

*Community With Shared Differences: Solo  
Performance in Pat Kinevane's Silent and Panti's  
A Woman in Progress*

*Comunidade com diferenças compartilhadas: Performance solo  
em Silence de Pat Kinevane e A Woman in Progress de Panti*

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**Abstract:** *Solo performance is a theatrical form which has been increasingly popular in contemporary Irish theatre with the rise of individualism. This paper takes the works of two representative solo performers in contemporary Irish theatre, Pat Kinevane and Panti (Rory O'Neill) as examples, trying to discuss how the form of solo performance is applied by the two performers to create an intermediate space for the marginalized groups to find their distinctive voices and for the audience to identify with the "other", so as to build up a community that respects differences. While at the same time, the two performers use postdramatic strategies to admonish the audience to take a step back to reexamine the constructiveness of community and performativity of identity. By addressing the significance of solo performance in contemporary Irish theatre, this paper calls for the diversification of not only subjects but also forms in contemporary Irish theatre.*

**Keywords:** *Solo Performance; Pat Kinevane; Panti; Community.*

**Resumo:** *A performance solo é uma forma teatral cada vez mais popular no teatro irlandês contemporâneo devido à ascensão do individualismo. Este artigo toma como exemplos os trabalhos de dois performers solo representativos do teatro irlandês contemporâneo, Pat Kinevane e Panti (Rory O'Neill), tentando discutir como a forma de atuação solo é aplicada pelos dois performers para criar um espaço intermediário para os grupos marginalizados encontrarem as suas vozes distintas e para o público*

*se identificar com o “outro”, de modo a construir uma comunidade que respeite as diferenças. Ao mesmo tempo, os dois performers utilizam estratégias pós-dramáticas para aconselhar o público a dar um passo atrás e a reexaminar a construção da comunidade e a performatividade da identidade. Ao abordar o significado da performance solo no teatro irlandês contemporâneo, este artigo apela à diversificação não apenas dos temas mas também das formas no teatro irlandês contemporâneo.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Performance solo; Pat Kinevane; Panti; Comunidade.*

Both Pat Kinevane and Panti (Rory O’Neill) are increasingly active stars in contemporary Irish theatre, whose works embody the great changes in terms of subjects and forms in twenty first century Irish theatre. Although neither of their performance career starts with solo performance, it is their solo performance in recent years that establishes their reputation and secures their places in the Irish theatre. Kinevane has five solo performances up to now: *Forgotten* (2006), *Silent* (2011), *Underneath* (2014), *Before* (2018), and the currently on tour *King* (2023). All of his solo plays were produced by Fishamble: The New Play Company and directed by Jim Culleton, Artistic Director and CEO of the company. The self-styled “gender discombobulist” Miss Pandora “Panti” Bliss is one of the most representative voices in both the national and the international queer community. To date, she has written and performed five solo plays, *In These Shoes?* (2007), *All Dolled Up* (2007), *A Woman in Progress* (2009), *High Heels In Low Places* (2014), and *If These Wigs Could Talk* (2022). Their solo performances give voices to the historically and socially marginalized groups in Irish society, from homeless and elderly people to queer community.

Kinevane gets the inspiration for writing *Silent* when he was surprised by the huge amount of homeless people on the street during his first visit to New York City in 2008, and he was even more aware of the number of dispossessed after he went back to Dublin. Bringing such reflection with him to the stage, Kinevane transforms into a homeless man named Tino Mc Goldrig living on the Dublin street and he is here to share his story. On the other side, Panti draws artistic inspiration from her own life experiences. *A Woman in Progress* is an autobiographical performance based on Panti’s life from growing up in a monotonous and depressive town in Mayo to traveling around other places in the world and discovering her identity. Through solo performances, both Pat Kinevane’s *Silent* and Panti’s *A Woman in Progress* create an intermediate space for the marginalized groups to find their distinctive voices and for the audience to identify with the “other”, in the hope of building up a community that respects differences. While at the same time, the two

performers apply postdramatic strategies to admonish the audience to take a step back to reexamine the constructiveness of community and performativity of identity.

Monologues and monodramas have gained an increasing degree of popularity in Irish theatre since the 1990s, which parallels the early period of the Celtic Tiger. Yet it needs to distinguish between a monologue and a solo performance. Monologues are usually written by a playwright and performed by an actor, whereas solo performances are written and performed by the same person so that performers will have full control of the performance. In this sense, solo performance usually has fewer restrictions and is often combined with other performance forms such as dance, mime, and stand-up comedy. In addition, while the monologue “sets aside interpersonal spaces” (Jordan 222), the solo performance emphasizes more on the interaction and connection with the audience. Within solo performances, solo autobiographical performance stands out for its trait that “the performing subject and the subject of performance are typically one and the same” (Heddon 161), represented here by Panti’s works.

Eamonn Jordan argues that there is a strong connection between monologues and suicide and that the high rates of suicide in young males may due to male’s inability to communicate (222). Michael Peterson also acknowledges the ubiquitousness of monologues and solo performances in the works of “straight white male” playwrights as a way to reinforce the heteronormative white hegemony which has been destabilized in the postmodern period (12). However, one should not dismiss the power of solo performance to subvert the existing hegemony which is a common artistic practice especially for socially marginalized groups. Hany Ali Mahmoud Abdelfattah investigates the representations of Iraqi and Moroccan women in the solo performance and examines “how solo narrative theatre becomes a tool that breaks the silence of the subaltern” (89). Carrie Sandahl also explores the intersection of queer and disabled identities in solo autobiographical performance (25). As solo performances “rarely maintain the conventions of a naturalistic stage space” (Wallace 5), the stage is usually quite empty with only a few props, thus highlighting the performer’s existence and visibility.

Moreover, solo performance has a long history within the queer community, as Holly Hughes and David Román recognize how queer artists use solo performance to build alternative communities and they also investigate the reasons for such popularity of queer solo performance in the introduction of their co-edited book *O Solo Homo*. For one thing, they argue that solo performance, especially autobiographical performance, is a form of self-representation that responds directly to identity politics and can be seen as “part of a larger collective and ongoing process of revisionist history” (13). Panti’s autobiographical

performance may fit into part of revisionist Irish history, as Panti's retelling of her life story takes the audience back to the key national and international events in Irish history, such as the Pope's visit in 1979, the mass emigration in the 1980s, and the Celtic Tiger in the 1990s. In doing so, Panti reclaims the position of the queer community in Irish history, who has long been ignored or purposefully excluded from the canonical narratives of the historical events. For another, Panti's open criticism of the New Gay in the final part of her performance is also in line with what Hughes and Román say about queer solo work being pedagogical and serving "to educate queer audiences of all backgrounds even as it entertains us or mobilizes us politically" (14). In the performance, Panti bashes what she calls "the New Gay" community hard, as she accuses that the New Gay is assimilated into the mainstream culture and becomes an apolitical product of consumerism, "an inoffensive, sickly sweet candyfloss of blandness created by corporations" (258), and she tries to mobilize the young queer generation to be more politically engaged.

Panti is credited for her seminal role in promoting LGBTQIA+ rights in Ireland, including her great participation in the Equal Marriage referendum held on 22 May 2015, in which Ireland becomes the first country to legalize same-sex marriage by popular vote. And it is also Panti "who pitched Irish queer performance onto the international stage in 2014, when her oration in the Abbey Theatre went viral" (Walsh "Touching" 21). Although Panti is good at getting the mainstream to understand and identify with the queer community's call for rights with her eloquence, she does not want to be assimilated into the mainstream culture and she never stops celebrating and insisting on her queerness and difference. In *A Woman in Progress*, Panti consciously rejects Catholicism and is happy to be an "outsider" from mainstream society to build her own community. For her, the queer culture should always be "a rejection of the status quo" and "dangerous and exciting and anti-establishment and mother-horrifying" (Panti 258). The solo performance gives Panti the perfect platform to celebrate her queerness and individuality, as it is one of "the few forms of artistic expression that registers as democratic" (Hughes and Román 10) which is open to everyone regardless of race, gender, or sexuality.

The rise of individualism and celebration of differences are due to radical changes that took place in Ireland since the last decade of the 20th century with the economic surge as well as the subsequent immigration flows and cultural liberalization. Ireland is now recognized as "the most globalized country in the world" (Jordan 3). But not everybody can enjoy the benefits of these changes. Such huge economic success is at the expense of widening class division with still relatively few opportunities provided for the marginalized social groups, whose voices are weakened by the chanting and praises for the Celtic Tiger.

*Silent* is the play that calls for people's attention to those who are left behind by society, as it deals with the problems of homelessness, suicide, depression, mental health, and homophobia, which for a long time have been silenced in Irish society. The performance opens with the rise of Kinevane as Tino from under a gray blanket as he says the first line, which turns out to be the last line as well, "If anyone asks, I'm not here at all, alright" (Kinevane 3). Then Kinevane turns the stage into a real-life scenario on the street, and we, the audience, become the passersby who are too busy minding their own business to pay attention to the people around us. "Only one in every six hundred will stop and talk, look ya level in the eye – like an equal" (20). When Tino narrates his story, there are frequent interruptions with coin sounds. But every time when Tino stops his telling and attempts to initiate a conversation with the kind-hearted person (of course we never know whoever that is), they are already gone, "all they see is the Blanket" (5). Even for someone who is as generous as willing to give out a fifty-euro note, there is little possibility of communication, "all he saw was the blanket" (12). Tino the homeless is never seen as an equal individual by the passersby, as the blanket becomes the signifier of a fresh-and-blood individual and thus reduces Tino to an objectified abject. Tino arises from the blanket and eventually disappears into the blanket. His story is not heard, as nobody knows that he also "once had splendid things, a job a wife a son" (20). And like his brother Pearse, Tino becomes an outcast from society and commits suicide eventually. It is towards the very end that the audience realizes Tino has long been dead and the person on the stage is just a phantom from the past forgotten by society.

In addition to addressing great empathy for homeless people, Kinevane also places the queer community at the centre of the play. It can be argued that the heart-wrenching tragedy of Tino's brother Pearse is at the core of *Silent*, since his whole life, as well as his death, is repressed by the conservative society as an unspeakable and silenced taboo. Pearse suffered greatly from the extremely homophobic society in 1980s Ireland. After three failed suicide attempts, he eventually succeeded on 6th May 1987, only six years before the decriminalization of homosexuality, as Tino laments "sure today, if he was alive, he could get his hole in any gay club he wanted and nobody would bat an eye" (Kinevane 8). Suicide is one of the unforgivable sins in Catholicism and no one would dare to bring it up even after the death of Pearse. Yet "it was there, bursting to escape, behind the front teeth of everybody's downturned mouth" (12), as the sound of silence gradually grows so loud that everybody related is drowned in it. After Pearse's suicide, Noelle Amberson, who reported Pearse's homosexual behavior to the Garda, was forever traumatized by the accident that Pearse's "half a human leg" (22) came through the window and landed on

her lap. Pearse's mother became mute and died within six months. Tino, despite his effort to keep everything normal and carry on with his happy family life, was knocked down by his enormous guilt for not taking action, "I should have stood up, and stopped them – But I remained shtumm" (5).

The community here is a fantasy and communication remains silent. By bringing the story of Tino and Pearse to the audience, Kinevane not just points out the insufficient social care and actions for the marginalized groups, but urges our reflections and gratitude towards our daily normal life, noting that we are no more different than the others except for some lucks, as in the preface he explains his motivation for writing the play, "it could be me lying against a posh restaurant door. It could be me under a blanket outside a bank. It could be me hassling you for cash beside an ATM" (xvi).

The two plays touch upon the issue of identity, which has been troubling Irish society from generation to generation. What constitutes our identity? Is it the same popular culture we are all immersed in, the same places we have been to, or the same historical events we have all been through? Such questioning of Irishness pervades the frequent self-referential lines in regards to Irish culture in both solo performances. For example, Panti adopts a queer intervention into Irish history with multiple references to historical events, city landmarks, and Irish television programs such as *Wanerly Wagon*. Scholars point out the "meticulous specificity of time and place" in Pat Kinevane's plays (Dean 213). In *Silent*, Kinevane brings up many well-known locations in Ireland from the North Infirmity in Cork to Cathal Brugha Street in Dublin. The specificity of time is also worth noticing. Pearse's third suicide attempt took place on the Eve of St Patrick's Day, one of the most important festivals celebrated by Irish people. The sharp contrast amplifies the disillusion of the community and the fact that no one cares about the condition of marginalized characters represented by Pearse. Moreover, even the name of Pearse carries a strong relation to Irishness, which comes from the nationalist leader of the 1916 Rising, an irony that a homosexual boy is named after the icon in Ireland's masculine, heterosexual, and nationalist narrative.

Apart from demonstrating the constructiveness of Irish identity, in *A Woman in Progress*, Panti points out the performativity of gender in the very beginning. Before the performance begins, Panti shows a video of the process of her transformation into "Panti" with a spoken word track saying "lipstick, powder press, lash curl, eyeliner, and I am, Pandora 'Panti' Bliss" (Panti 244), thus foregrounding the constructiveness of identity. Panti herself is the drag alter ego constructed by Rory O'Neill, and she is never afraid to reveal the man beneath her blond wigs and extravagant makeup. Throughout the show,

Panti encourages Rory (and the audience) to find ways to construct their own identity: “Life is plastic, malleable, and you have to shape your own” (250). She gives full credit to herself in constructing her own identity “I am my own life’s work. The fruit of my own creative endeavours” (245). Panti also underlines it is “sex” that defines us, taking sex or sexuality as the identifier between homosexuals and heterosexuals, between her and the New Gay: “The New Gay wants to go to sexless, shiny, over-decorated bars, and drink Bacardi Breezers on glass table tops; I wanted to smash the glass table tops and fuck on the shards” (258).

Similarly, the performativity of gender is also implied by the performance of Kinevane in *Silent*, only more ambivalent and downbeat. Kinevane appears on the stage with a black eyelined, shaven-headed, and androgynous impression. Such paradoxical and inconsistent gender representation may suggest “dark corridors of internalized sexual guilt”, as Ben Brantley writes in his review. Pearse was troubled by his “misplaced” gender representation since the age of four, because he wanted “Crolly dolls instead of Action Men, tea-sets instead of Meccano” (Kinevane 6). The gendered allocation of toys has drawn a clear line in regards to gender identity. But in the performance, Tino (Kinevane) crosses the border purposefully as he expertly switches his role from Tino to fashionable Noelle Amberson or the nasty, violent Mom through changes of costumes and postures, which underlines the performativity of gender and disrupts the fixed identity.

However, it is the misogynous portrayal of female characters in *Silent* that draws controversy, as most female characters in the play are presented as unsympathetic and selfish: Tino and Pearse’s Mom is an irresponsible mother who mentally and physically abuses Pearse. Noelle Amberson is deemed by Tino as the first to blame for the tragedy of Pearse since she is the one who “opened the can of worms” (Kinevane 4) and Tino curses her foully “may she sizzle forever in deepest hell” (4) despite the fact she gets her comeuppance in the end. Tino’s wife Judith is also accused by Tino of having a “cold soul” (8). Tino makes fun of the women who buy the jewelry made by Gretta, “stupid bitches from Foxrock wear them to charity balls at the Radisson – standing beside some celebrity from TV3” (6). While on the other hand, all the male characters are fragile, sensitive, and much easier to sympathize with. Even the Garda Pisspot is allowed to have some softness inside, since “he’s at her grave every mornin at six before duty with daisies” (19). It can be argued that Kinevane subverts the gender stereotype that men are tough and women are soft, yet such simple subversion cannot be justified as Kinevane does not push further to challenge such gender binarism.

The deconstruction of identity is one of the characteristics that mark the postmodern era and the postdramatic theatre. Clara Mallon carefully examines the application of postdramatic strategies in Pat Kinevane's solo theatre. In her observation, Pat Kinevane's plays combine the "postdramatic modalities with more traditional methods of storytelling" (340), which facilitates the identification of the audience with characters while also keeping the audience at a critical distance to evoke their active reflections. Panti also adopts the postdramatic methods in her performance, as she specifies in the beginning that "I am merely using me as a theatrical device, through which I hope to illuminate a larger truth" (245). In fact, the premise of Panti's performance is that "all gender is a form of drag: a performative mode of expression that bears no direct relationship to biological sex" (Walsh *Queer Performance* 60-61). By using herself as the tool for artistic and political expression, Panti speaks for the performative nature of queer lives in which the private self and public self will always sustain and contradict each other.

Mallon also points out that postdramatic theatre shifts its focus of inquiry from representation to "the relations between actor and audience", so as to include otherness in its discussion (331). Both gifted masters in solo performance and improvisation, Kinevane and Panti infuse their stage personas with great charisma, as every movement and comment they make on the stage dazzles the audience. On the stage, both performers manage to establish a strong connection with the audience so as to form a temporary community. The plot of *A Woman in Progress* is developed through letters written by forty-year-old Panti to young Rory and videos playing on the stage screen. Panti passes a letter to an audience member in the beginning and will ask them to read it aloud at the end of the show, which turns out to be the letter written by little Rory back to Panti. Through the action of inviting the audience member to engage in the performance directly, the audience is no longer the passive spectator hiding in the seats, but can be seen and heard. The fourth wall in the conventional theatre is broken and no longer exists. In addition, with the audience taking the character of young Rory, the context of the whole performance immediately changes. It is not just a private exchange of letters between Panti and her younger self, nor a one-way story-telling addressed by Panti to the audience, but rather it is an intimate and thought-provoking conversation between Panti and numerous Rorys who are still struggling with their newly awakened sexuality and confused or anxious about finding out their own identity.

Although not directly engaging the audience in taking up characters in the performance, Kinevane also finds other ways to interact and connect with the audience. Before his monologue begins, Kinevane emerges from the blanket, and "after he takes time



to survey the audience, he eventually winks at them” (Kinevane 3). By acknowledging the existence of the audience, Kinevane subverts the power structure of spectatorship. Moreover, according to reviews of *Silent*, Kinevane “asked two members of the audience for their names and repeatedly during the performance broke the fourth wall by engaging with them by name in lines ad libbed” (Dean 212). It carries significant meanings to exchange names with somebody, for as soon as the action of exchanging names is complete, the two people are no longer strangers and form an interpersonal relationship. Such direct engagement of the audience strengthens the connection between the audience and the performer as well as between the audience and the marginalized people represented by him.

In Pat Kinevane’s and Panti’s solo performances, marginalized groups are offered great opportunities to negotiate with the mainstream without denying their differences. As Panti and Kinevane go further to investigate the constructiveness of identity, whether national identity or gender identity, they relocate their performance in the postdramatic theatre where identities are dynamic and contingent, which shatters the stability of building a community. Yet still, Panti and Kinevane do not indulge themselves in the celebration of individualism but rather turn their performance towards the audience by breaking the fourth wall to include them to take the role of not just a spectator but also a questioner and an investigator. While solo performance is the manifestation of the rise of individualism, there is no other art form that better nurtures the sense of community and identity, which brings us closer to others while recognizing our differences.

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