

**"Crippling up is the twenty-first century's answer to blacking up":  
Conversation with Kaite O'Reilly on theatre, feminism and disability**

By Jozefina Komporály, De Montfort University, Leicester

Kaite O'Reilly was the winner of the Peggy Ramsay award for *Yard* (Bush Theatre, 1998), a major success both in the UK and abroad, running for over two years at the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin. Her other theatre work includes *Banshees* (Royal Court Young Writers Festival), *Belonging* (Birmingham Rep, 2000), *Peeling* (Birmingham Rep, 2003), *SMAC2K* (Disability Arts commission 2003), *Perfect* (Contact Theatre, Manchester 2004; Manchester Evening News best new play) and *Henhouse* (Arcola Theatre, 2004). Germany, Austria, Poland, France, Spain and Australia. She has written *Lives Out Of Step* for Radio 3, and wrote and directed the screenplay *Mouth* for British Screen/Channel 4. Her short story "Sight" included in the *Mustn't Grumble* anthology (The Women's Press) won the MIND/Allan award.

O'Reilly, who was previously visually impaired, has been experimenting with the dramaturgical potential of juxtaposing spoken English, British Sign Language and Sign Supported English for many years. She has worked as a writer and director with Common Ground Sign Dance Theatre and as a dramaturg/tutor on *Off The Page*, developing disabled writers with North West Disability Arts Forum. She was also involved with disPlay4, a two year development project with writernet.org, Graeae Theatre Company and Soho Theatre, mentoring four disabled writers. She is editor of *Shelf Life*, an anthology by writers with a reduced life expectancy for the National Disability Arts Forum ([www.ndaf.org](http://www.ndaf.org)). Currently she is the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Creative Fellow in the School of Performance Arts at Exeter University, working on the research through practice project "Alternative Dramaturgies Informed by a Disability and d/Deaf Perspective" and tutoring on the MA in Playwriting and Script Development.

This interview was prompted by O'Reilly's collaboration with Graeae, Britain's leading theatre company of practitioners with physical and sensory impairments. *Peeling*, scripted by O'Reilly, was directed and designed by Jenny Sealey, costume design by Kevin Freeman, and premiered at The Door, Birmingham Repertory Theatre, in February 2002 before embarking on a national tour ending at the Soho Theatre, London. The play toured to the Edinburgh Festival as part of the British Council "best of British" showcase in 2003 and also performed



in Ireland (The Project, Dublin) and France. The play won the [www.theatre-in-wales](http://www.theatre-in-wales) best drama award in 2003, and was published by Faber in 2002 and adapted by O'Reilly for BBC Radio 3 (aired on 28 September 2003). Photos of *Peeling* courtesy of Patrick Baldwin (<http://www.patrickbaldwin.com>).

**Interview taken on 6 June 2005 at the British Library, London.**

JK: How do you negotiate being a theatre practitioner with your affiliation to academia?

KO'R: I am the recipient of an AHRC Creative at Exeter University. This is the best gig I ever had, because it allows me to follow my research through practice and to reflect on practice, publishing essays on the topic. I have taught on several playwriting courses, but I am usually in a particular department for a short time, because it is very hard to be a full-time academic and a practitioner at the same time. Doors are opening more to practitioners to reflect on their own processes, research as practice is viable now. My attachments are usually as writer in residence, and this fellowship is for three years, thus finite, and allows me to focus on a project that wouldn't normally get funded outside this marriage between university, the AHRC and the profession. It really allows for interesting work to happen. Practitioners like myself, who are rather mercurial and maverick, are encouraged to stop and reflect and actually start writing about their practice. The AHRC and academic connection particularly helps my more experimental work, usually unfunded and invisible, within disability and deaf culture. At the moment I am trying to bring this experimental strand in line with the profile I have as a mainstream playwright. I am also supervising students on the MA in Playwriting and Script Development, which makes you as a tutor reflect on your own process as well; working closely with a handful of students is a symbiotic, cyclical connection. My attachment, however, is as a practitioner, I don't do lectures or theoretical modules.

JK: How do you see the relationship between your own creative work and women's theatre/women in theatre/feminist theatre?

KO'R: I am a feminist without a doubt. I gave a lecture to some students on feminist theatre a few years ago, saying provocatively that I am a "fucking feminist"; people were shocked by the "F" word: "feminist". It was a dirty word for a very long time. I know that I learned a lot, and I want to acknowledge and be respectful to my ancestors (as in Eugenio Barba's meaning of "ancestors"): the women playwrights who have influenced/inspired me. I don't like being boxed though, because people either go are you a feminist or an Irish or a disabled writer? I am all of these. Although I'm comfortable and even proud to be connected with feminist theatre and with writers who are feminist, I get worried that we are limited by being seen just



in that box. For instance, I did a play at the Birmingham Rep on the relationship of the Irish community in Birmingham to the English community at the time of the Birmingham pub bombing and I was seen as an Irish writer. When *Peeling* came out, people went "she is the Irish writer how come she is doing this strange feminist disabled stuff?" Then I got labelled as the disabled writer. A year later I did a piece called *Perfect* at the Contact Theatre in Manchester which was an extraordinary piece of collaboration, it used computer-generated imagery with live action on the stage and people just did not know where to put me. I think people like to have a convenient label to stick on your forehead. It makes things easy and it's lazy. I do my utmost to keep surprising people and to keep reinventing myself. I am affiliated to all these things, and I am very strong in my politics, but I don't want to be just one thing.

JK: Would you consider yourself influenced by feminist theory or by writers with a feminist agenda writing in other genres?

KO'R: By Hroswitha, the wonderful, tenth century German woman playwright. She was writing drama at a time when drama was thought not to be written. I like using humour and intimidation in comedy as Franca Rame does. Influences include Caryl Churchill, constantly reinventing herself; Anna Furse through Blood Group; the Magdalena Project and Jill Greenhalgh; the female playwrights working towards the vote and writing under pseudonyms; Cunniff Stunts. I would not necessarily quote any particular approach or theorist, but with *Peeling* the politics of the gaze was important. The three women characters are professional performers, thereby deliberately placed in a context and profession which is about appearance, youth, vitality and being desirable. Yet these three women are unconventional to look at from a mainstream perspective and its notions of beauty. Part of what I wanted to do was to explore notions of appearance, to challenge and allow different notions of beauty and what a female body may look like on stage, and for the audience to look at these women who I personally find beautiful. One of my favourite moments is when the least powerful person in the room, Sophie Partridge playing Coral, becomes the most powerful as she interrogates the audience, returning their gaze: "I watch them - the audience - their heads sleek in the dark [...] it's transgressive - I'm to be stared at, not them. But I want to ask, who are you? [...] What do you think of me? [...] Am I just another performer?" (*Peeling*, p. 48).

JK: An affinity with Beckett - entrapment, inertia, dark humour - has been repeatedly pointed out by critics in their reviews of *Peeling*. How do you react to such a parallel?

KO'R: I see Beckett as one of my ancestors, alongside a very strong female line, the influence of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and the 1950s playwrights such as Ionesco, Genet, Cocteau. I really believe that although Beckett wrote in French there is an Irish sensibility in his work



that I understand; I believe there is something that speaks very deeply to me. This comparison, however, can become a very lazy label, and several of my playwright friends (all writing in very different styles) have been compared to Beckett at some point. I don't want to consciously write like Beckett. Unfortunately, if critics are going to see three large empty dresses on stage they will immediately think of *Play*. That's actually not my fault; I did not design the show. I don't see the references to *Play* or *Happy Days* in *Peeling* because of the simple fact that the design was not integral to my script. It was Jenny Sealey's superb design, and Kevin Freeman made the costumes. Then you find other people who are a bit deeper in their comparison, look at the dark humour, the viciousness, the punch in the stomach. You want that extraordinary rollercoaster experience, you want people to be aware that they have seen something when they come out of *Peeling*. Beckett did the same, and I think that's partly an Irish sensibility where you can do the laughing and then the punching.



Fig. 1.: *Peeling*

JK: Where did the idea for *Peeling* come from? Was there a collaborative devising process with Graeae?

KO'R: Jenny [Sealey] and I met as actors working on a show in 1986 directed by Anna Furse, but we did not work together until 2000 when we wondered what would happen if two practitioners with our own perspectives and impairments [visual and aural] got together, what kind of an aesthetic would we create. I trained as an actor, in a physical theatre background,



and Jenny has a more visual perspective. Jenny was to direct and design, and we had an image of three women tied to very high chairs, against their will. We talked about having Marie Antoinette ball gowns or crinolines; and I had this fantasy of the signing hands coming through the skirts. This image was located on stage, but at the back, with a performance going on in the front. I wanted to do something metatheatrical. I loved the idea of writing a piece of theatre about a piece of theatre. I already knew two of the performers directly, and I wrote a draft script which was a chorus, an ancient Greek piece, a Robert Lepage-style big scale cut and paste post-modern production. We got together in the rehearsal space because I wanted to see the performers' dynamic, how bitchy they were, what their voices were. Caroline Parker was a long-term collaborator and I knew I had to use certain structures that worked well with her voice, and I wanted to hear Lisa Hammond and Sophie Partridge as well; all very strong and very distinct women. We did not devise as such, we just played status games, then I wrote a full draft which happens to be the version published, without being revised in the light of rehearsals.

JK: *Peeling* integrates verbal communication with sign language interpretation and audio description. How does this increased communicative potential impact on you as a playwright?

KO'R: I incorporated audio description, because as a visually impaired person I felt that previous attempts were done badly. I wanted to script it into the text, making it an integral experience for all. I hate when any device, such as audio description, is just stuck on the side. In fact, it is this that is driving me currently, to explore how can the playwright dramaturgically take on these so-call access devices. To my knowledge, I have been the first playwright doing this to a developed level, though there have been others since. Graeae has been exploring the use of audio description and BSL (British Sign Language) for some time, but had not done it as part of the script. A little of that happens in *On Blindness*, but it was after *Peeling*, and I felt that it wasn't properly integrated. With *Peeling* Jenny wanted to avoid sign language and to have the whole of the script projected on the back wall, because there are some people who use BSL and others sign-supported English, yet others lip-read. I wanted to have sections that are signed but not spoken on stage, which was actually very difficult because it's not seen as best practice, it is not politically correct. The right way to do it is that somebody is speaking and somebody is sign interpreting. I wanted to subvert that. I wanted to use sign theatre to talk about Deaf peoples' experience of Hitler's "Final Solution" - this is part of Deaf history which is only really emerging now into the mainstream - but not to have a voice over or text projected at the back. Everybody got a bit nervous about that, because this way you are denying access to half of the audience. I basically said that this is a dramaturgical



device and let's privilege deaf people and those who sign, and then use the same speech at the end in a different form. It also creates a dynamic in the auditorium, and many Deaf people felt this was a political act - to have this "secret" part of Deaf history told first solely to the Deaf or signing community, then re-telling this story, for all, at the climax of the play. As a dramatist it is more interesting to see what happens if everyone gets the same information but not at the same time. You can then shift the politics and the focus from the stage to the audience, because you have part of the audience having information - people with access to sign language who will see the signing of this invisible history - to which the predominantly hearing audience will be oblivious. At the end when the story is retold I wanted it in direct translation from BSL (British Sign Language). The notion of voicing from BSL was very important to a hearing ear, and to that whole fragmentation that is happening at the end of the play. I was trying to do something that pushed the boundaries of dramaturgy generally, and not necessarily having to do only with disability. I had this theoretical and dramaturgical desire, coming from a political as well as theatrical experience, wanting an integrated audience and a deaf and hearing cast.

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JK: Could you compare and contrast the stage performance of *Peeling*, on the one hand, and the radio play, on the other? What were your priorities in tailoring your material to the specificities of each medium? To what extent, if at all, were you prepared to satisfy the different audience expectations?

KO'R: This was my first time to adapt my own script. I was basically thinking of what's possible in the given medium. My favourite section is when Coral interrogates the audience and says: "I watch them." (*Peeling*, p. 48) She becomes powerful, while people begin shifting and getting uncomfortable. Before that they were scrutinising her. This reversal of the gaze in confrontation worked well in the theatre, the weakest person becoming the strongest. One can't confront on the radio, so I made the audience Coral's confidante. This softened the play, but made Coral powerful, central. On the radio she gets into the heart of the listener. Moving to radio also made the play more naturalistic. The chorus becomes the play in the last act, it is a shift in form, place and theatrical style (like Sarah Kane's Leeds hotel room becoming a killing field in the Balkans in *Blasted*). In the theatre we had Beaty's line "all men know that children are more than life, which is why they kill them", (*Peeling*, p. 61) followed by a wall of sound, signifying the shift to somewhere else. In theatre we can go somewhere else but not so, in the same way, in radio. So it becomes more literal and naturalistic - was there an attack? Has the theatre been hit? The women are banging on the fire curtain that has come down. I



later tried to move them, referring to the high planes of Troy with the wind blowing round them, it becomes more poetic but the characters haven't become the embodiment of the women of Troy and all women who have experienced warfare - as they do in the theatre version. I hoped I was able to move the ending somewhere else imaginatively but it didn't have the metaphorical and metatheatrical power or the emotional punch of the live performance.

We could, however, mess around with the beginning. I had the stage manager make an announcement and thus became far more provocative and in your face with my politics, by including references such as "in the European Year of the Disabled Person we give lip service to disability politics". I am delighted that disabled performers get work, but overall it can be lip service. It felt good to put that in the radio version because I know one reason why the BBC wanted the play, apart from Sunday Night Theatre Season, was they could also tick the box in the equal opportunities form: It's the European Year of the Disabled Person and we have a Graeae show! I wanted to be able to write in an acknowledgement of that, as I saw it.



Fig. 2.: *Peeling*

KO'R: I am trying to marry my so-called experimental work with me being a playwright. I don't write what's known as "the well-made play", but I am good at structure, informed by the well-made play. There is a lot happening in deaf and disability culture, and I'm encouraged in



my endeavours as a lot of people claim that the bar was raised by *Peeling*. Work with deaf collaborators, for example, could be put in a ghetto, but could also be seen as avant-garde. The problem with quite a lot of work from within disability and Deaf arts and culture is that it is often of not very good quality. We know historically and politically why this is the case - for a very long time disabled and deaf artists have been denied access to training, education, opportunities and employment. Society has followed the Medical model of Disability, which claims there is something "wrong" with the individual rather than the Social Model of Disability (which I believe and follow) which sees it is society, its structures, prejudices, inaccessible buildings and other constructs which disables the individual, not the condition or impairment. How, as disabled artists, can we access training or keep up to date with developments when it is impossible just to get into the building! For similar reasons of access and opportunity, disabled artists lag behind mainstream art. (The Disability Discrimination Act was only fully passed in October 2004. The employment rights and first rights of access came into force on 2 December 1996, further rights of access came into force on 1 October 1999, and the final rights of access in October 2004.). I am fortunate as by having a partial, invisible sensory impairment I have had access to mainstream education and training, and there has been no bar to my development or imagination put into practice. However, this may not have been the case for others who may have been secreted away in "special schools" or been denied access to experience owing to prejudice or inaccessible architecture. I attended the Vienna Deaf Theatre Festival at Easter 2005, where many people thought they were making work that was new, but it was in fact sometimes 50 years out of date. It's like constantly reinventing the wheel. If you have been unable to access theatre history or styles, it's impossible to develop work in the manner that Barba and Odin Teatret did for example - as you don't know who your "ancestors" were, what they achieved.

Disabled practitioners are emerging, however, but have had little if no formal training. We are having to catch up. I went through the mainstream first and was involved in the disability culture on the side, now I am trying to marry the two. Things are slowly happening, but people are not always aware of disability politics. "Inclusion" and "integrated" are the vogue terms of our times, yet often in dance companies wheelchairs are still used just to pirouette off, ticking boxes an equal opportunities forms. I'd love to see a disabled Hedda or a Nora. It's like the movement in black theatre, the RSC casting their first black Othello. Cross-racial casting is not such a big deal any more, so hopefully we'll reach that stage with disability as well, disabled actors not just playing Richard III or a non-disabled person crippling up but disabled actors doing a piece because they bring a new perspective to it. We



might not necessarily need to have disabled theatre as such, just as we might not have women's/black theatre any more, it's all entering the mainstream. The disability movement is fifteen to twenty years behind the other movements that started in the 1960s, activism starting only in the 80s. Ideally, in the future, disability theatre will also enter the mainstream.

JK: On this optimistic note, I would like to thank for the conversation and wish you all the best with your future work.