

# Front & Centre: Women of the North's Playwriting Symposium

This three-day symposium seeks new ways of creating space for women's playwriting in the theatre industry of the north.

Date(s)

May 23, 2025 - May 25, 2025

Location

Brian Friel Theatre, Queen's University Belfast

Time

11:00 - 21:30

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At a time of increasing challenges for the arts in Northern Ireland—where funding is shrinking, and a clear arts policy remains absent - female-identifying and non-binary playwrights, particularly those from working-class backgrounds, face even greater barriers. Despite the undeniable talent emerging from this region, including playwrights like Stacey Gregg and Lisa McGee, the lack of main stage productions (apart from Gregg's *Scorch*) for their work is striking.

This symposium is a call to action. Focusing on playwriting as both craft and career, it will open up vital conversations, explore constructive strategies, and showcase fresh talent. Expect a dynamic mix of staged readings, works in progress, and critical discussions - bringing together emerging playwrights, academics, and industry professionals.

Join us for an inspiring weekend of creative exploration, thought-provoking panels, and open conversation. Whether you're a writer, artist, academic, or theatre enthusiast, your voice is welcome.

This event is a collaboration between playwright and theatre-makers Karis Kelly, Caoileann Curry-Thompson and Trish McTighe (QUB Drama) and is inspired by conversations with some of the brilliant female and queer artists of the north, to whom we owe a great deal.

Register here for the panels and talks:

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/front-and-centre-women-of-the-norths-playwriting-symposium-tickets-1277845844319?aff=oddtcreator>

**Please note that tickets for panels and talks are free; you will need to book separately (see below) to attend the staged readings and scratch performances for which there is a small charge.**

For more information, please contact [frontandcentreni@gmail.com](mailto:frontandcentreni@gmail.com).

We are grateful to Belfast City Council and to Queen's University Belfast for their support for this event.

## **Panels & Talks**

Friday May 23rd, 13:00

**WELCOME ADDRESS:** Olwen Dawe (Safe to Create)

Goal setting, setting the culture & reflections on waking the feminists

Friday May 23rd, 13:30

**PANEL: In the Wake - The Landscape since WTF :** Pamela McQueen, Maggie Cronin, Ciara Murphy and Caoileann Curry-Thompson

A discussion of what's been achieved since Waking the Feminists, and what work remains.

Friday May 23rd, 15:30

**Discussion: Punk Funding**

Karis Kelly in discussion with Brona Whittaker (Arts & Business NI)

Saturday 24th May, 11:00

**Keynote 1: After the Wake - WTF's Lessons for the Future**

With an eye on the future, WTF lead organiser Sarah Durcan will reflect on the lessons emerging from the Waking the Feminists campaign.

Saturday 24th May, 12:15

**Workshop 1: Challenging the Status Quo**

Hour 1 of the workshop will examine how traditional models might be challenged. Hour 2 will address how we might affect policy change.

Sunday 25th May, 11:00

**Keynote 2: Alternative Funding Models**

Dr Anders Rykkja (QUB Arts Management) will discuss crowdsourcing as a means for funding the arts.

Sunday 25th May, 16:30

**Workshop 2: Co-designing Change**

We invite all participants to work with us to co-design a new women's theatre collective for Northern Ireland.

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## Staged Readings

Front & Centre are proud to present a series of staged readings featuring plays that have been finalists, shortlisted, or longlisted for major UK and Ireland playwriting awards, but have yet to be programmed in Northern Ireland. Despite their accolades, these works, penned by talented women from the North, have remained under the radar.

Plays are living, breathing documents that are written to be performed. For many women of the North, their brilliant, commended plays are sitting in drawers, languishing.

Front & Centre is determined to change that! We've paired these remarkable writers with accomplished Northern Irish directors, offering audiences a first look at the next generation of female theatre makers from the North.

**Hello Charlie** by Caoimhe Farren

Directed by Séon Simpson

Finalist for Victoria Wood Award

Shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Playwriting

*Sisters Maeve and Kate have fled their past trauma in Derry and now live in London. Hedonistic Maeve binge-drinks to oblivion; brittle Kate sees history repeating itself. But Maeve dodges culpability for her drunken antics; how can she be at fault? The blame clearly lies with her beloved, inebriated alter-ego: Charlie.*

*Hello Charlie is a black comedy about trauma, sisterhood and breaking the cycle of familial addiction.*

*Hello Charlie (Caoimhe's debut play) was developed as part of The Lyric's New Playwrights Programme. It was shortlisted for The Women's Prize for Playwriting, a finalist for the inaugural Victoria Wood Playwriting Prize for Comedy and in the top 1% (from 4643 entries) of the BBC Writers Open Call.*

May 23rd 18:00 - Book here: <https://HelloCharlie.eventbrite.co.uk>

## **Stuff & Things & Junk and Belonging** by Carley Magee

Directed by Emily Foran

Longlisted for the Women's Prize for Playwriting

*Four estranged siblings reunite for their father's wake only to be trapped in their childhood home. With no way out, they have to face their greatest fear; having to make conversation with one another.*

*Familial bonds are brought to their breaking point as something is lurking in the house - watching - waiting. This is the last chance to move on from their shared past, or else their future will be brought to ruin.*

May 24th 19:00 - Book here: <https://Stuffthingsjunkbelonging.eventbrite.co.uk>

## **The Wake** by Anna Teresa McGrath

Directed by Emma Copland

Longlisted for the David MacLennan Award

*It's Mimi's wake, in a rural border town in Northern Ireland. Caught up in getting things correct for the mother she warred with, Brigid is feeling stressed. Her estranged daughter MARIA has joined her to spend these last few waiting hours with a woman they both had complicated relationships with.*

*The Wake is darkly comic, but full of heart. It explores the matriarchal relationships in a family experiencing the seismic shock of loss, as they mourn the death of the senior matriarch, Mimi.*

May 25th 18:00 - Book here: <https://TheWakeStagedReading.eventbrite.co.uk>

## **Performances**

Front & Centre are delighted to be able to showcase these studio shows by women and non-binary writers from Northern Ireland. Both pieces have enjoyed major successes at festivals in the UK and Ireland and as far afield as Australia. They're examples of the excellence of craft emerging from the region.

In presenting these works, we hope that arts institutes and buildings will engage and give the work much deserved, longer runs here in the North.

However - a note on the trap of studio shows! Keeping women on small studio stages, not allowing them to graduate to main stages, seriously damages their career and earning power. It pushes them out of the industry as they can't earn a living viably. This is particularly pronounced for working class writers. Longterm, we'd like to use our platform to propel these artists from studio shows to mainstages.

### **The Daughters of Róisín** by Aoibh Johnson

*Locked in a room for nine months in a home she once called her own. The Daughters of Róisín explores the harrowing history of church and state abuse against pregnant women out of wedlock in Ireland over the last 100 years.*

*Moving, angry and charged with fiery activism, this one-woman show is a rallying cry for women everywhere to rise up, stand tall and eradicate Ireland's ancient shame.*

The one-woman show first saw its debut in Aoibh's hometown of Coalisland, in Craic Theatre and Arts Centre in 2019. Directed by Cahal Clarke and written and performed by Aoibh, the production received rave reviews, which inspired the duo to bring the work across the globe to the Adelaide Fringe Festival, South Australia in 2020.

Last year, the play was chosen for the Lyric Theatre and Pleasance National Partnerships Scheme, as Northern Ireland's representative. The team were honoured to work alongside two prestigious venues and managed to have a sell-out run for the month of the Fringe festival. Further to this success, Aoibh was one of six artists nominated for the Filipa Bragança award for Best Solo Performance by an emerging female, female-identifying or non-binary artist.

*"This is inspired genius."* - Bernadette Devlin McAliskey (Civil Rights Activist)

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★★★★★ THEATRE WEEKLY

★★★★★ NORTH WEST END

★★★★★ THEATRE THOUGHTS

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May 23rd 20:00 Book here: <https://TheDaughtersofRoisin.eventbrite.co.uk>

**TRIFLED - A raw remount** by Caitlin Magnall-Kearns

After a highly successful, sell-out production at Dublin Theatre Festival last year we are delighted to present this script in hand, semi-staged performance of TRIFLED - directed by the writer.

*Jen is a bolshy young Northern Irish woman who is housebound with agoraphobia and trying to make the best of a sticky situation. Her days revolve around watching daytime TV and filming niche pornographic content for her profile on OnlyFans, until one day when a heartbroken English university lecturer lands on her doorstep.*

*Based, in part, off the writers experience living with agoraphobia TRIFLED charts their blossoming friendship, in this brutally honest, darkly comedic two-hander about sex work, mental illness and custard.*

***Bawdy, line-crossing, occasionally moving and always fun."* - The Irish Times**

Audience Advisory/Trigger Warnings

Contains strong language and references to sex and mental illness

Caitlin Magnall-Kearns is an award-winning writer from Belfast with a passion for telling unheard and underrepresented stories about fatness, queerness and disability with warmth, humour and wit. Following on from making it to the top 1% of applicants in 2023, she was selected last year from over 1300 people to be a part of the BBC's Comedy Collective 2024 and was also a member of BBC Belfast Voices 2024. Her radio drama Safe Space produced by FABEL for Radio 4 aired in January 2025, and was a pick of the week in The Observer, The Sunday Times, The Mail on Sunday and the Radio Times. She is currently developing a sitcom with Hat Trick Productions, along with several other projects across stage, screen and radio. She is represented by Kate Haldane Management.

May 24th 5:30 Book here: <https://Trifledremount.eventbrite.co.uk>

## **Screenings**

**DISTORTION** by Amanda Verlaque

When a homophobic government minister resigns in disgrace, a brand-new political party fronted by a photogenic yet shallow husband and wife team want his once-safe seat. To secure it they need a jaded electorate's support. Enter Jo Devine - out and proud PR guru - hired by the couple for the polish and sheen they need. But when careers collide with ego and conscience clashes with lies, who wins?

**Distortion** is a fictional take on PR spin, sexuality, and the personalities jockeying for position in a cutthroat political arena, featuring a stellar cast including Valene Kane (The Fall, Counsel, Rogue One - A Star Wars Story), Michael Condrón (Game of Thrones, Soft Border Patrol, Coronation Street), and Mary Moulds (Line of Duty, Bloody Sunday, Blue Lights).

A hybrid production, Distortion was written by Amanda Verlaque, directed by Rhiann Jeffrey and produced by The MAC and Amanda Verlaque. It was filmed in the Downstairs Theatre at The MAC.

Amanda Verlaque's work has been produced by The MAC, The Lyric Theatre and the Grand Opera House including This Sh\*t Happens All the Time, her critically acclaimed play about homophobic hate crime, and her critically acclaimed debut play Distortion, about political hypocrisy and PR spin. She adapted and wrote the pilot for An Irish Country Doctor based on Patrick Taylor's award-winning novel and made her directorial debut with Egg; a VR short film set during the Belfast Blitz. Amanda has been commissioned by The Abbey; the Derry Playhouse and her play Normalised for the National Theatre Connections 2025 season debuts this Spring. She was an Irish Theatre Institute virtual Six In The Attic artist and is currently a recipient of The Mavens Programme at The Mill, Dundrum. Amanda had an twenty-five year, award-winning career in TV drama and film as a script editor, storyliner, producer and executive producer before starting her writing career approximately seven years ago.

May 24th 3:15 Book here: <https://Distortion.eventbrite.co.uk>

### **Scratch Night**

Be there at the beginning...

Join us for an evening of bold storytelling and fresh takes! This is your chance to witness the seeds of new ideas from some of Northern Ireland's most exciting and innovative female and non-binary playwrights.

Playwrights learn and advance their craft in communion with audiences - so your support and feedback is a vital part of this exchange.

Featuring new works by Denise McCready, Aoife Kane, Íde Simpson, Alice Malseed, Soso Ní Cheallaigh, Aoife De Bhál, Gillian Pencavel, Clare Duffy and Grace Kully.

May 25th: 17:30 - Book here: <https://Frontandcentrescratch.eventbrite.co.uk>