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Oh wow! He's queer! Queering Panto in Belfast: An Interview with Ross Anderson-Doherty

Alyson Campbell and Trish McTighe, interview with Ross Anderson-Doherty[1]

Ross Anderson-Doherty is a queer singer-actor-cabaret artist and performance-maker based in Belfast, where he runs and regularly performs at the Cabaret Supper Club, as well as other of the city's gay bars and clubs. His most recent project is a show called Cake Daddy*, a work about the intersection of queerness and fatness emerging from his own experience and his commitment to fat activism.*[2] *His performance ethos is driven by his feminism and immersion in both feminist and queer theories, which can be seen in his alter ego as a 'sonic lesbian bear'. Although not within the academy formally, his practice is very much interwoven with research and theoretical questions around queer performance and, specifically, queer voice.*[3] *He has worked in panto in Belfast since 2013.*

In the following interview, Anderson-Doherty addresses the ways in which the panto form might be queered – an especially charged project in the particular locality of Belfast, North of Ireland.[4] *The interview focuses on how Anderson-Doherty works to queer panto, largely in the role of the dame, through casting, rehearsal processes and in performance. In the Cabaret Supper Club and in panto, Anderson-Doherty is performing to largely heterosexual audiences, and he highlights below some of the challenges he has faced, but also the sorts of queer interventions he has been able to make through performance. His approach to gender and his lived experience, coupled with the range of his work, have often*

clashed with the culture he works within, leading him to identify and adopt a set of strategies we might see as queering the spaces and artforms he engages with.

It is worth noting that The North of Ireland/Northern Ireland remains the least hospitable and most homophobic region in the UK and Ireland (with a high rate of suicide and publicly-sanctioned homophobic statements from the highest levels of government, including a determined resistance to equal marriage).[5]

Note: Campbell and McTighe have added context and critical commentary in italics after the interview..

AC/TM: Given your background and experience in academic work theorising gender, was there something in the figure of the dame that interested you from the start?

RAD: When I was a child being taken to panto I always enjoyed the dame, but actually loved the principal boy role so much more. That was, until they started casting men in those roles instead of women; then I lost interest. I loved the fabulously feminine figure singing great tunes and getting to be adventurous, even if they were dressed as 'a boy'. The dame wasn't something I had really thought about in years, other than to be vaguely dismissive of the role as misogynist and often racist. I ended up playing the dame for the first time in The Waterfront [Belfast] by accident, in fact. I was cast as the Big Bad Wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood* because the producer heard me sing a Jackie Wilson song at the launch of a festival. I took that role, frankly, because I needed the money. Then the more famous guy they had playing the dame got sick and I was recast. So, I started my relationship with panto and the

dame in Christmas 2013, playing Nanny No Hood.[6] There wasn't much time to think about it, but I was pretty anxious given all my assumptions about the problematic nature of the figure. It was alarmingly stressful, both in terms of workload and trying to identify the parts of the form that made me uncomfortable, and then translating that discomfort into thought and then into action.

As part of this conversation with Anderson-Doherty, we began to reflect that, as adults, none of us had been attending pantos and that we considered the form to be inherently heteronormative, 'unqueer', and conservative. And yet, in our conversation we noted that for all three of us our first experience of theatre/live performance was panto and that it still functions as such for huge numbers of people in Ireland, North and South. Indeed, it may remain the only form of live performance experience for many people. As such, we know that to dismiss it is to undermine its cultural significance and the potential capacity it has to create carnivalesque spaces for identity expression, even if that does not always manifest in critical ways. This manifestation is, of course, very reliant on the creative personnel involved, although, as a low-brow form of performance, this aspect has had limited critical attention.

RAD: When I started doing my performance as the dame, people expected something akin to what John Linehan as his alter-ego May McFettridge has been doing at the Grand Opera House for the last 30-odd years. This is because it's become the tradition *here,* in Belfast, one that John has established. Linehan's dame is different to any other I've seen, which is down to his career as a stand-up and his 'being' May McFettridge (explanatory note below), and to the fact that this is a panto show that has been taking place within forty-odd years of conflict and contestation. This has meant that panto here in Belfast has always been dealing

with a particular sociopolitical climate, and Linehan's standup routine is very Belfast-focused, with all the politics that this encompasses. Whereas other big budget pantos produced by this company (Qdos) would tend to shy away from that sort of political comment and local specificity, Linehan has done a lot of material about the Troubles and, via the figure of McFettridge, would make fun of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) or of Sinn Féin – although less so since the peace process. I don't think you'd find a panto in England talking about terrorism in the way that we did here.

AC/TM: Linehan created the character of May McFettridge in the late 1980s and both he and McFettridge were household names in the North of Ireland well before he began to work in panto. Life began for McFettridge on a radio show hosted by well-known Northern Irish presenter Eamonn Holmes, with whom Linehan has a family connection.[7] *Linehan's performance of McFettridge is categorically in the realm of female impersonation, a tradition that is quite different from drag and, certainly, queer performance. Linehan is on record as denying that May is anything other than a 'wee woman from North Belfast' who will have 'nothing to do with any talk of transvestites and transsexuals'.*[8] *While the non-threatening 'wee' woman was possibly a means to speak openly in ways that many in Northern Irish society could not at the time and be openly critical of the establishment, what this means is that the cross-dressing becomes a tool, a safety valve for social tensions, but at the same time its gender politics are purposefully occluded.*

RAD: In a way, I also expected to be like Linehan, but I'm not sure I am. Those sort of conflict or so-called post-conflict politics are not really where my own humour lies when I play the

dame. Above all, what Linehan/McFettridge has meant for me is that my control over what I am doing as the dame could get stronger and stronger.

AC/TM: What does that mean for you 'taking control' and making the dame stronger?

RAD: I hate what panto is communicating very often, especially when it comes to gender politics and race also. Some lines make me retch while I'm saying them – that is if I can't change them. Or someone else's lines if I can't get them to change. Some of that makes me ill. If it were more responsible, ethical maybe, as I was trying and failing miserably to achieve, it would be so much more craic! That said, editing single lines here and there is never too much of a problem. There were things in the script of our production of *Aladdin* (2016), for example, that I was not prepared to say. If the joke is reliant on me making fun of how an Asian person speaks, then I am not going to do that. I am not prepared to start punching down. When people are no longer being harassed or attacked or feeling threatened just leaving their place of work, then maybe we can consider making that joke, but certainly not before. One of the issues, for example, is that, more often than not, white actors play Asian characters, in, for example, *Aladdin.* However, it's when the 'princess' character's whole sense of ambition is dropped as soon as she meets the 'prince' and she becomes trapped in a cage or something awaiting a man to rescue her that I feel the need to crawl under a rock. Or it is when the laughs come at the expense the dame figure based on her ugliness or lack of intelligence.

The rehearsal time is so quick and everyone so stressed to learn their lines, blocking, dances, and songs that any pause for discussion about how we renegotiate these tropes isn't really welcomed. It's not that other cast members haven't cared; there's just so little

time to take on new information that I'm often the grumpy one talking about the importance of representation and the responsibility we have as a company to not set the kids' ideas of how gender works back to pre-1990s Disney. I recall having a very genuine conversation with a great actor about how the treatment of marginalised people in fairy tales isn't great, especially their treatment of women. This came as a total shock to him. He was very prepared to listen but this was in the dressing room after the show had been running for a few weeks – only then did we have time to reflect. I guess the things I want to achieve are a fundamental shift in how the narrative and character arcs and interactions function. That's a lot to try to get done in a short rehearsal process, especially when you're the only engine driving it. This year I'm hopeful that, with a new creative team with whom I have a working relationship from other, more radical projects, I will have more input before rehearsals and can effect more change.

AC/TM: Panto does seem from the outside like a last bastion of resistance to standards that would be decried elsewhere in the industry, with its resistance to recognising and refusing cultural impersonation, yellowface and brownface, for example.[9] Do the claims that these modes are acceptable because of deeply-held attachments to tradition rely on what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would call an 'alibi': because there are a certain set of expectations attached to the form, this somehow overrides the racism and, indeed, sexism?[10]

RAD: I would answer this question by talking about panto form in general and its changes over time. It's my experience that what you say is true: that the form of the 'art' takes prevalence over any responsibility it may have to its audience and the world at large. The stick used to beat any opposition to racist or sexist elements of the form is 'this is just how

it's done'. I get the impression from a lot of producers and directors that they think because the actors playing Chinese characters are wearing literal yellow face that everything is somehow fine. There's a very real sense in some quarters that the loss, or dilution, of these facets of the form is weakening to the very fibre of pantomime. I'm constantly reminded that the loss of privilege usually feels like oppression. In the Waterfront pantomimes there was never any suggestion that I play the character as anything other than Irish. The team at The Waterfront seemed pretty attuned to issues of race and ethnicity compared to gender or sex. There were no attempts to ask any of the actors to use yellow-face or voice. I don't think The Waterfront team are unique in this but it's a small step in the right direction.

Furthermore, the panto form itself has changed radically over the last one hundred years alone. For instance, the girl playing the lead boy role has almost disappeared – we almost never have a girl playing Aladdin. For some reason, me as a dame in a frock is perfectly acceptable but not that, because it's too queer: it would present a girl on girl scenario.[11] Also, there's less 'comedy potential' there, in having a woman play a man. It's always been my thought that a lot of the humour that the dame creates is based on how degrading it is for a man to be seen as anything less than aligned with whatever the hegemonic masculinity is in that time or place. It's very simple but very real in my experience. I always think of the television comedy sketch show *Little Britain*'s 'We're ladies' skit as an example of how it is still regarded as acceptable in our cultural consciousness.[12] There is a longstanding tradition of male comedians dressing as women to show how far they will degrade themselves to make the audience laugh.

AC/TM: Are there strategies that you have developed to call out the sexism and misogyny from within the industry? Do these happen in rehearsal or in the creative process and / or in performance?

RAD: I tend to insert a rant at least once during each show, commenting on the gendering at work, and on the misogyny. The joyous thing about being a panto dame is that you are the one person in the show who doesn't have to give a shit about taking it seriously at any point – you become a joker figure. And because I am that lynchpin with the audience, I can do that commentary too, so that's positive. But actually, when we started, the director was quite keen for me to be a more traditional dame, as in less of an outside eye, doing less commenting on the action but rather staying within the fictional frame.

Other creatives, though, like producer Martin Lynch, love that I do that and he encourages it. He likes the fact that I make fun of it. He likes that I pick on the men and never the women, and he likes that I poke fun using local references. But in my first year I was very much discouraged from doing any of that; I was asked to stick with the script. And that year I tried my best to do so, but in my second year I decided I couldn't cooperate because it was my only way of dealing with the horror of what we were peddling to these kids. I think in every single production I have pointed out my co-performer Jolene O'Hara's academic achievements, saying: 'She has 11 GCSEs and a degree in engineering and you've just reduced her to a shoe!'

In terms of strategies, I think that's also why my beard is so important to me. Well actually, there are two separate things: the beard and the make-up. It is the fact that my make-up is not used to make me look ugly, or take the piss out of make-up itself, or the desire to wear it. My make-up is good. It's over the top but it's good make-up. It's nothing

maybe that anyone would ever choose to wear outside of a performance context (or maybe they would!), but it's well applied, over the top glamorous. In essence, I am not a man taking the piss out of femininity. I absolutely refuse to do that at any point and if I ever do it's entirely by accident – and I hope I never have.

AC/TM: In terms of this sort of critical perspective on gender that you deploy, do you see what you do as related to drag in any way? How would you describe this?

RAD: That's something I wrestle with a lot. It depends on how one conceptualises drag, I suppose. What I do in my cabaret work certainly doesn't gel with mainstream forms of drag, especially those made popular by *RuPaul's Drag Race* or the more theatrical and cabaret-based forms of drag that the UK and Ireland have produced. Those sorts of drag tend toward a consistent and convincing image of femininity. I do think that I sit somewhere, probably a few places, in the wider drag matrix. Really, that means that how I do my genders aligns with other performers who don't really fit within the parameters of drag as it's narrowly defined. I paint my face in ways that don't try to diminish the masculine features, like my brow bone or smaller eye space, and use techniques more associated with how women use makeup. I don't pad or change my body shape and I wear a mixture of male and female clothes and shoes. When asked, I usually say that I do drag but I am not a drag queen. That's not to say that one can't be a drag queen and do what I do, but it's a useful, quick distinction in the moment. A useful analogy might be how I think of opera singing vs pop singing. An opera singer's job is to create and keep consistent a singular vocal quality that can then move and change and bend to the needs of the music and text. A pop singer's job is often to change their voice quality to suit the music. I see myself as more in line with

the kind of vocalic mutability that you find in pop singing – that's both to do with the way I approach singing and the way I approach gender.

The dame figure is seen more and more within the drag matrix/spectrum, I think because drag has become so much more mainstream. British drag has traditionally been closer to the theatre and cabaret scenes and its edges rougher than its American counterpart. I get the sense that the dame and the drag queen probably went to the same school and, while they were in different classes, they played together in the playground at lunch time – probably avoiding playing football and talking about the old movie stars they both loved. Lily Savage and Myra Dubois are both very successful drag performers in the UK who have played both dame and villain roles in versions of their already established drag personas. Like McFettridge, they are both comics but are members of the LGBTQIA+ community whose drag crosses over from the drag scene into mainstream comedy, television, theatre and cabaret. I experience it as outside of mainstream drag, again because mainstream drag performers work to create a consistent image of femininity – whatever that means to them. I, as the dame, don't make that attempt.

Anderson-Doherty's approach to his image, especially his make-up, is in stark contrast to Linehan's McFettridge, whose make-up appears to be deliberately crude: there are blacked-out teeth, a badly-drawn beauty spot and poorly applied block-colour eye shadow. Taken as a whole this look reflects the grotesque or failed femininity which tends to be put onto middle-aged women. As Caroline Quentin queried in 2016: 'Is it appropriate, in this age of inclusion, for middle-age[d] women to be ridiculed by blokes in skirts and too much make-up, be it in panto or a TV sitcom?'[13] *May McFettridge may go in and out of the fictional world of the panto, but Linehan does not seem to comment critically on the form itself. We suggest*

that Anderson-Doherty takes panto performance to a metatheatrical level by calling out the tropes of the form and simultaneously staging a commentary on the problematic gendering that is at work within those tropes. He does this by foregrounding the tension between his performed gender identity and his lived gender identity, embodying on stage the same critical approach to gender he deploys in his everyday life.

Figure 1. John Linehan as May McFettridge, courtesy of Qdos Entertainment, @Qdos Entertainment

AC/TM: Would you agree that you try to avoid trading on a failed masculinity or failed femininity? Rather, that you try to embody both at the same time, in a way that is never reductive or diminishing of femininity?

RAD: I would say I confidently embody my failure; that might be the best way to put it. At least, that's what it feels like. I quite like that. Neither end of the binary construct seems like something I want to achieve.

The beard is an attempt to leave my masculinity visible. The first year I didn't have my beard because it was the first time and I just went along with it; it was a job after all and I didn't know what I was doing as I hadn't seen a panto in years. The second year there was a fight, and I lost my beard because I had signed the contract before even thinking about these things. Without my beard some people thought that I was a woman, so my masculinity got lost somewhat.

Figure 2. Ross Anderson-Doherty in Jack and The Beanstalk*, courtesy of GBL Entertainment, @GBL Entertainment*

As the years go by, my own personal ways of doing gender have become more known to some people in Belfast. I'm often called 'that big fella with the beard that wears the make-up and sings.' This local familiarity has allowed me to insert more of myself into the proceedings in the rehearsal room and onstage. I'm always reminded of listening to Judith Butler in interview, many years ago,[14] and her saying that all gender is a failure, so I very much enjoy failing to do my masculinity in my everyday life, then bringing that to the stage in my cabaret work and then extending that further to a form where I am a man failing to be (being) a man who is also failing to be (being) a woman. Having the joy of that wriggle room with how I'm doing my gender means I can be much more fluid in how I interact with the other performers, the narrative, the audience and the form in general. I can be very much 'Rossy' at some points, decrying the ridiculousness of the form, or the dame at some points, decrying the ridiculous nature of her place in the form, or just the dame in the scene driving the narrative. I don't feel like I'm achieving either. I feel like I'm reveling in my failure to do either well, hopefully, without diminishing the femininity. That said, I'm perfectly happy to diminish masculinity. Perhaps this is where the audience get a little tickle of queerness: seeing someone revel joyously in their failure to do their gender well and maintain a position of relative power in the space while doing so. Dancing about in the spaces created by my gender-wriggling is a lot of fun.

AC/TM: What was the argument against your beard?

RAD: The producers argued that a beard cannot work for a panto dame. Yet when I asked what was meant by 'worked' I got nothing back, no clarification. So, in the third year I said I

would do the show, but I had to keep the beard – which they questioned – but I basically said that I was keeping the beard or not doing it at all.

My argument was that I think it helps me preserve that element of masculinity even if everything around it is glitzy and glamorous, hyperbolic and heightened femininity. I still have these masculine markers. I want the kids to leave asking questions. Sometimes it works: some of the kids will ask 'why does that woman have a beard?' And I would often talk to some of the other women in the audience and ask them when they were going to grow their beards, and suggest they would look lovely should they decide to do so. Of course, some women were a bit offended, as if me implying they were going to grow facial hair was the worst thing that could ever happen! Not all of them took it well. Some kids were even asking their mummies when they were going to grow their beards…

Whereas hair on a woman is culturally associated with grotesqueness and failure and ugliness, Ross is queerly refusing to make that equation. By doing it in a hyperbolic manner he is gently arguing for a more expanded understanding of the multiplicities of gendered bodies.

RAD: The point is that some women have beards, you just have to get over it! This is something I say quite a lot in everyday life. I think it made the overall enjoyment of the whole thing a bit greater – for me anyway! And maybe for the audience too. We can have endless comedy about my beard. But it functions neither as a mockery of hairy women nor feminine men: we can come in and out of moments where people observe it and ignore it and it's fine. In short, the beard helped me not take the piss out of femininity, or out of what it is to be a woman. This is me, a man who is obviously failing at making you think he is

a woman because he's got this beard, but everything else he's doing is pretty cool so let's enjoy it all. And then it became a selling point: 'the dame with the beard', which could be marketed in some places as the hipster dame, because I also have tattoos. Interestingly, that is another thing that came up around assumptions about gender: the notion that I couldn't possibly be a girl because I have tattoos. I get that a lot.

AC/TM: Does the beard then do something in terms of sexuality too – does it contribute to queering in a specifically sexual sense?

RAD: The beard also helps to queer things onstage. In the year we did *Aladdin*, for example, the relationship between Abenazer and I was made much gayer by the fact that I have a beard. As I said, we are one of the few commercial pantos that don't have celebrities; we're all just local actors, so we can avoid having the show become about showing off the celebrity, which seems to be the way with most pantos these days. In ours, we can just be silly and gay it up a bit, and, most importantly, I can stop and have a feminist rant at a guy who is a local actor, something I could not do if he were a celebrity. I would have been told, for example, not to call the celebrity a misogynist and tell him to get off the stage; that's something I've done every year. Except in the first year, actually. But I rimmed a wolf that year…

Obscenity and double entendre are pretty standard parts of the panto form. The year where I landed from a slow-motion fall face-first between the wolf's buttocks would have been pretty standard had I not been well-known locally as a gay man. The kids just laughed at the ridiculous base humour of it and the adults either laughed or recoiled in horror at the allusion to a sex act associated with gay men. A friend of mine who came to

see the show said, ‘ever since I’ve seen you in a wig rimming a wolf, panto has changed for the better.’ Traditionally, the dame’s affections are spurned by everyone to whom they are directed. I’ve been lucky enough to build relationships with other actors who enjoy the small queering strategies we use to tackle the conservative elements of the form. So we’ve built in little moments where I’ve been making romantic advances towards a male character and the direction has been for him to push me away – which he does – however, as soon as there’s an audience we have a small lingering moment of sexual attraction before he goes back into character and the show continues as directed. I mean, it’s a complete lack of professionalism and utterly disruptive but no one ever got anywhere by following the rules or being ‘directable’. Anyway, for a fleeting moment the audience can see, if they choose to, two male bodies showing genuine sexual attraction to each other. There are some more traditional pantomimes where the dame would maybe find a husband but usually that husband is a harangued and bewildered ex-villain. We like to keep it sexy. The guy with whom I had those moments as a performer is actually directing the show this year at The Waterfront (2019/20) so that should be an interesting process.

Essentially, in theatre, people will accept whatever convention they’re presented with, so they accept that there is the woman with pretty makeup and a silly costume who flirts with the men, even when that woman sings like a man.

AC: And speaks like a man?

RA: Actually, my panto dame voice is slightly higher than my speaking voice. Not so much higher as ‘twangier’. By that I mean I engage the aryepiglottic sphincter more during phonation; these are the muscles used to bring the epiglottis down to cover the larynx

during swallowing. When engaged, they create a smaller space above the larynx which creates a sound whose harmonics are between 2 and 4 kilohertz making it appear louder to the human ear. It's that sound that in isolation sounds like an evil but very happy sheep. It's often associated with working class people from industrial cities, like Belfast, where it is a defining feature of what is known as the 'millie' accent.[15]

In essence, I do an impression of every matriarch of every family I grew up with, putting localised working class femininity into the heart of the performance. My dame is a mixture of my ma and my mate Lyndsey's ma, Jean. I have to be loud at all times, but without shouting, so the Northern Irish matriarch twang gives me that. I essentially imagine how my ma or Jean would say this or do this. Jean, in particular, is a woman who takes no shit from anybody. While the panto dame figure is made fun of for being stupid – and she is indeed stupid, in that she does and says stupid things – at no point do I ever play her as such. I can't bring myself to, for a start, but also the comedy comes from the fact that I refuse to believe that I am either ugly or stupid. And the rest of the cast can make fun of me but I am one hundred per cent confident in the fact that I am remarkably clever and remarkably beautiful. And everyone else can bugger off. In that regard, Linda Hughes from *Gimme Gimme Gimme* is another inspiration for my 'daminess'. It's a UK show from the late 1990s written by Jonathan Harvey, in which Kathy Burke plays what is essentially a fabulous gay character. She is amazing, even if now the show might be bit dated. It was done at a time when gay masculinity was so fragile. I was not allowed to see camp faggotry on TV: Julian Clarey was banned for most of my adolescence so I missed him; *Queer as Folk* I had to find ways of watching so I wouldn't get caught; *Ab Fab* had a few faggy characters but nothing like *Gimme Gimme Gimme's* Tom and Linda, who provided my first experience of unpolished, scrappy, male femininity. James Dreyfus did that very well. As a sixteen or

seventeen-year-old I was very happy to see that on the TV. It gave me permission to act in certain ways.

It is a point of difference from most other panto dames that I sing. Usually in panto, the dame does not sing for the sake of showing off their voice. She'd often sing a clap-along patter song but rarely an emotional ballad or high-octane soul-tinged dance number. However, when I have a solo the show stops. My solo is not there to facilitate the narrative or bolster the love interest; these moments are literally just there for me to show off for five minutes, usually with a big party song. It's so weird, and does make things interesting in terms of voice. Especially in the early days I'd go from talking in quite feminine tones to singing in a deep and resonant masculine voice. I still do this actually. I enjoy lowering my larynx in the vocal tract when singing at lower pitches. This has the effect of keeping the pitch consistent with the demands of the melody but making it sound deeper, richer, and perhaps lower, to the listener. I sort of feel a wee jolt from the audience again who, despite the beard, might have forgotten my physical manliness for a moment. Suddenly there's this unmistakable masculine voice coming at them: another little gap in which to wriggle about with queer abandon.

This discussion makes us think about Ross and the notion of queer voice, in both a material and metaphorical sense. This is to do with how Ross vocalises a Northern Irish dialect and vocabulary to make it sound queer. When we think of how Northern Ireland / the North of Ireland is and has been 'heard', we think of the voice of zealous masculine sectarianism. We hear the extreme religious and unionist voice of Ian Paisley and we hear the voiceovers that were imposed on those associated with the IRA and Sinn Féin during the 1980s, Gerry Adams among them.[16] History seems to have associated the Northern Irish voice with conflict and

violence, as a site of danger, of threat, of fear – at least in the public media channels through which Northern Ireland has been heard. Yet, we in the North know that there are other voices to be heard. Anderson-Doherty's vocal virtuosity offers a glimpse of an alternative vocalic landscape, through which Northern Ireland / the North of Ireland might be heard differently. We suggest that he manages to both love and expose 'Norn Irish' simultaneously; this comes via strategies that we might understand as a form of disidentification in José Esteban Muñoz's term; that is, he takes forms of speech that sit comfortably in the mainstream and, rather than rejecting them outright, playfully subverts them and opens them up to the queer minoritarian subject. This includes techniques such as a joyful embrace and reimagining of certain grammatical 'errors', specific local terms and, particularly, working class forms of speech.[17]

AC/TM: How do you understand this as queering through voice? And how does it work when you are doing panto?

RAD: The voice, for me, has always had a lot of queer potential. So much identity is carried in the voice. It's made in our bodies, leaves, takes up all the space surrounding the bodies and penetrates the listener with a tiny imprint of the vocalizer's musculature. So much store is set by whether someone is using their 'real' voice or not. It's assumed that there is a single identity that is projected sonically into the world from the body. The voice is supposed to be the sonic embodiment of the 'authentic' self. As a voice teacher I often think that we hear a voice as 'inauthentic' when we hear any evidence of muscular instability in the vocal mechanism, whether we're aware of that or not. A bit like when we see someone complete a physical task they have just learned compared to when they have practiced it

over and over. We see them complete the same action but we notice, perhaps unconsciously, that it isn't secure and thus isn't part of the 'real' them. As a performer with my particular history of voice training, I am lucky have access to lots of places of vocal stability and the ability to move between them quickly and fluidly. I like to use this to create as many 'authentic' selves as possible in performance. That's not to say I like to play lots of different characters, more that I like to suggest the possibilities of lots of selves all scrambling about at once. Whilst I often feel like I'm performing myself failing to do gender well, I do try to do the performance well. The twang of the 'millie' accent, for example, is a sound often made in a derisive way. I have a genuine love for that sound and that way of making sound – I think that shows on stage. I suppose it's an extension of the type of camp comedy I grew up loving where the campness both exposes the marginal but also upholds it, usually with a commitment to the marginal – perhaps even more commitment than is really required. When singing, I use techniques usually attributed to divas; long sustained belted notes; little embellishments like riffs or runs; using a wide range; moving between voice qualities; large leaps in pitch and so on. Whilst these are things that male singers do all the time too, they're much more associated with female singers.

And of course, I endeavour to do this with the utmost respect for the singers I'm referencing. All this allows me to play in the spaces between the visually masculine markers of the beard and body hair, the hyper-feminine costume and makeup, the movement between feminine and masculine sounds when singing and speaking, and then the linguistic features from the North of Ireland that I love. An audience member once told me that they'd never heard someone embody a whole province of Ireland with such relish. That delighted me no end 'cause I love all the little linguistic curiosities I grew up hearing the women around me use. I have a ball using a variety of them when I go off script and I even

enjoy adding a few to the script, to be honest. I'm lucky to have the opportunity to perform and celebrate the fabulously feminine aspects of the working-class background I spent my childhood absorbing, but as a child or adolescent never felt safe to participate in. I suppose for me that's where I feel the queerness most: when the voice, the speech and language and the visual are all working together to create a joyous, oscillating ball of gender and class failure.

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[1] Main interview took place Belfast, 21 June 2017. Follow up questions and answers were communicated by email. Ethics approval from the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, The University of Melbourne.
[2] See https://wreckedallprods.com/
[3] Anderson-Doherty has a BA and MA in Drama and Performance Studies from Queen's University Belfast and is an Estill Voice Training Master teacher.
[4] There are some scholars and practitioners who see panto as already queer (see Lipton, Martina (2008). 'Principally Boys? Gender Dynamics and Casting Practices in Modern British Pantomime.' *Contemporary Theatre Review* 18 (4): 470–486), but in our opinion the potential for queering that panto indubitably possesses is most often not invoked – indeed, may be studiously avoided by changes such as the removal of the female Principal Boy, which erases that potentially queer pairing.
[5] The mental health cost of homophobic attitudes, and in some cases violence, is traced in a number of publications, for instance: Jarman, Neil and Alex Tennant (2003), *An Acceptable Prejudice? Homophobic Violence and Harassment in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: Institute for Conflict Research; McNamee, Helen (2006), *Out on Your Own: An Examination of the Mental Health of Young Same-Sex Attracted Men*, Belfast: The Rainbow Project. For a broader contextualisation of gender and sexuality within the frame of Northern Irish ethnosectarian conflict, see Duggan, Marian (2012), *Queering conflict: Examining Lesbian and Gay Experiences of Homophobia in Northern Ireland*, Surrey: Ashgate.
[6] *Little Red Riding Hood*, Waterfront Studio, Belfast. GBL Productions. Writer PJ O'Reilly. Director Lisa May. 21 November 2013 – 4 January 2014.

[7] Linehan created May's voice for Holmes' radio show, later creating the image by 'raiding' Holmes's aunt May's wardrobe for a dress, an old cardigan and wool hat that resembles a tea-cosy; some blacked out teeth 'completed the picture' in Holmes's account (p. 109). What 'started as a joke' between Holmes and Linehan produced this grotesque-feminine panto icon. As Holmes describes her: 'May is not only our funniest and most famous housewife, she is also not the best looking by far.' Eamonn Holmes (2008), *This is My Life*, London: Orion, p. 108.

[8] 'Who is May McFettridge'*, The Irish Times,* 1 December, 2000, online. Viewed 25 May, 2019.

[9] See, for example, Chris Hastings and Stephanie Plentl, 'Political correctness infests the pantomime', *The Telegraph,* 25 November 2007, online. Viewed 25 May, 2019; Stevens, John (2013), 'Is This the End of the Panto Dame? Productions Do Away with Characters as They Bid to Become More Politically Correct' *Daily Mail; Copping , Jasper (2013)* https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-news/10486457/Curtain-falls-on-traditional-panto-oh-yes-it-does.html, online. Viewed 25 May 2019.

[10] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in conversation with Gunew, S. (1990). 'Questions of Multi-culturalism', in Spivak, G. C. and Harasym, S. (eds) *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 59–66.

[11] In his article 'The death of the Dame? Tales from the National Database of Pantomime Performance', Simon Sladen (2015) cites Jon Conway of Qdos as arguing that 'lesbianism featured so frequently on television that audiences would automatically reach the wrong conclusion about a romance involving the Principal Boy [played by a female actor].' In *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, Vol. 35, No. 1, pp. 80n – 89 (84). I've to removed the [sic] but it was about the idea of lesbianism being 'wrong' or part of a 'wrong conclusion'. I can't manage to add comments in the endnotes(I don't know why but it's very irritating…)

[12] *Little Britain,* David Walliams and Matt Lucas (writers/performers) for BBC radio (2000-02) and BBC Television (2003-05).

[13] Quentin, in Clemmie Moodie, 'Having a male panto dame is sexist, claims Caroline Quentin (but Christopher Biggins says: Oh no it isn't!'), *Daily Mail,* 11 November, 2016. Viewed 2 June, 2019.

[14] *Judith Butler* Part 3/6, dir. Paule Zajdermann (2006), Artes France & Associés https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALx1MEW2P3U [accessed 31 May 2019]

[15] 'Millie' originated as (and remains) a derogatory Irish, but particularly Northern Irish, slang term for low-income female industrial workers in the mills of industrialising Dublin and Belfast of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Anderson-Doherty comments further below about the class implications of performing this voice with queerness in mind.

[16] There was a UK-wide ban applied to the IRA, INLA, UVF, UDA and others in addition to Sinn Féin politicians which was in place from 1988–1994. It applied to television and radio interviews on TV and radio; Ireland's national broadcaster, RTÉ, applied the restrictions in similar ways.

[17] José Esteban Muñoz, (1999) *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. University of Minnesota Press.