

CATRINA McHUGH, MBE – DLitt

Chancellor Dharker,

As we gather here today to celebrate the achievements of our students, it's easy to forget how fortunate we are. We work and study in a safe and comfortable environment with the freedom and opportunity to succeed. This is a world away from the lived experience of many women and girls on the margins of society. It is these hitherto hidden voices that the award-winning playwright and feminist activist, Catrina McHugh, compellingly brings to our attention, using the power of theatre to advocate for societal change.

Catrina, or Trina, as she is known to close family and friends, was born at Catterick Army camp in 1967. Her father and four older brothers were all in the British Army. She grew up in Liverpool, the only girl in a strong patriarchy. As a punk lesbian, she did not conform to convention, and stood out in a society where expectations for a girl were low. Catrina left school at sixteen and trained as a shorthand typist. Two years later, she was offered a place on a Youth Opportunities Programme in which the options were hairdressing or drama. Catrina wisely chose the latter. Joining the Rathbone Theatre Workshop, where her fellow students included the actress Cathy Tyson and Morrissey, the lyricist and frontman of The Smiths, she first became aware that theatre could be used as a tool for social change. Aged nineteen, she found herself taking on the role of supervisor on a drama scheme in Salford. Catrina tells me that when she realised that the students she'd be supervising were only a year younger than her, she lied and said she was twenty-four!

Catrina has been a feminist activist all her life, and fondly recalls the year she spent at the Greenham Common Peace Camp in 1983. It was here she met her former girlfriend and life-long friend, Tricia Duffy, whom we are delighted to welcome here today, along with Katrina's wife Huffty and son Vinny. Whilst work absorbs a significant amount of her time, I'm told Katrina loves to dance, is adept at getting others up to dance, and for the last thirty years, has been lead singer in a fabulous band called The Camp Vamps.

The Open Clasp Theatre Company, which, since 1998, has been the principal vehicle for Katrina's prodigious output, was initially conceived as a final year project for her BA in Drama at Northumbria University, for which she gained First Class honours. Based in the West End Women and Girls Centre managed by her wife, the Company was set up as a community venture in and for one of the most impoverished areas of Newcastle. It has gone on to achieve national and international significance. Ellie Turner, Joint Chief Executive and Executive Director of Open Clasp, shares Katrina's passion for the company and what it seeks to achieve. She told me that working with Katrina, "you have everything you would want from a brilliant job, working in a highly skilled and experienced artistic environment, championing the growth of talent, and bravery, knowing there is respect and inclusion, and being part of a team working for positive social change. "

The pursuit of Social Justice is one of the University's core values. Professor Rachel Pain, our Dean of Social Justice, is proud to be a Trustee of the West End Women and Girls Centre in which Open Clasp is based. She told me she is delighted that we are honouring Katrina's work, adding that, " it provides the very best example of how theatre contributes to social justice, through her extraordinary talent for listening to women and girls who are not always heard, and translating this into productions that profoundly affect audiences."

The mission of Open Clasp is “to change the world one play at a time.” One of the ways in which it has made such a unique and distinctive contribution to changing the world, is by challenging cultural expectations around who makes theatre, whose stories get told, and which voices are heard. As Catrina herself has noted, the Company strives to “create theatre from a female gaze, so the story telling is through the eyes of the women we work with”. Catrina’s plays explore the most challenging of subjects, including domestic abuse, racism, sexual violence, and experience of the criminal justice system. Using creative story-telling methodology, she empowers women who have lived troubled and traumatic lives to share their experience and give voice to their thoughts and feelings. These workshops provide the raw material upon which her plays are based.

It’s invidious to select examples from her extensive body of work, but there are a couple that stand out for me. Rattlesnake is an award-winning play which explores the devastating impact of coercive control as seen through the eyes of two women who have, at different times, been married to the same man. It is inspired and informed by the experience of women who have faced and survived the experience of coercive control. As a piece of theatre, it is utterly compelling, and its impact lingers long after the final scene. The play has been used to deliver drama-based training to police officers, GPs, social workers and other key support workers. To date, a filmed version of the play has been viewed by more than twenty-seven thousand people world-wide after being part of the 2019 United Nations Campaign to Eliminate Violence against Women and Girls. It recently became the first UK recipient of a prestigious US Purple Ribbon award.

Key Change, a play inspired by the experience of women in HMP Low Newton, was initially toured around men’s prisons, to encourage men to reflect on how their behaviour towards

the women in their lives was a key factor in driving women to crime. It won the Carol Tabor “Best of Edinburgh “ award at the Fringe Festival in 2015 and went on to have a critically acclaimed tour off-Broadway in 2016. There’s line where a character called Lucy describes herself as “ lost and invisible.” which I found incredibly moving. With Catrina in your corner, you’re never lost or invisible. Throughout her work, she “holds the voices of the women who put their trust in us.” I am proud to use my voice to celebrate her amazing work and we are honoured to host the Open Clasp Archive in the University Library.

Chancellor Dharker, in recognition of her pioneering, passionate and socially inclusive use of theatre to give a voice to women and girls who would not otherwise have one, and her lifelong commitment to changing society for the better, I present to you Catrina McHugh, MBE, for the award of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

Jill Taylor-Roe, Senior Public Orator.

July 18th, 2024