

## ***Creative Ageing Writing Bursary 2021: Reflections Of A Theatre Maker***

Reflecting on my practice doesn't come easily to me. I'm quite a spontaneous person and looking back if I'm honest, is not one of my strong suits. If maturity has taught me anything however, it is that making time to stop and take stock is invaluable.

The now in which we find ourselves represents only our current iteration after all. We can witness our physical evolution through time in the photographs we take, but this can't tell us everything. We know our cells are replacing themselves at a rate of knots, and perhaps like the old broom with the new head and the new handle, we feel we are constantly shedding versions of ourselves as we move through life, like snakes shedding skins.

This idea appeals to me, I have to admit. It suggests constant renewal and it chimes with my desire to feel new and up-to-date. But it also exhausts me, if I'm honest. As I reached and passed the half century, I was glad that experience had stuck to me and perhaps slowed me down a little. That it had wrapped itself around me so that in fact I feel more like an onion than a snake.

When I wrote my first play in 1996 (around the same time the Bealtaine Festival was launched), it was a significant moment. I had never written a play before. I had written stand-up comedy - so that was a start - but not a script for a fictional world with characters and action to be turned into a coherent piece of live theatre. Though that may sound like a daunting prospect, I was not daunted at the time. I lacked fear. I was a young person after all. I had the confidence of inexperience and I was filled with a huge energy for this new creative outlet. It felt like exactly the right thing to do.

Twenty-five years later I'm still writing plays and making theatre and it still feels right, just a lot, lot harder. I'm genuinely surprised at some of the twists and turns I've taken over that time, and the layers that have consequently been added to me. I could never have predicted or planned my career path, but the significant turning points do present themselves more clearly in retrospect.

In 2006, for example, ten years after my first play, I presented a show called *Play About My Dad* at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin. This was a departure for me as it was an autobiographical performance made in response to the death of my father,

Barry. This bereavement was such a shock at the time – dad was fifty-eight, only three years older than I am now - that it emotionally hijacked me. I felt compelled to write about it, perhaps because I was trying to come to terms with the reality of that experience for the very first time.

I jumped in feet first. Fearless and with limited reflection, and not fully considering that I knew nothing about the creative use of personal material and what it would be like to share that publicly. It was actually quite tough. I wanted to communicate the pain of grief and I wanted to talk to the audience directly, but I remember a nagging feeling at the time that I wasn't fully in control of the material.

Re-watching a video of that show, I can see more clearly what my concerns were. Hindsight, as they say, is twenty-twenty, but looking back is also an incredibly valuable tool. There are definitely things in *Play About My Dad* that I would not include now; they are too raw or too personal or just too undigested. (I'd love to go back in time and give myself a big hug). But once the piece settles down, it is better than I had given it credit for. Despite its flaws, it is brave. Despite its brashness, it is sincere, and when it works well it does show the impact of grief and how it can turn a person's life upside down. It is moving. This show taught me a lot – definitely about how I process loss - but also about how powerful theatre can be when it works and what a challenge it is to make it work consistently.

This kind of realisation is a tricky one. With it you can lose the fearlessness that started you off and propelled you forward. You understand the potential to fail – and I'm not talking about bad reviews here – I mean when by your own standards you can't make the work on the stage match the idea in your head. When this happens, the only way to move forward and not give up, is to acknowledge that failure might actually help you succeed (or “fail better”) next time. That despite the desire to never think about it again – to shed it and leave it behind – keeping all your experiences with you may actually stand to you.

In May of this year (2021), fifteen years later, I presented another piece of theatre about the death of a parent. This time my mother, Margaret. The show, called *On A House Like A Fire*, named for a mis-remembered phrase, is about the experience of remembering Margaret as a younger and older woman. When she saw *Play About My Dad*, Margaret jokingly asked if I would make a piece about her. I had not thought I would, but after her death, and through a reflection on memory itself sparked by her diagnosis with Alzheimer's, I started to collect ideas and material. I

didn't know if it would work, or if I would put it in front of an audience even. Writing it was less of a compulsion this time and more like spending time with my mum.

On paper *On A House Like A Fire* sounds like a very similar piece – it's a true story about a parent who dies in tragic circumstances. In fact it is very different. It's the work of an older person for one thing. I think because of that I've managed to make more space between myself and my mother's privacy, and the show as a piece of public performance. Also, as I wrote in collaboration with the composer Brian Keegan, combining my words and his music, there was an added level of objectivity in the process, which was extremely helpful. This piece is a memoir rather than an autobiography. It is a synthesis of material rather than a recounting. It is less personally explicit, and therefore, I think more universal.

Reflecting now on both shows I don't think *On A House Like A Fire* is a better piece of theatre than *Play About My Dad*. It's just a more experienced piece of theatre. Without the former, as raw as it was in parts, I don't think I could have made the latter. One layer of experience adding to the next.

As a theatre maker I am definitely still learning and grateful for that. I don't think that age automatically offers a gateway to wisdom, but what it can give you – through the invisible but tangible layers that life adds on - is a sense of when something is working, of when it's right. Some people call this intuition, studies suggest it is actually the absorption of experience into the subconscious mind.

Like anyone deepening their know-how over time, I've benefited from practising throughout my life. I hope to keep making theatre for as long as I can. To keep increasing my understanding and appreciation of what makes live performance work. At this stage in life I don't want to shed anything, I want to hang on to it all. A good onion after all, has lots of layers.

**Michelle Read**  
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*'On A House Like A Fire' was part of the Bealtaine At Home Festival in May of this year and will tour in 2022. Michelle's new play 'Bang!' about love and identity opens in October at Smock Alley Theatre as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival 2021.*