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HIV and AIDS in Irish Theatre: Queer Masculinities, Punishment, and 'Post-AIDS' Culture

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Abstract This essay provides a critical survey of key Irish theatre productions that present queer men with HIV or AIDS as a central theme while also seeking to situate several of these productions within the controversial discourse of 'post-AIDS' as it plays out in Irish cultural and social discourses. Through this survey, this essay finds and critically elaborates how a discourse of AIDS as punishment is a common denominator in all of these plays; whether that be as a central metaphor in the drama or conversely as a trope that theatre makers seek to disrupt. Throughout, this essay simultaneously attends to the ways in which non-realist, non-linear dramatic structures (as opposed to social realist narratives) have proved to be better positioned to present the realities of living with HIV or dying with AIDS in Ireland since the emergence of the first Irish AIDS epidemic in 1982. By approaching 'post-AIDS' discourses through the lens of HIV and AIDS in Irish theatre, this essay critically analyses the insidious ways in which 'post-AIDS' Irish culture is bound up with neoliberal discourses of homonormative assimilation and cultural respectability, especially the figuring of HIV/AIDS as punishment for non-assimilation.

Keywords HIV/AIDS · Irish theatre: HIV/AIDS in performance · Disease-as-punishment · 'Post-AIDS' · Queer masculinities · Homonormativity

Loughlin Deegan's 2000 Irish drama, *The Queen and Peacock* (Walsh 2010),[1] seems initially to be a coming-out narrative about a gay man making peace with his sexuality. Set amongst a group of gay, first-generation migrant, white Irish men who frequent a run-down Brixton pub, the eponymous Queen and Peacock, the dramatic narrative is structured along the lines of modern social realism and thereby presents a problematic situation which is accordingly escalated by conflict and then resolved by means of a satisfyingly cathartic ending. *Queen and Peacock*'s dramatic narrative thus elaborates the psycho-sexual journey of Paul, who

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presents the spectator with the problematic situation of his being a deeply closeted gay man from Donegal and who refuses to believe that his parents will accept his sexual orientation or that being gay in Ireland does not condemn him to a life lived on the margins of society. The subsequent escalating conflict is engendered by two events: first, the arrival from Dublin of Willie, a nineteen-year-old, very macho lad – what Raewyn Connell would call 'a very straight gay' (2005, 143) – who both signifies and announces a newly gay-friendly Ireland (but has, quite paradoxically, come to seek fame and fortune on London's Soho gay scene). And second, the death from AIDS of an offstage character, Ciarán, who dies (somewhat conveniently, one could argue) during the interval in an unnamed AIDS hospice. The death of his close friend, coupled with Willie's assurances that Irish society will accept him, thus force Paul to re-evaluate his reasons for living in London. The ensuing cathartic resolution – which ends not only with Paul telephoning his parents in Donegal to reveal his sexual orientation but also their acceptance of him to the point of offering him early inheritance of the thriving family pub – is satisfying to all. Paul will return lucratively victorious to Ireland, while Willie, with his good looks and manly ways, will venture onwards to gay-scene success in London's Soho.

Deegan wrote this drama in the midst of a massive epistemic shift in Ireland with regard to same sex relationships. Initially spurred by a nascent Gay Rights movement in the late-1970s, homosexuality was decriminalised in 1993 with same sex marriage constitutionally ratified in November 2015. The latter followed on from the Irish referendum on May 22, 2015 which asked the Irish populace to vote on changing the existing definition of marriage in the Irish constitution. This successful 'yes' vote was quickly followed by the Gender Recognition Act on July 15, 2015 which allows all individuals over the age of eighteen to self-declare their own gender identity. Notably, while LGBT rights have been elevated, the rights of those living with HIV have not been part of these changes; indeed, one could argue, especially in light of the media campaigns advocating for same-sex marriage in Ireland (discussed below), HIV-positive queer men have been ushered out of public sight. Within this context, the dramatic premise of Deegan's coming-out narrative, especially in terms of Ciarán's death from AIDS, is both flawed and anachronistic. More remarkably, the play is underwritten by a troubling binary – Good Gays versus Bad Queers – that privileges easily assimilated and socially respectable gay men while simultaneously punishing radical, sex-positive queer men who buck the politics of heteronormative respectability. 'Heteronormativity,' as Sara Ahmed elaborates, 'refers to more than simply the presumption that it is normal to be heterosexual. The "norm" is regulative, and is supported by an "ideal" that associates sexual conduct with other forms of conduct' (2013, 427). This is a politics of respectability, then, that assumes heterosexuality is not just the only socially acceptable mode of living and loving but also that any counter-normative sexualities have 'deviated' from – are deviant to – heterosexuality and so, to function properly, must aspire to its paradigms, life narratives, and temporalities. Of course, this is not to deny that within queer sex-positive communities there are stratifications of power that run along lines of whiteness, gender, and class. However, what I am focussing on here is a specifically Irish context wherein, by virtue of an overall fraught, conservative cultural understanding of sex and sexual bodies, the tensions between those sex-positive communities and dominant, mainstream, and easily assimilated white gayness, means that any sex-positivity is usually understood as radical.

In terms of Deegan's anachronistic dramaturgy, that a gay man would die from AIDS in an AIDS hospice in either the UK or Ireland in the year 2000 is taken as a given; and yet it is a false axiomatic that ignores advances in HIV medications. Despite anti-retroviral treatment (ART) for HIV being deeply embedded in gay cultures by the year 2000, the play elides any

mention of ART – which has been freely available in both Ireland and the UK since 1996 – and instead situates Ciarán's death within a grim, 1980s 'AIDS as gay plague' rhetoric. Following from this, the good gay Paul, by virtue of his chaste, clean-living ways and having provided bed-side companionship to Ciarán in his dying days, is rewarded with not just familial acceptance but more remarkably with the inheritance of a thriving family business. Ciarán, on the other hand, who liked drinking and cruising the underground sex clubs of London dressed in rubber fetish costumes, is punished with that most convenient castigator of queerness in popular culture – a death from AIDS. Gay normativity is thus amply rewarded while sexually adventurous queerness is soundly punished.

Queen and Peacock follows on from several previous Irish dramas that mobilize this AIDS as punishment trope. Indeed, Irish theatre and queer masculinities have always had a troubled relationship. As I elaborate elsewhere (O'Brien 2014), until the decriminalization of homosexuality in Ireland in 1993, with the notable exception of playwright Frank McGuinness, queer men were presented on the Irish stage as sinister, troubled antagonists and never as primary protagonists. Since decriminalization, although representations of queer men have evolved into affirming central roles, such representations have increasingly subscribed to the neoliberal commodification of idealized, white gay masculinity, or what Sharif Mowlabocus calls an 'homogenizing gay aesthetic' (2007, 67). With its emphasis on white, young, muscled perfection, this gay aesthetic promotes and is enabled by the commodification of aspirational, middle-class affluence that can financially afford plush private residences and high-end leisure activities such as expensive gym membership and vacations on gay men's luxury cruise liners. This homogenously white and youthful aesthetic is perpetually and quite uncritically reproduced in Irish and British gay men's magazines such as *Gay Community News* and *Attitude*. Hence, in both Irish culture and theatre, neoliberal politics and social practices sanction gay masculine visibility strictly in terms of happy, apolitical, white hyper-consumers who emulate heteronormativity thereby implying that gay life is easily digestible and problem-free while also prosing problems for queer theatre makers who want to use representation to radical, political aims.

Indeed, mobilizing non-assimilatory queer representation to political aims has become more challenging in the wake of the 'Yes Equality' movement that successful campaigned for the referendum on and passage of Ireland's 2015 Equal Marriage bill. The imagery of Yes Equality's campaign posters was homogenously white, middle-class, and had an asexual focus on narrative tropes of family. As Anne Mulhall puts it, 'the official campaign for "marriage equality" in Ireland did not diverge in any substantial way from the familiar white middle-class neoliberal register' (*Bully Bloggers* 2015). Several queer theorists, most notably Michael Warner and Lisa Duggan (Warner 1999; Duggan 2003), have come to understand this rhetoric and its incumbent aesthetic as part of the discourse of 'homonormativity,' whereby as white gay men come to cultural prominence they emulate and assimilate into heterosexual lifestyle paradigms, as evidenced by the recent wave of same-sex marriage legislation, gay male parenthood, and acceptance into national militaries in the United States, Canada, and several European nations including Ireland. Most crucially, the cultural narratives of neoliberal homonormativity do not create any spaces for HIV-positive masculinities. In keeping with the perfect consumership of the neoliberal subject, less-than-perfect health is disavowed and shamed in this culture of the ideal lifestyle and body.

The reluctance on behalf of several Irish playwrights to see queer men with HIV in terms other than punishment is, as this essay argues, symptomatic of the ways in which 'post-AIDS' culture (discussed below) maps itself across neoliberal homonormativity. And yet, truthful

representations of HIV and AIDS in theatre bring their own set of challenges, particularly in Ireland, a former British colony whose artistic traditions are shaped by a strong sense of independent, cultural nationalism. Especially problematic for representations of HIV/AIDS in Irish theatre is an overdetermined reliance on and audience expectations of narrative dramatic realism whereby more experimental, avant-garde performances that veer away from the safe confines of linear narrative and fourth-wall drama tend not to attract the same level of audience as mainstream theatre and thus remain on the fringes while also failing to attract funders. HIV and AIDS, and the slippery, unpredictable ways in which they permeate bodies and identities and impact real lives, do not fit easily into realist dramatic narrative with its insistence on neat resolutions and cathartic endings. This provokes a set of questions that scholars of HIV/AIDS in cultural representation have grappled with since the early-1980s (Murphy and Poirier 1993): in what ways can representational art, such as film, drama, poetry, or fiction, narrativize a global pandemic? How can a virus that has imbricated itself into multitudinous cultures around the globe and that impacts so differently and uniquely on each of those cultures be neatly contained within the realist 'beginning-middle-end' narrative format? Is it possible for dramatists to pin down, within the confines of the tidy, linear narratives that mainstream Anglo-American, Irish, and Australian theatre audiences demand, a living, evolving history that is as chaotic and varied as it is both global and local in scope?

The aims of this essay, then, are two-fold. First, it critically surveys key Irish theatre productions that present queer men with HIV or AIDS as a central theme. Second, this essay seeks to situate several of these productions within the controversial discourse of 'post-AIDS' as it plays out in Irish cultural and social discourses. In so doing, this essay elaborates how a discourse of AIDS as punishment is a common denominator in all of these plays – either as a central metaphor or as a trope that theatre makers seek to disrupt. Throughout, this essay attends to the ways in which non-realist, non-linear dramatic structures are better positioned to present the realities – the very slipperiness and unpredictability – of living with HIV or dying with AIDS. But most importantly, this essay hopes to illustrate – through its lens of HIV and AIDS in Irish theatre – the insidious ways in which 'post-AIDS' culture in Ireland is bound up in neoliberal discourses of homonormative assimilation by its figuring of HIV/AIDS as punishment for non-assimilation.

'Post-AIDS' and its metaphors

Any virus, in essence, is a microscopic particle of genetic material coated in an envelope of proteins and is, as such, the smallest, most primitive organism known to humankind (Crawford 2000, 6). The Human Immunodeficiency Virus, HIV, has been tagged by scientists as 'a piece of nucleic acid wrapped in bad news' (Whiteside 2008, 23). This bad news not only means the eventual death that untreated HIV's end-point cluster of opportunistic infections, known as AIDS, causes in individuals. More so, HIV's bad news manifests in a proliferation of cultural narratives, metaphors, and received axioms, as individuals and their communities seek to make sense of a global epidemic that rose in the late-twentieth-century; a time in human history when, by virtue of the eradication of poliomyelitis and smallpox as well as hugely successful vaccination programs, it had been popularly assumed that scientific progress had called a halt to such calamities (Crawford 2000, 66). HIV/AIDS, then, as well as being a biological epidemic is simultaneously, in Paula Treichler's words, 'an epidemic of signification.' 'AIDS,' Treichler asserts, 'is a nexus where multiple meanings, stories, and discourses intersect and

overlap, reinforce and subvert each other' (1998, 11). And while, as Susan Sontag avers, illness and epidemics have always been understood through the lens of cultural metaphors (1991, 7), the signifiers that attach themselves to HIV/AIDS in Ireland, despite emerging in a postmodern age of science and technology, evoke fearful narratives and metaphors that are mediaeval in their understanding of disease as punishment. By virtue of being (primarily) sexually transmitted and because it was first reported as epidemic in queer communities – the 'gay plague' and 'gay cancer' media-narratives – HIV and AIDS and, in particular, those who live or die with them, have become discursive sites. The virus, the bodies it colonises, and the lives they lead, operate as convenient metaphorical scapegoats for a wide array of groups to articulate a plethora of social anxieties, all of which are cloaked in the guise of concern regarding the spread of HIV to the 'general population' – as if HIV-positive individuals themselves do not belong to the general population.

If Irish theatre has but since the mid-1990s begun to explore queerness, then how HIV/AIDS maps across the queer male body is a theatrical conversation still waiting to happen. In the U.S., Therese Jones identifies two distinct generations of AIDS theatre (1994, xi), and David Román charts an ongoing history of AIDS and HIV performance across the Americas (1998). Likewise, in both British and South African drama and theatre practice, scholars have documented an ongoing and evolving canon of HIV/AIDS theatre that spans the emergence of the global pandemic in the early-1980s through to the present (Barnes 2013; Blumberg 1997). However, in Irish theatrical culture there exists but a tiny handful of plays that concern themselves with AIDS, HIV, and the queer male bodies they permeate – a canon hereby documented for the first time in this essay.

Each play in this Irish HIV canon addresses the AIDS as punishment metaphor, either to reinforce it or challenge it. As such they can be organized into two categories: plays in the first category (discussed in the section immediately below) are AIDS-death dramas, presenting a tragic death from AIDS-related illness. In two of these plays we never meet the dead-from-AIDS queer man; he dies offstage, unmet, unvoiced. In the third we are privy to the final days of his life as he wastes away. In all three plays in this category, AIDS is presented as punishment for stepping outside the boundaries of normative, monogamous sex. Crucially, each of the plays subscribe to the dramatic tenets of social realism thereby exemplifying how the situation-conflict-resolution model of this theatrical structure is problematic when it comes to radical yet realistic representations of queerness and HIV/AIDS.

The plays in the second category are queer-made theatre events and monologues that interrogate the challenges faced by gay men living with HIV in Ireland and are discussed in the final section 'Positively Irish.' Each of these performances veers away from the confines of social realism and linear storytelling while also conveying stories that remain rooted in an Irish context. Thus they make queer the normativity of realist dramatic narrative that Irish audiences have come to expect while simultaneously presenting the realities of queer life with HIV/AIDS in Ireland. To get real about HIV, queer Irish theatre makers are paradoxically embracing non-realist forms. However, while these plays can be seen as a reaction against the notion of HIV as punishment, precisely because they attempt to disrupt this discourse they still address this troubling metaphor in one way or another. AIDS as punishment, then, whether it be the underlying message of a play or the trope that a theatre maker seeks to disrupt, is still the predominant feature of Irish theatre that concerns itself with queer men and HIV/AIDS.

Plays in both categories are chronologically intercut by the development of ART in 1996 and its subsequent widespread, free availability in Ireland. The ART phenomenon of people living with HIV as opposed to dying from AIDS has engendered what critics term a 'post-

AIDS' culture, whereby a discourse of crisis and death has evolved into one of survival and living. However, the term 'post-AIDS' is contentious, not least in its geopolitical assumptions, applying as it does to the specific context of wealthy Global North nations where ART is relatively easily obtained but also when we consider that there are, on average, 6000 new HIV infections every day somewhere in the world with 36 million people globally now living with HIV (Crawford 2000, 190; UNAIDS 2015). Moreover, 'post-AIDS' discourses lessen the urgency of HIV awareness and prevention, thus hampering fundraising, research, and public education. Furthermore, this discourse stokes homophobic hatred because, as HIV activists such as Sean Strub state, 'Combination therapy, in our enemies' eyes, enables us "AIDS carriers", not only to "live longer" but, more important, to "infect more"' (1998, 13). Perhaps Sarah Schulman formulates a better terminology, albeit in terms of the Global North, with her alternatives of 'AIDS of the past' and 'ongoing AIDS' as opposed to 'post-AIDS' (2012, 42). In the context of Global North nations (including Ireland) that were able to roll out ART across healthcare infrastructures with relative ease, Monica Pearl identifies the development of ART as the 'treatment threshold' that changed the face of the pandemic in those countries (2013, 36). Regardless of which taxonomy one employs, with UNAIDS (the United Nations task force for HIV/AIDS) stating that there are approximately 36.7 million people with HIV in the world, it is safe to argue that the global AIDS pandemic rages still (UNAIDS 2015). Simultaneously, UNAIDS and many other leading NGOs, as well as prominent medics, scholars, and activists, now cite HIV-related stigma as the foremost barrier to HIV prevention, treatment, care, and support (HIV Ireland 2016). In a fatal cycle, stigma (including, in some parts of the world, the fear of incarceration) prevents individuals from presenting for testing which means that, if they are HIV-positive, their HIV remains untreated and they are therefore 98 percent more likely to transmit the virus, thus shooting up the rates of new infections (Rodger et al. 2012).

'Post-AIDS,' then, is a fallacious term, a misaligned and asymptotically aspirational discourse that seeks to bring an AIDS-free world into existence merely by means of discursive and theoretical performativity and reification. In other words, in the context of wealthy Global North nations where ART is available – relative to national healthcare structures[2] – we have allowed the phrase 'post-AIDS' to become both self-evident and culturally axiomatic by its very autopoiesis. We imagine ourselves to be 'post-AIDS' because we no longer see AIDS, by which I mean the general public are no longer subject to that crisis years iconography of dying white gay men, impossibly skinny and splotchy with Kaposi's Sarcoma. In a collective performative, we in Global North contexts bring 'post-AIDS' into being by doing it – by uttering and writing the term. Bolstered by the absence of any bodies visibly marked by AIDS as it was instilled into our collective conscience during the crisis years, we socially and culturally reproduce this false security under the comforting banner of 'post-AIDS,' all the while ignoring the silent and invisible-unless-looked-for statistics of rising new diagnoses while simultaneously turning our collective back on the pandemic in Global South contexts – 'not our problem!' Clearly, while the treatment threshold of ART may have irrevocably changed the course of HIV/AIDS, this pandemic is not over; we do not live in a 'post-AIDS' world.

The punishment paradox in performance

In Irish theatre, whether a performance acknowledges the treatment threshold is crucial not only in decoding metaphors of AIDS but also in understanding the underlying politics and queer or class anxieties at play. Two of the plays in this first category of AIDS-death dramas,

Loughlin Deegan's *Queen and Peacock* (2000) and Declan Hughes' *Halloween Night* (1997) are set after the treatment threshold and yet choose to narrate reports of dead-from-AIDS bodies. As such, these plays' anachronistic dramaturgy raises questions about AIDS functioning as a metaphor for something else, in both cases as punishment for straying from the tenets of homonormativity. Furthermore, both *Halloween Night* and *Queen and Peacock*, much like earlier Irish plays featuring gay male antagonists, focus on the lives of those affected by knowing a secondary, offstage character who dies from AIDS rather than bringing the AIDS character to the centre of the narrative. The final play in this category, Geraldine Aron's *The Stanley Parkers* (1990) features a queer man in his AIDS deathbed. Cared for by his partner, both men have chosen to keep his illness a secret.

All three plays rely on dramaturgical motifs of hiddenness, suffering, victimhood, and death. Moreover, they eschew any direct interrogation of the politics driving such motifs, resonating, instead, with a vaguely leftist suggestion that the AIDS characters are victims of a homophobic society. Yet, under closer scrutiny, and reiterating Sontag's point that 'considering illness as punishment is the oldest idea of what causes illness' (1991, 131), this victimhood operates in oxymoronic parallel with the trope of AIDS as punishment. This is what I term the 'punishment paradox' of AIDS in Irish theatre. This paradox arises because, while these plays certainly hold socio-political significance regarding the correlations between homophobia, class status, and HIV, and thus cast the AIDS characters as victims, they still promulgate the notion of AIDS as punishment for operating outside the normative sexual paradigms and class-hierarchies of homonormativity. By the terms of the punishment paradox, all of these queer men ultimately die, thus providing the spectator with contagion catharsis while further embedding a socially conservative message regarding the morally punitive nature of AIDS. The punishment paradox suggests to the spectator that people contract HIV because of misdeeds in earlier life, or the type of person they are, or where they come from, rather than as a result of a contingent encounter with another HIV-positive individual.

Moreover, each drama weaves the binary of good gays versus bad queers into the punishment paradox. This is straightforward in *Queen and Peacock* with the hidden AIDS character, Ciarán, who dies during the interval, being a farmer's son from rural Ireland who ran away to London. Ciarán, as reported by Paul, drank heavily, his drunkenness enabling him to morph at night into a promiscuous bondage queen, a bad queer who preyed on young innocent men. What the play does not examine, in any nuanced way, is Ciarán's sexual practices as a means of queer self-expression; rather his rubber fetish is unquestionably figured as a sinister, nefarious practice. Nor is there any unpacking of the effects that his socio-cultural background, represented as an unquestioned stereotypically oppressive rural Ireland – itself an anachronistic dramatic trope – could have had on his sexual self-expression; it was, the spectator is led to believe, Ciarán's shame at enjoying fetish sex that brought him to need alcohol to express his sexual self, rather than the presupposed stifling conformity of his family life in Ireland. Meanwhile Paul, the good gay who cared for Ciarán in his dying days, is rewarded with a lucrative career and easy assimilation into neoliberal homonormativity in newly gay-friendly Ireland.

In *Halloween Night*, a college-reunion narrative, Hughes appears at first to reverse the good gays/bad queers binary by having the offstage and assimilated good gay, George, die from AIDS, far away in America. Whereas David, his former partner and a 'sinister fucking queer' (1998, 199), has recently tested HIV-negative. Yet this reversal fails to critique the binary and, in the end, shores up homonormativity. David, a bad queer who engages in casual sex-work, is costumed in bondage gear and espouses counter-normative politics. He feels that he is the

'spare prick among the [white heterosexual] breeders'[3] and disavows George's previous desire for a monogamous relationship as 'some ridiculous sit-com queenery,' as something that 'revolts me, all that shit… I mean, what's the point in being queer if you end up living like that?' (184, 161). Appalled by such queer notions, the other characters make it clear that they feel the wrong man contracted HIV. And this is where Hughes' dramaturgical critique of the punishment paradox collapses, for this is a sentiment with which David agrees. By the final scene, David decides he has dodged the AIDS bullet, vows to change his queer ways and embrace the very homonormativity he has opposed. He begs Neil, his casual lover and former client, 'to share my life […] I'll make promises, anything' (199). Therefore, George's absence and offstage death in faraway America, coupled with David's disavowal of a queer lifestyle, convey the message that neither the HIV body nor radical queers have any place in Irish gay culture.

Geraldine Aron's *The Stanley Parkers* (1990) was the first play to present an HIV-positive gay man in Irish theatre. The drama was groundbreaking not only in that it broke the silence around gay men and HIV/AIDS in an Ireland that, by virtue of the illegality of homosexuality until 1993, insisted on seeing the virus as primarily an issue of people who use drugs. But it is also (again with the exception of the canon of Frank McGuinness), the first Irish play to feature gay men as its main protagonists. *The Stanley Parkers* is a duologue performed from the bed of a long-term, middle-aged gay couple, Stanley, an Irishman, and Dimitri, originally from Greece. Stanley's HIV has developed into several AIDS-defining opportunistic infections. And so, as the two men grow towards acceptance of his shortened life-span, they reflect on their lives together. Significantly, Aron copperfastens the notion of HIV as an entrenched facet of Irish queer life. It is Stanley the Irishman, and not Dimitri the Greek, who is HIV-positive. But more importantly, she highlights Irish discourses of HIV-shaming and stigma within which the masculine HIV-body must operate. The two men have 'vowed to tell no-one. We'll say its lymphoma. The doc says the progress is somewhat the same' (1995, 13). This stigma was further foregrounded in that all media releases and reviews of *The Stanley Parkers* avoided any mention of HIV/AIDS (Singleton 2011, 112). Thus *The Stanley Parkers* shows the challenges of reconciling HIV-positive masculinity with Irish identity, not only in performance but also through the meta-discourses of stigma imbricated across the show's media reception.

However, despite the drama's taboo-breaking stance, it still features AIDS as a punishment for non-monogamous sex. Stanley, the men relate, has always been prone to unfaithfulness. Shortly before he first became unwell, Stanley 'had a fling with a Byronesque hairdresser' and thus attributes his contraction of HIV to this dalliance (13). The couple's need to lay the blame at the feet of the Byronesque hairdresser, while understandable and, it must be noted, coming from a time and place before the treatment threshold, resonates with current 'post-AIDS' discourses of criminalization and incarceration. Too often in Global North contexts (with Canada being the latest to criminalize non-disclosure of HIV before sexual activity), [4] punitive criminal laws embolden this blame-culture while simultaneously encouraging the cultural notion of not only HIV as punishment but also as something that needs to be punished.

While it is arguable if the punishment paradox in these plays is deliberate, they certainly mirror Irish society in that HIV-stigma has become culturally normalised. It is rare, if ever, to see any positive imagery of HIV/AIDS in Irish culture and media despite several thousand Irish HIV-positive citizens living full and healthy lives; simultaneously, Irish media tends to ignore the ways in which HIV/AIDS manifests in migrant communities in Ireland. Furthermore, none of these dramas intervene into the discourse of AIDS as punishment. AIDS instead functions as a metaphor for undesirable aspects of queer masculinity that reside outside the

fantasies of homonormative manhood. Normative masculinity must always define itself against that which it is not: therefore, through the dramaturgical machinations of the punishment paradox in performance, the spectator thus learns that acceptable gay masculinities are not poor, nor radical in their attitudes to sex and sex work, and should never step outside the boundaries of monogamous sexual practice. Ultimately, the commodification of neoliberal, 'post-AIDS' gayness does not figure HIV in its seductive promise.

Positively Irish

Each of the above plays makes clear the ideological links between 'post-AIDS' culture, homonormativity, and the disavowal of HIV-positive masculinities in Ireland's homonormative middle-class cultures. Today's Irish gay male consumer is assumed to be homogenously white, young, affluent, and, most significantly, HIV-negative; or, to use the term seen on gay hook-up websites such as Grindr, Gaydar, and Manhunt, 'disease free.' HIV-positivity cannot, under these terms, reconcile with Irish gay masculine subjectivity. Nonetheless, since the mid-1990s, several plays have intervened into this dramaturgy of HIV-stigma by staging performances of HIV-positive Irish men who, crucially, do not subscribe to the punishment paradox while simultaneously exploring the challenges of an HIV-diagnosis in Ireland both before and after the treatment threshold.

Gerard Stembridge's *The Gay Detective* (1996) avoids the punishment paradox while simultaneously troubling the good gays/bad queers binary. Set on the eve of homosexual decriminalisation in 1993 (and debuting mere months before the treatment threshold), Pat, the primary protagonist, is a gay detective-sergeant who falls in love with Ginger, an HIV-positive Dublin man. Pat is assigned, because of his sexuality, to uncover an underground sex-ring of closeted gay Irish celebrities and politicians who violently abuse vulnerable young men at sadomasochistic orgies, a plot-line which, as Brian Singleton notes, 'helps us to explore how a state in the closet permits such practices to fester' (2011, 117). Disgusted, however, by the blatant, state-sanctioned homophobia and HIV-shaming of his boss, Inspector Bear (a delightfully ironic take on an entrenched gay masculine identity), Pat eventually removes himself from the investigation. Wanting to show that 'there is good and bad in all of us,' Stembridge has Pat and Ginger perform aspects of both radical queerness and homonormativity (Interview, 2013). Pat uses Ginger's knowledge of the underground queer scene to further his ostensibly normative police work, while both men display interest in alternative sexual practices. And, although they opt for a seemingly normative coupling, Ginger raises Pat's awareness of queer politics, while plenty of references to radical queerness suggest that their relationship will be far from conventional. Crucially, the final moment of the play conveys hope for Ginger's HIV-positive future, thus disrupting entrenched tropes of the inevitable, fetid death of the punished AIDS-body:

> Pat: How long have we got do you think?
> Ginger: Hard to tell Sergeant – could be a few years you know.
> Pat: As long as that? No way.
> Ginger: 'Fraid so – better cancel all your plans.
> *(They hold each other)*
> SNAP BLACKOUT (1997, 98).

Stembridge, who also directed, utilizes radical dramaturgical strategies such as non-hierarchal characterizations (only Pat and Ginger have human names with other cast members

having animal names and playing multi-characters), a film-noir *mise-en-scene*, abstract and suggested rather than real scenography, and actors changing costume onstage. This enables a dramaturgical exploration of the correlations between masculine queerness, Irishness, and HIV-positivity. Therefore, the spectator witnesses an individuated gay Irish man in a police uniform of the state being supportive, non-judgemental, and very much in love with his HIV-positive boyfriend, who, most significantly, does not face an immediate, punitive death.

In today's post-treatment threshold theatrical climate, any analysis of HIV-positive masculinities must take several important cultural factors into account. ART has been freely available in Ireland since late-1996; therefore, 'post-AIDS' culture has a longer time-frame than the fifteen crisis years, which gives rise to a new generation of gay men who never knew the previous climate of fear, demagoguery, and mass death. This has engendered a cultural forgetting of AIDS-as-crisis whereby the urgency of HIV/AIDS has receded to the back-burner of queer political agendas with normative 'happy gay' issues such as marriage and adoption taking precedence. Concurrently, queer men with HIV have been ushered away out of sight with other bad queers. This is bolstered by a 'post-AIDS' agenda of individuality which engenders a new wave of conservative backlash against those living with HIV whereby, rather than trying to enhance their quality of life or civil liberties, social discourse and political practice seek, often through punitive measures and contrary to all scientific evidence, to protect the public from HIV-positive people. What we see, then, is how a collective crisis of sickness and dying that mobilized queer communities to force social change has mutated into an ideological crisis of individualistic AIDS-amnesia and HIV-stigma that is, by virtue of 'post-AIDS' homonormativity, more prevalent in gay communities than in heterosexual life.

Neil Watkins' queer monologues are a singular theatrical voice in countering HIV-stigma. With *Cure for Homosexuality* (2005) and *The Dark Room* (2004, unpublished), he exposes several homophobic metaphors at work in AIDS discourses. It is with his most recent monologue, *The Year of Magical Wanking* (2010), that Watkins is at his most polemic. An autobiographical work written in lyrical verse, the monologue takes non-linear jumps through a year in the life of Watkins himself, rather than any fictional character, thus realistically exploring the everyday life and sexual vicissitudes of an HIV-positive queer man living in Dublin. From his family who banish him to his dead-grandfather's council flat upon learning of his HIV-status, through his unsuccessful attempts to find sex, to his shattered self-esteem, and the ways in which those who supposedly support him actually pathologize his queerness, the spectator is privy to the innermost thoughts, psychic misgivings, and emotional roller-coaster of Watkins' internalised queer shame and HIV-stigma: 'My HIV's under control with pills/But it's my attitude to it that's ill' (Conway 2012, 299).

Watkins' corporeal semiotics, coupled with the biographical nature of the monologue, shatter the myth of the punished 'post-AIDS' body as promulgated by plays such as *Queen and Peacock*. By revealing that he is the performed character, any ambiguity between the possibly-positive performer and a fictionally-positive character is disrupted. Watkins performs on a darkened stage under a bright spotlight; playful, mischievous, wearing a tight-fitting white t-shirt under a smart business suit. The aesthetic impression is one of overt masculine health and strength. This forces spectators to confront common Irish misperceptions of the wasted AIDS-body, which sit in stark contrast to the corporeal semiotics encoded on stage. Watkins further weaves a warrior metaphor throughout the monologue recounting how he has fought his way through life, in constant battle with conservative family, society, and medical establishment. Completing the warrior image, he has two stripes of war-paint across his face and a bushy beard – bolstering his healthy, hard-bodied semiotics of alpha-masculinity.

However, in contrast to this performance of an attractive, healthy body, Watkins' emotional wellness is up for question. HIV-stigma merely adds one further layer to the sexual and cultural shame that comes with living outside Irish hetero- and homonormative paradigms. *Magical Wanking* thus unhides the ways in which HIV-stigma in Ireland is an extension of queer-shaming and the pathologization of queer sex and sexualities. He feels guilty about enjoying bondage sexual practices (BDSM), relating how two counsellors inform him that his desire to be dominated stems from childhood sexual abuse at the hands of a sports coach, both of them furthering the idea that 'I choose to recreate the sense of shame' (Conway 2012, 297). Yet, his vocal delivery during these sections of the performance implies that is he not fully invested in the counsellors' take on BDSM: 'That's great. I'm fine. No, something has come up' (309). In these moments, Watkins comes close to embracing BDSM as a radical form of queer resistance and, crucially, as a non-shaming sexual practice; one which would allow him not only to explore new paradigms of queer pleasure but also to explore the self- and sexual empowerment inherent in his submissiveness. However, any recognition that 'perhaps my higher self loves S&M,' is disrupted by the heteronormative paradigms to which he and those who claim to support him unwittingly subscribe (309). Similarly, the social scripts of a sexually suppressed Ireland prevent any radical reimagining of masturbation as another method of sexual activity, forcing him to understand it as the last resort of a lonely loser: 'Addicted to my dick […] And so I wank because I haven't wed' (293). Despite strenuous efforts to 'unfeel the mean and nasty lessons of the Pope's regime' (295), heteronormative discourses which shroud HIV, BDSM, and masturbation in shame, abuse, and loneliness – invisible by their very ubiquity – insidiously infiltrate Watkins's psychosexual imaginary.

Still, Watkins seeks to reconcile his queer, HIV-positive masculinity with a sense of Irishness by uncovering not only the cruel optimism of hegemonic masculinity but also the seductive lure of neoliberal homonormativity. *Magical Wanking* is thus not a cry for assimilation into 'post-AIDS' culture, but rather an uncovering of the queer discomfort cast upon HIV-positive masculinities. Why, Watkins asks, is it so impossible for queer, HIV-positive masculinities to exist in tandem with hetero- or homonormative counterparts? In his quest for an answer Watkins performs the truth of what it means to be Irish and queer, Irish and HIV-positive, Irish and shamed, Irish and abused.

Like Watkins, theatre collective BrokenTalkers' *Silver Stars* (Millar 2008) queers the familiarity of realist dramatic form in order to convey how local gay men function within the context of a global epidemic while simultaneously challenging AIDS-amnesia. *Silver Stars* is not a drama but rather a song cycle wherein eight song sequences are performed by ten men, several of whom are not professional actors. Sometimes solo, sometimes duet, each song has a chorus sung in unison by all ten men. Performed on a bare wooden floor, with cello players at the side of the stage, the songs are augmented by video footage of interviews and significant events in the history of the Irish and American gay rights and ACT UP movements, projected onto a large screen above the playing area. The show's fluid, fragmented, and non-linear dramaturgy sees several AIDS narratives float in, around, and through each other. The seamless movement from the song cycle 'Richard' into the next cycle 'Robert' ensures that the spectator experiences a multi-faceted, poly-vocal representation of not just the quotidian life-narratives of those who lived and died with AIDS and those who mourn them but also the histories and politics of ACT UP and other queer resistance movements that brought about the treatment threshold.

'Richard' begins with all ten performers delivering lines describing how the lovers and carers of Irish men dying from AIDS were denied hospital access by authorities because they

were not next of kin, and how these next of kin ignored their dead sons' pre-planned funeral arrangements by excluding lovers and carers from the preparations and services. These spoken words meld easily into a solo elegy sung by Richard's anonymous boyfriend, 'Everybody Told Me About You,' in which he sings of how his grief had to remain hidden (Millar 2008). As the last bars of this song fade, focus is pulled to the overhead screen bearing the title 'Robert,' signalling the shift into another cycle. An interview with the parents of Irish-American AIDS activist Robert Rygor plays on the screen, during which they discuss how coming to terms with Robert's queerness was made more difficult because he came out to them by announcing that he had AIDS – 'I didn't know what AIDS was, let alone what gay meant' – and yet they now understand that he did not die in vain. After discussing how they make annual pilgrimage to Ireland in their son's memory, Rygor's parents' poignant interview fades into footage of him delivering an impassioned speech at an ACT UP demonstration before the focus shifts back to the stage where two actors sing a duet, 'I'm Here Today.' The lyrics of this song, 'I'm here today, without a leader/This is a crisis, without a leader,' resonate directly with the homophobic responses of many right-wing governments during the crisis years. Yet these lyrics reach across history and into current 'post-AIDS' culture by symbolising the isolation and fear that homonormative HIV-stigma engenders in many positive gay men today as well as the current crisis in Ireland whereby government ignores new diagnoses rates that are higher than they have ever been since the beginnings of the Irish epidemic in 1982 (O'Brien 2016, 45). Most crucially, *Silver Stars*' non-linear song-cycle structure goes some way towards answering questions about how to narrativize a global pandemic that is still local in its impacts. 'Richard' and 'Robert' simultaneously perform localised narratives of everyday living with HIV while remembering those who died. These operate concurrently in tandem with narratives of the history and politics of AIDS activism while also examining the experiences of those who loved and cared for HIV-positive men. This multi-faceted kaleidoscope of AIDS narratives situates the spectator within local, personal, political, and historical performances while simultaneously marking their place within the global epidemic.

Conclusion

Overall, despite being restricted to a small canon, the performance of HIV-positive masculinities in Irish theatre constitutes a rich stew of AIDS metaphors and reified narratives. Realist dramas hide HIV-positive masculinity, shrouding it in victimhood while paradoxically punishing it with death. With these AIDS-death plays, there is a sense of middle-class, mainstream, white-Irish male playwrights attempting to give voice to queer masculinities they perceive to be voiceless, yet without really knowing the truth of those voices, nor the medical realities of living with HIV in today's Ireland. The elision of such truths thus confounds the inclusive realism towards which these playwrights strive, while simultaneously exposing a host of queer and class anxieties. Conversely, when non-realist dramaturgy is mobilized, HIV-positive masculinity performs up front and centre, disrupting many culturally constructed myths about the virus and the masculine bodies it colonises while simultaneously exposing HIV-stigma as an extension of homonormative shaming of bad queers. The queering of narrative structures and realist form makes HIV-positive masculinity more real, concurrently situating the spectator within a kaleidoscope of AIDS narratives and histories that contextualise the local within the global.

Endnotes

[1] Date references in this essay provide, in the first instance, the year of first performance of the play in question. Thereafter where the essay provides quotations from the play, the date in the citation reference indicates the published text and, in cases where the play has been published in an anthology, the editor of that anthology rather than the playwright. Because published plays generally appear one or several years after the first performance, the initial date provided for a play and the dates in the citation references for quotations will differ.

[2] In all EU nations, ART and HIV healthcare is provided free of charge, as it is in Australia. In the USA, access to ART is dependent on healthcare insurance, a situation that has improved with the passage of the Affordable Care Act (aka 'Obamacare') in 2010. For those living with HIV in the USA who cannot access any healthcare, there are various charities which will provide ART. This charity route is, however, arduous and overly bureaucratic and can therefore prevent those living with HIV from approaching them.

[3] In Ireland, the term 'breeders' is used by gay men to denote and sometimes disparage heterosexuals who procreate.

[4] Under Canadian law, the legal obligation to disclose was established in the 1990s, but the law became harsher in 2012 when the Supreme Court of Canada decided that people living with HIV must disclose their status before having sex that poses a "realistic possibility of HIV transmission" in R. v. Mabior SCC 47 and R. v. D.C. SCC 48. The Supreme Court characterized even very small risks of HIV transmission as "a realistic possibility."

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