly and simply - in a language that is recognisable and accessible to all audiences. I'm still working in monologues but working in a different structure - letting the characters tell the same story from their own points of view as it is happening to them. I have assembled a great company of actors and trust that their authenticity and insight will help the performance retain a sense of relevance and familiarity.

Have you retained the humour, or does this mark the O'Connor foray into dark, depressing territory?

Humour is still absolutely a major part of the script. I'm writing about a typical Glasgow family - mother and three sons - and although there is tragedy in this piece (perhaps more than I have ever written about) there is still the local voice that always finds the familiar in the chaos that is surrounding them. I remember hearing a Glasgow mother on the news appealing for her missing daughter and when asked to comment on the upheaval of her life all she could say was that she was sorry she didn't have a carpet in the living room when the police came over. This way of looking at events keeps the action in the domestic, now, everyday - and that's what I'm aiming for. Not a cheap jibe at the expense of someone else - or a patronising stab at the working classes - but a recreation of a voice that we all know and hear every day. Whenever I felt that I was writing too flowery or descriptive or too "me", I was always conscious to strip it back and remind myself of how people actually speak, and try to capture that.

What influenced you to go for a family drama?

Again, I think I've been building up to this - my previous solo show *Reality* was about three young men and the choices they face in modern day Scotland which continually referenced the family, the church, the education system as influences in their lives. This time I have a bigger platform to explore these issues so I now have the chance to look at the whole family and their situation. With my last performance *Inner Circle* I tried to make a comment on our individual responsibilities to our society and how we are programmed to function without being aware of ourselves - and that has provided the basis for this new play.

How does this fit into the Glasgay programme and its themes?

This year the festival is all about the family - my piece sits nicely alongside the *Maw Broon Monologues* and *Memory Cells* - both dealing with relationships between parent and child/guardian and ward - and although not necessarily a gay show, *Playing Houses* explores the lives of young people gradually becoming adults - dealing with awakening responsibilities, burgeoning sexuality and latent desires. I've been influenced by Tennessee Williams and his focus on the oppressiveness, the heat and the secrets that are bubbling under, waiting to come out. So there is a lot there for people to enjoy not just gay audiences. I'd like to think that I'm making something that is accessible to everyone and I think that is slowly becoming the ethos of Glasgay - to attract those outsiders who don't see their place in society and to show them that they have a voice and something to contribute.

You've been involved in Glasgay for years now. How do you see your place in the Glasgay aesthetic?

Steven Thomson (programmer) first saw *Zugzwang* which dealt with various men discussing their fears and anxieties in the modern age. He was attracted to the work because it dealt with issues such as body image, penis size, sexuality, transgender and father-son relationships. I think he saw it could have an important place in his programme. As I have said, since then I have been looking at wider socio-political topics but I think a show like *Playing Houses* still deserves to be in the festival due to it's exploration of those on the fringes of society.