

A Talk with Irish Playwright Deirdre Kinahan

Mária Kurdi

Q: What or who inspired you to write your first play?

DK: My first play was *Bé Carna, Women of the Flesh* produced in 1999 by Tall Tales Theatre Company. It was a play about prostitution in Dublin, a monologue play exploring how women working the streets were deeply affected by the stigma and illegality of their profession. It was not at all voyeuristic but showed these women had lives as mothers/daughters/sisters/lovers, that they come from every walk of life and are not “other.” I wrote it because I was working as an actress at the time and gave occasional classes with Ruhama Women’s Project which offered support to women working in prostitution. I got to know the women over two years and they asked me to write a play about their lives that would highlight their humanity and show the dreadful exploitation rife within that industry. I had never considered writing before that!

Q: Then came the play *Attaboy, Mr. Synge!* The title including the name of a hugely acclaimed iconic figure in Irish theatre, does your piece perhaps embody a kind of response to playwriting traditions? What is your relation with other Irish playwrights, classical or contemporary?

DK: *Attaboy* grew out of a one-woman show called *Summer Fruits* which I wrote and performed for my theatre company Tall Tales. It centres around a highly unconventional amateur drama enthusiast who joins a traditional rural theatre group and causes ructions with her overtly sexual and highly unorthodox interpretations of revered classics. It was a comic exploration of social divisions, class, rural/urban, artistic/lay, etc. The conceit was that the group were celebrating their 25th year with a production of the Irish classic *The Playboy of the Western World* and our friend positions herself and her revolutionary approach, front and centre. I suppose the most obvious inspiration would come to me from Lennox Robinson’s *Drama at Inish*.

As far as my relationship goes with other Irish playwrights, I love them. I was pretty much reared on them as my mother and I trotted along to pretty much everything in Dublin when I was a teenager. My mother loved the theatre and was delighted to have an enthusiastic partner. I saw all the great traditional productions at the Abbey and many more contemporary ones at the Project and Peacock. Big influences would be Tom Murphy and Marina Carr. I also love Brian Friel, particularly his *The Freedom of the City*. These plays impacted on me enormously as a teenager. I ate up everything Dermot Bolger wrote for theatre or as a poet and novelist, he was a voice I immediately connected with. I loved companies like Barabbas who told stories in a physical rather than literary way. I am also a huge fan of contemporary dance. There

are lots of interesting new and mid-career writers whom I love like Caitriona Daly, Karen Cogan, Nancy Harris. Conor McPherson, Martin McDonagh, Mark O’Rowe and Enda Walsh have surely left their mark on me too. I particularly relate to Conor’s work. I love craft. I love the word.

Q: Could you describe your working method and give an account of the major steps of how you develop a drama from the first idea and preliminary draft to the final form?

DK: I write all the time. I usually have anything from three to eight projects in full swing. I work with theatres and artists both national and international, collaborating in many different ways and creating a huge variety of plays. In 2018, for example, I have had seven new pieces of work premiere: *The Unmanageable Sisters* at the Abbey Theatre, *Wild Notes* in Washington DC, *Renewed* in London, *Me & Molly & Moo* touring Ireland, *Rathmines Road* in Dublin, *Crossings* in the UK touring and *House*, a project as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival. So there is no absolute formula in how I approach a play because sometimes I co-write, sometimes I work with musicians, etc. Generally, however, plays ferment in my head for a long time before I actually create the commission and sit down to write. I am usually a four to six draft woman. Plays often start with a question for me or a strong idea/storyline/character. I think about this for a while. Place it somewhere in my head and come back to it.

Once I start writing, I can write quickly. I wrote *The Unmanageable Sisters* in four weeks. I have just started writing a new play for Landmark Ireland to be finished in 2019, yet *Rathmines Road* has been a luxurious three years from commission ... it depends on the time-frame and what else I have spinning. I find a lot of the magic for me starts when I actually put pen to paper. Plays are very dynamic living organisms in my mind and I find out a lot about my characters when I get into their socks and shoes and trousers. I get right into that room with them and feel it. I laugh a lot when writing, also cry a lot. I used to think that might be nuts until a great film-maker said to me: well, if you don’t feel it, how do you expect an audience to feel it? I absolutely get into the mindset of each character and hit that emotional journey. Structure comes once I know what the big questions are and who the characters are. I don’t usually think about structure, it is just a means to unleash the story/exploration.

I really enjoy writing. There are times when I feel like I’m going through a mangle and I can’t, just can’t get the scene to go where I want it to go, then I go for a walk or go to bed and it irons itself out. I might have to jump up or run home and just write the scene fast as it flashed into my head. I kind of fall in love with my characters and they haunt me until I do them justice. I am all gut and instinct ... I think I am and have always been a storyteller. The gift in spinning a number of projects is that when I am researching/focusing on one, I do one and only one with the other projects dropping out of my head entirely. I then hand in the draft and move onto the next project. When I come back to the original, I am very fresh in my approach. I almost always work with a director or a trusted dramaturge, I love to take notes and have conversations after each draft. I type up the conversation immediately and then leave it a week or two before I come back to re-read notes and start writing. I am collaborative in that way but once the play is finished, I feel it is finished. I let it go. I love to let the others, the

theatre people bring the magic and I kind of like to disappear so that the experience is between the play, the actors and the audience. I shouldn't be visible at all.

Q: Do you weave personal experience, events or incidents that have happened to or affected you during your life into your plays?

DK: Absolutely. I am very dangerous to be around. I seem to have a knack of getting people to talk to me. Maybe I'm a listener. I soak up the experiences of people around me and often think ... wow, that's a play. I am curious and a total people watcher, I have been one since I was a child, so the idiom of language, the quirks of character all come from real life. Similarly, I often wonder what it is like to be that person, particularly if I know a person has suffered or survived a great trauma and in trying to understand what it feels like, I write a scenario, put myself in there and feel it. There is a lot of my family in my plays. *The Unmanageable Sisters* was entirely inspired by my Mother and her sisters and that extraordinary generation of women I knew in my childhood. There is certainly a lot of my own story and experience wrapped up in the characters. With a play like *Spinning*, I get into Susan's headspace and imagine the agony of losing a teenage daughter. I have had the experience of losing a baby and I think that grief haunts a lot of my writings.

Q: Does it help to find the most suitable language registers and form to your plays that you are also an actress?

DK: Yes, certainly. When I write, I literally play all the parts. I read the script aloud and know how it falls or doesn't fall off the tongue. I think theatre is kind of in my DNA, I've been obsessed with it since I was about eight years old. I went to a drama school when I was ten and acted in plays all the time as a teenager and right through into adulthood. I think in terms of theatre, that is just how stories become presentable. I also really trust actors in the rehearsal room and will tweak the script to fit their instincts. I often write for particular actors too, knowing their art and performance.

Q: Once you said that the early play, *Hue & Cry*, which was first produced by Tall Tale Theatre Company in association with Bewley's Café Theatre in 2007, has a special place in your work. Could you elaborate on its significance?

DK: *Hue & Cry* is a play about grief and how it can define us, particularly when repressed. I suppose it was inspired by the experience of a very good friend of mine who lost her mother when we were young girls. I was always very conscious as to how that trauma completely shaped her as a person and how she interacts with the world. When I wrote *Hue & Cry* I was seven years into writing but I feel it is the play where I really found my voice. It is very funny, sparse and emotionally charged. It features two men, which is actually unusual for me but I felt I really knew these men and their emotional constipation, I enjoyed setting that dysfunction to music in a sense ... to the music of their dialogue. The play is set at the night of a funeral and appears initially familiar but then spins into a very different place. I know one reviewer in

Edinburgh admired the “off the wall originality” of the script and that pleased me. It also received a Critics Pick in *The New York Times* at a small festival in 2009, which helped put me on the map internationally. I remember I had a vision of these two men dancing from the very outset and really wrote the entire play to get them to that point. I’m delighted to say that it is being revived in January in Dublin with two rising stars of Irish Theatre in the roles. I suppose it is just one of those plays I remain incredibly fond of, Kevin and Damien are always with me, they still make me smile.

Q: Your play *BogBoy* had its premiere and a very successful run in New York as part of the 1st Irish Theatre Festival there in 2011. According to a critic it “has the kind of voice that stays with you.”¹ In a sense it seems to be your “Troubles play” yet more than that in addressing the aftermath of the sectarian war interwoven with another deep-rooted trauma of the Irish society in its plot. Could you speak about the genesis of this play? Were you aware of the resonances with Heaney’s poetry while writing it? Was the audience in Ireland also enthusiastic about this drama?

DK: Yes *BogBoy* was much loved I think though it has only had one production, it is still my Dad’s favourite. *BogBoy* is an exploration of our deeply conflicted relationship with Northern Ireland and the sectarian violence that exploded into war in the late sixties. Belfast is only 136 kms from my door. Members of the disappeared were buried in a bog not two miles from my cottage in County Meath and I remember thinking “you don’t find your way down that lonely bog road unless you are local.” So it is entirely possible that local Irish people were involved in those murders/burials. That is one of the many brutal truths surrounding the Troubles that are shrouded in silence and that haunt us as a society and a nation. No matter how we turn our face away, we are complicit in and deeply affected by what happens not too far from our front door. Northern Ireland is Ireland and the partition and border still hurt and still resonate deeply in our politics. The story of the disappeared in particular seemed like an excellent way to explore that relationship and also point to the other disappeared members of our society, beautiful broken people like Brigit.

The form of *BogBoy* allowed me to soar in terms of language, the mix of monologue and action opens up possibilities for style but for me as long as the language is truthful, it works. *BogBoy* was also a radio play so that emphasis on language probably sat at the front of my consciousness when writing it. As for poetry, I do love Heaney, I wouldn’t have drawn on him directly but I think bogs lurk in the Irish imagination and creative impulse to a strong degree so any similarities are not surprising to me. The genesis of the play was one day when I was out walking on the bog, I saw a bright bunch of flowers, so tramped over to investigate. Tied to the flowers was a photograph, half faded, of a young man. I knew by the polaroid colours that it was probably 1970s and I wondered who is that boy and why are these flowers here. I then read that they were digging in the bog for bodies of the disappeared (civilians kidnapped and murdered by the IRA in the early 1970s) and I began to picture what might have happened to him.

1 Rachel Saltz. “A Lost Girl of Ireland, Dealing with Its Lost Boys.” *The New York Times* Sept. 16, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/17/theater/reviews/deirdre-kinahans-bogboy-review.html>

The boy Kevin McKee was recovered from a nearby Bogland in 2015.

Q: *Halcyon Days* was your first play to have its Irish premiere as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival in 2012, and was very well received. It is a play set in a nursing home with action involving an elderly man and an elderly woman talking to each other, which does not sound very dramatic when described in such brief terms. What do you think made it a success? Did it perhaps strike a chord with many audience members?

DK: On the surface it might appear that it is just two people talking, but the beauty of *Halcyon Days* is that it is always moving, their interaction is always shifting as they grow to know each other and impact enormously on each other. The characters are based very much on my uncle Sean and my mother Patricia. The stories are different but personality traits and language are the same. It is a play about resilience and how there is always hope once the heart is beating. I kind of set it up like a love story until you find out that it is doomed because she is dying and he is gay. It is funny and tragic ... you think you know it until it spills away from you. I think audiences recognized something fundamental in the interchange and the characters, because it is very alive and poignant without being sentimental.

Q: In two of your other plays, *Moment* and *Spinning*, one of the main characters killed a child in the past and served a prison sentence for some years before the action begins. What is the significance of this kind of background to the respective characters and does it join the two plays somehow? Can one think of them as family plays, the form characteristic of twentieth century modern drama inflected, recharged and reshaped here by certain acute contemporary problems?

DK: *Spinning* and *Moment* are certainly in the same vein. They are family plays in a way and plays that expose dysfunction, denial and the pressures of social convention. I think you will find that *Rathmines Road* also fits into this batch of my work. Fraught, tight, contemporary dramas that feel familiar but then spin into new territories. I like writing in this way ... when you put characters into a pressure pot it makes for eruptions and eruptions make for strong drama. They both reveal episodes from the past and how these episodes have shaped the characters' present and future but they are not reveal plays ... they are not about the incident, the murder, they are about the aftermath and how the aftermath ripples out to the destruction of multiple family members.

Q: *Spinning* is my favourite and perhaps a favourite of many other people among your plays; its exceptionally powerful emotional charge really grabs us by the throat. Can you agree with the observation that the two protagonists, Conor and Susan, both benefit from their meeting and the recollected scenes that introduce them to each other's life and feelings? Does it offer, at least tentatively, a positive ending?

DK: Yes, I think they absolutely impact upon each other. I wanted in *Spinning* to try and understand what might bring an ordinary man to such a point that he would

consider murdering his own child. It is inconceivable to most of us, yet it is a live issue that presents itself in times of great crisis for many reasons. As an Irish phenomenon it seemed to me that there were an increased number of cases during the recession and research seemed to indicate that the social revolution in Ireland and the rattling of the patriarchy were contributing factors. As I said, plays for me are often a question or a means of trying to reach an understanding of people's behaviour and so I created a scenario where we watch a man slowly disintegrate because he cannot accept the end of his marriage. We follow the journey and begin to understand if not forgive this man; we see that he is controlling and selfish and full of denial in his reading of the world both during the breakdown and afterwards.

What happens in *Spinning* is that Susan, the mother of a young girl inadvertently killed during this episode forces him to recognize his role in the disaster, forces him to take some responsibility. Susan is part of a new generation of single mothers who have reared their children with great love and courage, so the loss of her daughter is crippling. Conor is entirely responsible but in his patriarchal dysfunctional reckoning it was outside events that brought about the tragedy ... yet here in the play he is confronted with her grief in a whole new way and it forces him to do something altruistic, and he lies to her. He lies and tells her that she was the last face her daughter saw before she plunged to her death; it is possible but I think we all know it is not true. He lies in this instance not for himself but to bring Susan some relief. It is cold comfort but comfort all the same. Susan forgives him and actually prevents his suicide, another act designed to hurt those around him. There is a forgiving and both change utterly as a result of their meeting.

Q: Your plays have been translated into some other languages, including Hungarian. Do you think your plays can travel easily to other countries and cultures? What is your experience in this field, the international reception of your works, so far?

DK: Yes, my plays travel widely and I think it is down to the universality of our humanity. I tackle large social issues through a domestic setting and whilst they are uniquely Irish in their voice and dialect, the response of the characters to their experiences is rooted in our common humanity. I love seeing my productions received by different cultures and see the audience laugh knowingly in exactly the same places or shift uncomfortably exactly as I anticipated and hoped they would. The response to my plays by audiences is the same at home and abroad but the critical response is remarkably different.

Irish reviewers in general remain resolutely underwhelmed by my dramas despite international accolade and awards. I find it incredibly curious and believe it is caused by a number of factors. I am a woman writing in a male dominated literary tradition. I embrace the domestic and often use it as a springboard and the plays are often dismissed as simple realism or kitchen sink (a dilemma rarely experienced by male writers). I think there is also a frantic desire amongst Irish theatre critics for less literary and more experimental theatre, they no longer recognize or celebrate craft. Internationally I find my plays are taken totally on their own merit, they are free of the peculiarities of that patriarchal Irish response. I also find that international reviewers

are more inclined to compare me to the great Irish traditionalists like McPherson, Murphy, O’Rowe and more inclined to compare my plays with theirs. There is a poor level of reviewing in Ireland to my mind, with critics often writing about the plays they want to see rather than actually responding to what is in front of them. I think this tendency is very destructive and has contributed to a lost generation of playwriting in Ireland.

Q: What do you mean by “a lost generation” in this context? Do you think that a more subtle level of theatre reviewing in Ireland would help playwrights’ work in substantial ways?

DK: I think that literary theatre is often dismissed out of hand in Ireland simply because it is literary theatre, and this has been happening for about twenty years, not only with journalists but in many other realms. This has obviously been deeply damaging to young literary voices. I believe that the gatekeepers of Irish theatre, for instance festival directors, producers, independent companies, academics, like journalists simply missed some great writing and didn’t actively encourage it. There is, as you know, a bastion of hugely celebrated men in the Irish tradition and it is very difficult to either add to or to dislodge that. London, as a much larger theatre community, was always active in finding new Irish voices but the last round of interest in the Irish voice took place in the 1990s and that’s when O’Rowe, Carr, Walsh, McPherson emerged. As London moved on and Ireland stopped appreciating the actual craft of script writing, it is my opinion that strong voices fell by the wayside or often moved into television.

Q: Your adaptation of the French Canadian Michel Tremblay’s 1965 play, *The Unmanageable Sisters* has had a mixed reception in spring 2018, and the division seems to lie chiefly between male and female critics and audience members. Was its subject, perhaps, considered to be dated by some of the critics? What do you think about the potential importance of this play set in 1970s Ireland for both men and women in our time?

DK: I found the response to *The Unmanageable Sisters* to be remarkable in its resistance to the themes and issues highlighted. I don’t believe it fell foul because of a sense of nostalgia nor because of the production (which was excellent), I think the resistance is far more complicated and a real testament to how Tremblay’s play still discombobulates today. *Les Belle Soeurs* is a truthful picture of how a patriarchal culture is deeply repressive with disastrous consequences for women. I could feel the rage at the centre of the play and brought it home to Ireland, a country still fighting its way out of a deeply conservative, Catholic and patriarchal past. I changed a lot of the back stories to make them work in the Irish setting but remained absolutely true to Tremblay’s remarkable observations. I honestly think some members of our audience and most reviewers still find the realities so richly observed in this play to be deeply disturbing. The first remarkable thing to note is that a number of reviewers focused on the musical choices made by the director which seems like a total waste of brain-space

considering that this play explores dark realities such as the lack of availability of abortion, institutional abuse and marital rape ... it feels like some reviewers wouldn't, couldn't, refused to engage with the truths revealed ... it was much easier for them to concentrate on ridiculous period trivia or music.

I also think that a lot of the reviewers could not possibly have read the original play or indeed have any idea what it is to write "a version of" because their criticism displayed a complete lack of knowledge of the original. They were therefore attempting to give an expert opinion on something to which they share no expertise. Audiences responded far more favourably, packing out the auditorium and honestly engaging with a truth they immediately recognized. I don't believe anyone who appreciated this play felt they were engaging in some exercise in nostalgia, because the issues at the core of *The Unmanageable Sisters* still exist and play out today despite huge social shifts in this country. Another interesting attack from some reviewers was that I didn't present women in a supportive, succouring light. In doing this they questioned my own feminist credentials unhappy with a picture of women who are not saints. I find this reaction to be deeply flawed because the truth of repression is that it lands like a lead weight on those who live under it. The repressed often misdirect their frustrations and anger, tearing at each other rather than taking on those who actually repress them because they are overwhelmed by their own reality. There is a *great* denial at the heart of their resistance and a sense of bitterness and desperation that infects many interactions. This is the behaviour Tremblay observed and I recognized it immediately. It is a brutal truth and a brilliant device through which to keep the oppressed fighting each other and therefore forever subdued. Tremblay calls out this truth. I call out this truth. He got criticized for it and fifty years later so did I. This play still has the power to provoke a deeply embedded patriarchal response. To me, that means we are both doing a good job because what is theatre if not provocative? What is the point of it except to invoke empathy, challenge prejudice or expose truth?

Q: Do you like to attend the premieres of your new plays? Are you sometimes surprised by seeing how they act out what you have written, perhaps differently, though not necessarily in the negative sense, from how you thought the play would work on the stage?

DK: I love attending premieres or any performance of my plays. I find it a deeply humbling, invigorating and a delightful experience. I am usually very involved in the premiere production and delight in the genius brought by other artists to the drama. I am a big fan of actors, directors, dramaturges, designers, choreographers. I believe theatre to be collaborative, it only comes to life with the genius of others and it only matters when it sits in front of an audience. I write entirely for my audience. It is all about their reaction, their response so watching that teaches me a great deal. I have attended performances further on in the life of a play when a director might have thrown a particular slant at the production and again I find that invigorating because as an instinctive writer I am not always analysing what I am doing. An outsider might see connections that were key elements in my subconscious but I was not necessarily aware of. Productions teach me a great deal about playwriting.

Q: Let us now get to your new plays which had their premiere in 2018. How did *Crossings* fare in England, where it was first shown by Pentabus, the company that had commissioned it? Through the transgender character, Grace, some kinship can be seen here with *Rathmines Road*, which played at the Peacock as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival of 2018. On the other hand, at the ending of *Crossings* the two characters change each others' lives, which happens in *Spinning* too. Your plays make up what is like a live, moving organism with all kinds of connections throbbing across it, some of them related to the potential, yet not always realizable healing role of art as in *BogBoy* and *Crossings*.

DK: *Crossings* is currently on tour in the UK and audience reaction is terrific. As Pentabus are a touring company the reviews come later in the run when they hit bigger towns. The play was written to tour to village halls and small studio theatres and commemorates the end of war. Once again, the play looks at trauma and the extraordinary resilience of human beings, how they rebuild themselves, find a place for themselves, reconnect and heal. I loved writing the play and Grace in particular has been a joy, she is not transgender as in 1918 such an aspiration would not have been presented as possible to her. I think the first experimentations in surgery came later in Berlin. Her impulse is to move away from the carnage she witnessed on during World War I embracing the soft fabrics of femininity but with no notion of the limitations or conventional pressures upon that sex. Like in *Rathmines Road*, I think I am exploring gender convention and how it impacts on our lives and yes, you have found my secret, characters like Grace in *Crossings* or Brigit in *BogBoy* will appear in different plays and in different guises, they haunt me until I truly excavate their potential and experience. Themes and characters naturally start to float across the sea of my work: crossing histories, crossing victories, crossing traumas, crossing joys. It is a real privilege for me to have this opportunity to find and live with these voices.

Q: *Rathmines Road* had a mixed critical reception, yet on the whole the balance was rather in the positive. All who reviewed the play agreed that it is heavy stuff regarding its central subject, sexual harassment and rape, which is deeply disturbing as well as very timely. To my mind, however, the play is as much about a sensitive personality's, a writer's creation of an imaginary, also rather brutal, outspoken alternative to what happened during the evening in reality, which ruffled only the surface and did not disclose the truth save to the old friend, David/Dairne. I think there is a play within the play here, authored by the main character, Sandra and acted out in her imagination. Her being a creative artist is little emphasized in the play, Ray, her husband refers to it once and then she herself when saying that among other things, "writing"² helped her move away from the haunting of the trauma she had suffered at that student party in a house on Rathmines Road. The play keeps the audience uncertain about what may have actually happened in the past and also what really happens on stage in front of their eyes. With this the drama fits into the broad definition of postmodern

2 Kinahan, Deirdre. *Rathmines Road*. London: Nick Hern, 2018. 72.

experimentalist theatre and it cannot be approached from the conventional standpoint of what theatre ought to do, for instance stage a plot which offers sympathy to victims of similar traumatizing experiences. What are the challenges of engaging with the internal world of a character on stage for the playwright?

DK: I originally wrote *Rathmines Road* and the accusation of rape as a straight up drama but the truth is that most women do not get their reckoning. The truth is that every social, cultural and judicial impulse is programmed to deny them, not to believe them, not to face the fact that sexual harassment and assault are endemic in Irish life. I know the truth. I know the appalling statistics where less than a third of survivors ever report their assault/rape to anyone and I struggled with that. I decided to reflect the awful reality that rape stays hidden and eats away at the survivor, that they “suck it up” rather than inflict the pain of their victimhood on close family so as to protect people they love from the shame of what happened to them because these crimes are always surrounded by shame and silence. I therefore devised exactly what you describe, what we witness in *Rathmines Road* isn’t what happens, it is a quick imagining by Sandra at the point when she recognizes the man in her mother’s front room as one of three men who gang-raped her at a party.

The trauma of that night re-assails Sandra, she knows it is him and she plays out a reckoning where she confronts him. Her husband’s pain at this revelation and the other characters’ natural pattern of denial, disbelieving, threatening and cajoling all convince her that if she confronts him she will “destroy everything.” Sandra has rebuilt herself, she has won her own victory but if she confronts her attacker that confrontation might cost her her marriage and therefore destroy her all over again. This is a brutal truth but a truth none the less. The device is to play two scenarios, the one where she imagines she confronts him and the real one where she just pretends not to feel well and asks him and his wife to leave. So in a way I give Sandra her reckoning but point up the awful truth that such a satisfaction, at this point in social development, is simply fantasy. Most perpetrators of rape or sexual assault walk away from their crimes and never have to face their actions. The point is that we are all complicit in keeping survivors silent until we accept that truth. Getting into the inner machinations of a character is never difficult, in fact I think I play with that inner/outer life all the time because I am always examining how we behave, how we are expected to behave and how that behaviour often breaks us.

Q: I can also see symbolism in my wording in the play-within-the-play section of *Rathmines Road*. The music playing in Sandra’s head and not heard by the others calls Blanche’s torment in *A Streetcar Named Desire* to mind, which is another family play. In contrast with Sandra’s psychological trauma is Eddie’s down-to-earth “punishment” in *Rathmines Road*; he is unable to stand up, “he gets caught in the chair” in Sandra’s old family home, which suggests his inability to get away from his past deeds easily. What do you think about these observations?

DK: Yes, I think *Rathmines Road* is working on many levels, there is a metatheatrical dimension with the chimney going on fire and the chair. When I was writing it, I was

surprised at the kind of comic awkwardness rolling into the early scenes and then I realized, this is a farce, they are all locked into this room until they find resolution, it is a boiling pot, it is therefore fraught and might be funny. Even though the question at the heart of this “how do we respond to accusations of sexual assault and rape” is not something I want to laugh at, our response is governed by convention, governed by cultural impulse and that impulse is the burial of trauma. They are all physically trying to stuff that accusation back into the fabric of the sofa because it is too hard to listen to or to understand or to accept. Eddie is caught in a “booby trap,” an observation he himself makes in the play about old houses. He won’t get out until he faces his guilt.

Q: How do your family relate to your work? Could you mention some characteristic details about this?

DK: My family are hugely supportive of my work, both my birth family and my husband and kids. There are often parts of them featuring in characters or stories, for example Sean’s farm in *Halcyon Days* is my Dad’s farm and the names of fields he wistfully recites are the fields my Dad grew up in, Bailey’s Gate, Railway Field, etc. It is lovely to immortalize little pieces of our lives. I have two brothers. They don’t work in theatre but do enjoy my work. I think they are sometimes surprised by the darkness, we lived a very stable and happy childhood but I suppose I was the gawker in the family, always watching and wondering about other people’s lives. My husband is a great right-hand man, he listens a great deal and really engages in what I am writing. I often read him passages and he loves the work. He doesn’t work in theatre either but has a great eye, he is the real psychologist in the family, I think I have learned a lot from him as to how people tick.

My daughters are eighteen and fifteen and both love theatre. They kind of look at the work as audience members, I don’t know that they really see their mammy in there but they come and they are generally very appreciative. *The Unmanageable Sisters* is their out and out favourite to date. They wish I would write more comedy! I write plays most of the time for my mother Pat Kinahan, she was my partner in crime going to the theatre, she gave me the passion and I am really sad to say that she died just as my career was taking off so has missed so much of it. She would have swanned around the world with me and loved meeting all the amazing artists I work with. She would have kept them entertained, she was a very astute and funny, funny woman. She is in a lot of my plays, particularly as Patricia in *Halcyon Days*.

Q: In addition to the number of the plays you have written so far, around thirty, as well as to the “crossings” across individual works, the variety in your oeuvre is remarkable, even awesome. Are there any plans for the publication of a volume of your plays including at least the most successful ones, perhaps complete with a selection of those which are not available in print yet? For instance, *BogBoy* definitely deserves to appear in print. What are your current projects, what kind of new work is on the way to the stage in 2019?

DK: No volumes are on the way that I know of. I have a new play, *The Companion* with Landmark Productions, it is an exploration of the influence of religion in Ireland old and new and a kind of moral conundrum, quite funny I hope although it really isn't funny at all. I am also working with a group of New York Musicians and Irish artists on a play inspired by Ettie Steinberg, the only Irish citizen to be murdered in the Holocaust. There are one or two other small projects but I am trying to slow down a bit next year for fear my head might just fall off my shoulders.

Q: What do you think about the future of drama and theatre in our increasingly digitalized and depersonalized world?

DK: I have no fears for the future of drama. I still see it as one of the most vital, immediate and imaginative forms of human activity. It is a live art. It remains deeply dynamic because it always questions, questions, questions. I love to see new audiences gape and shift and laugh and cry at all sorts of plays as I do. Theatre is alive and well.

Q: Amen. Thank you for the talk.