00:00 Katharina Rennhak [KR]: Hello everyone. Welcome back to the Irish Itinerary podcast. With the help of this interview podcast, EFACIS brings together some of the best contemporary Irish authors and artists in conversation with leading Irish studies scholars from across Europe. I am Katherina Rennhak, the president of EFACIS and professor of English literary studies at the University of Wuppertal in Germany. I am delighted to introduce today Katarzyna Ojrzyńska who will chat in the sixth episode of the Irish Itinerary podcast with Petal Pilley and Charlene Kelly. Katarzyna Ojrzyńska is an Irish studies scholar based at the Department of English Studies in Drama, Theatre, and Film at the University of Łódź. She obtained her PhD with a dissertation on dance in Irish drama published as "Dancing as if language no longer existed." Dance in Contemporary Irish Drama. It was published in the 'Reimagining Ireland" series with Peter Lang in 2015. Her most recent research has centred on cultural disability studies. And in this context she has co-edited with Maciej Wieczorek a volume published with Brill this year in 2020 entitled Disability and Dissensus. Strategies of Disability Representation and Inclusion in Contemporary Culture. Katarzyna is also one of the founders of the University of Łódź Centre of Irish Studies and a board member of EFACIS. We look very much forward to her interview with Petal Pilley and Charlene Kelly.

02:05 Katarzyna Ojrzyńska [KO]: Welcome to the Irish Itinerary podcast. Today I'll be interviewing Petal Pilley, the artistic director of Blue Teapot, the most critically-acclaimed professional Irish theatre company of actors with intellectual disability, which is based in Galway, and Charlene Kelly, who is an actress, a playwright, and a member of Blue Teapot. Hello Petal, hello Charlene.

Charlene Kelly [CK]: Hi!!!

Petal Pilley [PP]: Hi, Katarzyna!

KO: Thank you for accepting my invitation. I'd like to talk a bit about Blue Teapot and I would like us to begin with the history of the company. Petal, you've been the artistic director of Blue Teapot since 2007. How did you become involved in Blue Teapot?

PP: Umm... I have been doing some kind of a drama workshop though the youth project here in Galway. And it's actually where I met Charlene. And when the job came up for an artistic director of Blue Teapot, I didn't in any way think I was going to get it, but I did land into the interview and it went very well and one of the key things I was thinking about that interview is that Frank Butcher, one of the actors, was on the panel and he asked me an all-important question: "Petal, what are you like?". And I remember saying: "Well, I'm quite bossy but I'm really good fun". And I think that might have won me the job. [laughs]

03:35 KO: [laughs] I see. And what was Blue Teapot like back then and how did the company evolve over the years?

PP: When I joined Blue Teapot, it was... it had just grown out of... It started in 1996 as a community arts project and a way for people with intellectual disability to kind of express what was going on in their lives through the arts. My predecessor, Niamh Dillon, was... had been the artistic director of the youth company here in Galway and she began to form a small theatre company of actors. So when I came in, they had

just kind of been formed and had done a couple of small shows and what I saw when I joined the company was that they really needed training. They needed actor's training and that's where I began really.

KO: And how about you Charlene? When did you become a member of Blue Teapot?

CK: In July 2007.

KO: Oh, so that was more or less the same time...

CK: It was more at the same time as Petal started. Because she did drama over at Saint Joseph's Training Centre. And that's where she met me ... from the process.

KO: Umm. Was Petal the one who encouraged you to join the company?

CK: No, I... I actually... When I was in the training centre studying, so I found out that one of the things I really liked was drama, so it brought life to me and I was really happy then to join the company in July.

PP: There might have been a bit of talent spotting.

CK: [laughs] Auditioning kind of...

05:26 KO: Charlene and how did Blue Teapot change over the years from your perspective? Has much changed since then?

CK: Umm. I feel a little bit young still, still a bit younger in myself. That's for a start.

KO: Acting makes you younger. [all laugh]

CK: Yeah, exactly. And, yeah, but it really brought life to my skills and to what I like to do. So when I heard about doing an audition for Blue Teapots, I didn't really know was I going to get in or not get in. So I had a sleepover on it to see and then I got the call to say: "We would like you to come in for your first audition to be a Blue Teapot member". I was like: "Uuuh!". I didn't know ever what to say and then I came in to the audition and I worked for the audition for Blue Teapot and then when I heard that Petal, her job ready, joined as a director here, then I was really in my element to start working alongside her again and it makes me feel really happy insight so...

07:12 KO: Well, how does your work on a performance usually look like?

CK: That would be a technique that P – Petal would have done, which is called Meisner. It's a Meisner technique. Umm, it is where she would put two chairs in the middle of the stage floor and two of the act members would sit and we would look into the other person's eyes and repeat a word back and forth in a Meisner class technique and it would... it's for focus, for being on stage, if you were in the middle of the stage, for eye contact with the other actor in front of you. So I had that bit of training as well too. When I joined Petal I was so happy out and I had a lot of "On! Work! No dilly-dallying!" [all laugh] "Bums on seats!" I knew straight away after that

that I had to – that's it – on, perform. It really made me feel happy inside, really did, so I was really happy and everything, so when I got the feeling inside, I knew I had all the courage to go and perform on stage. And all... Petal had to prompt us with some of our script lines, but that was only if we missed that line.

KO: But... could you tell us a bit more about prompting? Because what I find very peculiar about Blue Teapot theatre is the fact that you do not give up on words, that you do not give up on verbal expression, which many theatre companies of actors with intellectual disability do, because many actors find it very difficult to memorize large chunks of text. And you've mentioned that sometimes... Petal, you prompt your actors, right?

PP: Yeah, if they need it. I've always taken the approach that our actors talk, they communicate verbally and they have long conversations with each other. They talk about life. And in my kind of early days of working with the Blue Teapot actors I could see their responses to script which they loved and responses to language. Perhaps it's a part of the Irish psyche. I don't know, but language and verbosity and words are hard-wired into people here. So my tack was always umm... to not take it off the table and in fact to move straight into it, to head right into the centre of it. For example, one of our first bigger pieces was *Midsummer Night's Dream*, which is Shakespeare, and we didn't shy away from the text. We didn't cut huge amounts of it.

CK: Only some monologues' bits.

PP: Certain bits of monologues – yep. But essentially it was... that was the right vehicle for those actors at that time. I suppose that's why one of the tools that I would use is Meisner, because the approach to text comes through the connectivity and being connected to the character, so the text is last in, if you like. And I think that works well, very well in approaching text for our profile of actors. So that's always been there and in terms of prompting, I see it like it's there... it has to be artistic. I can't just be a technical position like an assistant stage manager giving a prompt. It cannot be dry and it cannot break the fourth wall of the piece, if you like. So it's very key who's prompting. In the beginning it was me because there was only a few of us in the company. [laughs] And we did everything. But it's very, very clear in order for that to work. It's like people who're signing in a life performance – I see it in that way. So we don't hide, we don't hide the articulation of it. But whoever is prompting must really know the actors, must know the piece, and know the difference between when somebody is taking a pause dramatically or when perhaps they need a prompt. But the prompt is ever so gentle and floats underneath whatever's happening and, in fairness, the prompts require just so few and far between when people get into a place. But it's the support that is definitely a synergistic relationship between the prompter and the actor.

12:27 KO: And since we're talking about some possible challenges – Charlene, what was the most challenging role that that you played?

CK: My most challenging role... hmmm... in *Sanctuary*, yeah, I think Sophie was the most... challenging for me because I had a lot of standing around and moving around. On stage play it was different. But it was the same character I had into the film.

KO: Petal, could you tell us a bit more about the play and the film? The play, I think, it's the most openly political play staged by Blue Teapot, a play that raised a debate on the sexuality of people with intellectual disability and on their rights and eventually helped change Irish Penal Law. So, how did the idea for the play come about and how did the play itself come into being and how was it later adapted into film? Can you tell us in a few words?

PP: Yeah, delighted to! The idea for the play came directly from conversations with the actors. We were all getting to know each other, we've done a couple of performances, and conversations began around a desire for love, a desire to relate, and sexuality and all the blocks to somebody with an ID may be achieving that. Even to have a date means sometimes you might need to be transported to a date. Umm... So it began a series of conversations around the subject of the right to love and blocks, and also around sexuality. And in that process I became aware of the law that at that time when we were looking at it, it was illegal for somebody with ID to have sex before marriage and the likelihood of somebody with ID getting married or being supported to be married was very unlikely, which just horrified me, which ABSOLUTELY enraged me, and we spoke about that a lot as a group of people, and the unfairness of it. And out of those conversations and that rage, if you like, and upset we just all came together and said: "Let's create a play around this. Let's get this out there, because this is so wrong for all the obvious reasons". If somebody's criminalized for having sex and everyone who supports them knows that, then their attitude to supporting them for a date is already on a bad foot. There were myriad ways which influenced our actors' lives in an non-healthy way. There was a series of playwrights, but I knew that Christian O'Reilly was actually the right person for it and he had met the Teapots previously. We hadn't worked together. So guite early on, after these initial conversations and deciding we'd like to create a body of work, Christian came in and that was it. We kept workshopping on the floor, we flung him into actors' workshops as well so that he got to equalize with the actors very quickly. And he just... he's a wonderful playwright and he is wonderful with language and I think, most of all, he really understood the actors and the issue and wrote something very special that did not shy away from some harsh elements, but also had a really large dose of humour. And I think that's probably the genius of his writing because our guys are quite funny, you know [all laugh].

KO: I know, I know.

16:30 PP: They don't hang around in doom and gloom for too long. [laughs] Yeah.

CK: I think you've just made me laugh there, P.

PP: So the play was born and ... yeah.

KO: And then it got adapted for the screen by Len Collin.

PP: So, actually, Christian adapted it for the screen. So he wrote the screenplay, but Len was the director. Yeah, amazing for a piece of theatre which did so well around Ireland to then very quickly get adapted for the screen, but not only adapted, but funded to become a film [KO *laughs*]. And yeah, it's something we're so proud of, so

proud of... And yes, so Christian had adapted the play into a screenplay and Len was the director on that film and we were on journey, we were on a journey for... from an idea from a kind of response to a political wrong and to a group of actors and it's – as you know – it's done phenomenally well ... and yeah...

KO: Indeed. Charlene, so what was a greater challenge for you: to perform on stage or in a film?

17:52 CK: Oh, in the film it was kind of tricky because I had a lot of walking around to... and a lot of stunt, one stunt falling off the bed.

KO: Was it the first time that you worked as a film actress?

CK: Yes, my first time working from the play to a film it was. And I never were in front of a camera, even thought I was in a play. And there was a lot of technical things going on and rehearsals and so on, stuff like that. Or in the film it was kind of different to the play originally because there was a lot of cameras moving around spaces and we had to move into different spots for a long time and arrive early in the mornings, which I didn't mind [KO *laughs*] – getting up early in the morning for my shoot because it was in the whole cinema to the hotel scene, so I had a long distance from the cinema to the actual Nox hotel, cause the Nox hotel was further away from where we filmed in the cinema so it took us a little bit of time to readjust ourselves before we actually went into the next shot which was the hotel. I really enjoy doing the film work. It really brought more my acting skills out, that I couldn't get out at first, but now I could. So it really made me feel happy insight so I really enjoyed doing some.

KO: So the play and the film sparked a lot of debate around the former Irish law and eventually this led to the introduction of a change, right? To the introduction of a new law and the introduction of the category of a protected person. Are you satisfied with this change?

CK: Definitely and yes, for me. P? For you?

PP: Umm, it' a huge step in the right direction. There are multiple issues to consider in and around the law change but I think it was monumental that it changed. And I always feel slightly like we were a cherry on top of the cake and I always feel I have to write that because there are so many organizations campaigning for many, many years, but it does illustrate how art can hit the zeitgeist and change something, you know. I think that's the best thing about what we do as theatre and film makers. But, yes, it's changed that piece where it's no longer criminalizing the person and that can only be a good thing.

21:09 KO: Are there any other areas related to the lives of people with ID in Ireland that deserve critical attention and that Blue Teapot has addresses or would like to explore in the future?

PP: So, certainly there is so many. I was asked by an agency this morning that works a lot in rural Connemara. So Galway is, as you know, on the west of Ireland, but there is vast very beautiful landscape called Connemara, but it's very isolated; it is anyway so I was asked if we would consider creating a piece around isolation and

the isolation particularly of people with ID. And we have looked a bit before. There are multiple issues and maybe it's not an entire piece but maybe it comes through a character. There's a lot to articulate really. I think there is a lot to articulate: ageing, ageing of parents, ageing – something I would see – what happens when they get older, what happens when their parents and their families go. I think that's something that I think about a lot... keeps me up at night. [laughs]

KO: It seems to me that over the years Blue Teapot has become so much more than just theatre. Among other things, you have also started a performing arts school. Can you tell us more about the school. Are the Blue Teapot actors involved in the teaching process?

PP: I'll give you a little bit of the history of the school and then Charlene can speak as a former student. So the school was born totally out of the success of the training of the actors; as I joined in September 2006, we got into training guite soon, because that's what was always needed. The success of that of that training with the actors was really the motivation to establish the school because in Ireland at that time there was no..., no ways somebody with ID could access performing arts training. So that's why it was born. It is growing so successfully since; it's multi-award-winning; we have just secured additional funding; it's a three-year programme and we used to only be able to take one cohort of about eight to ten people every three years. Quality is really important. It is accredited so it is an accredited, nationally recognized training. Through some philanthropic support over a three-year process and our own strategic plan, we finally got us to the place where we have its own building. We have just hired a performing arts school manager, so there's a whole team and it's expanding whereby every year there'll be an intake of students. But also everything is underpinned by performing arts and that's the central theme of the school but woven into that now will be all the living skills and independent living and sexuality, relationships, so it's going to broaden out a little bit, but at the centre of it always will be performing arts so we are super-proud of that and it's literally flourishing right now... But you are a member, you are an ex-member, Charlene, so you speak.

24:40 CK: Ok, Umm, on behalf of my fellow actors as well. It was to do with FETAC level 3 and for now we have to call it QQI level 3 so we – from the members – we did our training way before the performing arts school students got introduced to the Blue Teapot building where the members were there to support them on their journey as well as our own. We were there for the performing arts school students when they started and we gave them the courage and support that they needed from us as members to be there for them so it helped along the way. So when we did the QQI training, it had to lash with different programmes we did. There was one programme I really loved - [it] was art because I found this drawing real art and not taking photographs as such but to memorize your surroundings before you actually draw it and that helped me also create the surroundings around how would I write a script for a play myself then; where would I get the inspiration for a story to be put into an actual play that I really enjoyed doing when I wrote it. So it actually makes me feel more proud of myself now that I did all my training and stayed on as a member so I'm really proud of myself now that I did that – did my three years, graduated and stayed on to be here, to do acting, but also support all our students when they joined. There will be five students, or seven or six, usually in a group. It depends on the group

itself, but we are always there at tea-break to support them, show them where everything was and to have them out.

KO: So the last few months must have been quite difficult for you and for the students. Did you have an opportunity to meet online or in any other way? Where the classes suspended?

CK: Over zoom.

KO: Over zoom...

CK: Yeah...

PP: Lots of zooms.

CK: Lots of zooms... Most of the time was that performing arts school students would zoom to the actor... members. So that would have been Jenny and myself. They would have zoomed to us during the COVID-19, which I really hate at the moment.

28:35 KO: As we all do. Yes, and here I'd also like to ask you about the European project that you participated in – Crossing the Line – together with several other theatre companies from various European countries, from the UK, France, Sweden, the Netherlands and Poland. And, unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic the festival had to be cancelled. Still, you had some opportunity to collaborate with those other companies and to exchange some experiences. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

PP: You have been to Poland, Charlene Kelly.

[all laugh]

CK: I haven't forgotten that, P. Well, I have been to Poland with Patrick and Kieran. So... to Warsaw. And umm... we did do workshops when we were there but there was one workshop I didn't really kind of get used of because they were talking too quickly for me to understand their language. So I found it really hard but then there was another company member that was really, really nice — [it] was Ally. He was blind. So we had a workshop as well with that company as well. So we did. And it was really nice meeting up with different people but they were just speaking a little bit too much, a little bit too fast... person or language in Ireland like when we speak English. But it was a little bit tricky for me to understand the language they were speaking but when I did a lovely little workshop with Ally, who is blind, and he was really nice so we had this kind of mind... I can't get it P.

PP: Well, you had this...

CK: Mindfulness.

PP: Yes, mindfulness in your work as artists, didn't you? You connected...

CK: We connected very well, so we did. And it was really well-based so whatever he... when he touched a certain side of me, I could feel the tension coming from him in a friendly way, even though he couldn't see me. So I had to keep my own friendliness and be kind to him as well more that we both had disabilities. So by working with someone that was blind and someone that could see and someone that couldn't see, like I could touch a certain area on Ally that he would feel my hand wherever – say, if I went to his leg and touched it, he would feel it by touch and hear my voice alright too, but he just couldn't see me.

KO: So you kind of learned to connect on a different, non-verbal level.

CK: Yeah, which made me really happy to work beside someone that was blind and from all my work with Blue Teapot and all my acting skills and all that, I brought that with me to Warsaw. So I would have the technology and the way of feeling and a way of being there for that person who didn't know me at first until we connected in the workshop. That was really very ...

PP: Powerful.

CK: That was really very nice of Petal to invite me to go to Warsaw.

PP: I think one of the things that was interesting cause it was the first Crossing the Line gathering of the tribes that Theatre 21 hosted and it was fantastic. It was a lot cause it was the first time six companies were all arriving together, wasn't it? What was very clear is the peer-to-peer connection between artists is really, really potent.

33:28 CK: Especially Mind the Gap theatre company. I really enjoyed meeting up with the guys and the girls.

PP: Yeah, so I think Crossing the Line is for us is just getting going. So I think Theatre 21, Theatre Babel from the Netherlands and Blue Teapot – we are the next three companies to join the existing three: Moomsteatern, Mind the Gap, and L'Oiseau Mouche. So we feel like we're just arriving and, unfortunately, COVID's happened in the middle of it. Yeah...

KO: And then the play that was supposed to premiere at the Crossing the Line festival and later was supposed to be staged – and I hope it will be staged – at the Abbey Theatre on the Peacock Stage is Charlene's *Into the Dark Woods*. And this is your debut play, right?

CK: Yes.

KO: So how did you become a playwright? Why did you decide: "Ok, and now I'm going to write a play"?

CK: Well, the idea came to me because I was out and about with my staff from my house and we went to Brigit's Garden. So I kind of... because there was a woods around it – they gave me an idea to put... to think about the title of *Into the Woods*, but make it a modern-day feel to it. So I was looking around at different areas like trees and plants and flowers and like... birds and all that kind of thing that would

happen in a wood. So from there then I just sat down in my own place and got out pen, got out writing paper, and said "That's it. I'll write a story." So I wrote a story about it and I got all the elements and all the different pieces put into the actual words of the story. Then I actually brought it into... my story into Blue Teapot to Umm... to another writer called Eileen Gibbons, who kind of... looked at our work about it and I read a bit about my story, I read the story of the play that I wrote. And when I read it to her, it brought a little bit of a tear to my eye because I knew what's going to happen next, what would happen next to my story and to put it into a play. Because I've been acting myself, there is no point of acting and thinking straight away what to put into another script, for another production. So then Petal sat down and said... She came down to Eileen's class when I was there doing some writing work with her on my own with Eileen Gibbons and... to do with the script. And then Petal came down and asked: "Why don't we have a chat about it? And where it's going to go". So from there then that's how the story to the actual play begin into a script by me. So it really made me happy. I know it's not gonna really happen because of the COVID-19 is still hanging around.

PP: Yes, but we have some good news.

KO: So before I ask you about the good news, can you tell me a bit more about your collaboration with the Abbey. How did it start?

38:09 PP: Yes, so we knew... a producer – producer had seen our work over the years, one of the Abbey producers and she had always expressed that it would be nice for us work and connect together. When that came... when the initial meeting came to fruition, we've gone through ... so Eileen Gibbons is a playwright and a dramaturg and had taken a number of our actors through creative writing workshops because they expressed the desire to write and Charlene's was clearly theatre and Eileen and I both felt the same way about what she produced though that process. So we'd already had a hit upon the idea that we must support her to write a full play. And we pitched that at the Abbey and said: "Would you support a first-time playwright with her debut play, who has an ID?" and they said: "Hell yeah!". It was very easy, I have to say.

39:13 CK: You were right P there cause you had something in your eye.

PP: I have something in me eye.

CK: So do I.

PP: We were just delighted by the idea. And we got nothing but support and this support is still there in spite of COVID, umm, sort of arrests to development in that way. They help to co-finance the creation of the play, the script and they are coming in as co-producers of the actual theatre production. So that's still gonna happen. We got some great news and yesterday that the *Into the Dark Woods* part of our relationship with our Capital of Culture has been saved. Sadly, the festival is gone but we got additional funding in place to do a kind of a bigger version and it will be – Katarzyna – it will be filmed. So you will get a very good quality.

CK: Yeah, VIP treatment.

KO: I'm really excited to hear that.

PP: We pitched to them because, you know, it will still be a theatre play. It's going to be more of an immersive piece of theatre in Galway to allow in a much larger space to allow for audiences and social distancing. We're going into the black box, yeah. But we will film the whole process so we will kind of document the story of creation and film the end, the kind of end piece as well?. So...

KO: That's just wonderful news! To finish with, Charlene I just was wondering if you could tell us a bit more about the play as such, about the plot of the play, perhaps without offering too many spoilers?

CK: That's hard enough to do. I can give a sneak peek.

KO: Please do...

41:00 CK: Umm. Like... how to say it... it came true as story-based before I got into the play. So for now since my friends have all been reading the script, I'm really proud of them, even though I'm proud of myself that I think because of the play that I wrote it into a play that I just thought that it'd be nice for the rest of my friends to be in it as well as me. But it's just after I wrote it that I kind of... Petal goes: "Can I have a little talk with you for three minutes, Charlene?" and I go: "What about?". And then she was... and says: "Would you like to perform in it with the rest of the guys?" and I said: "Yes, I would, even though it was me own play." So what not? Instead of sitting out in the side lines, would I like to perform with the guys in the play? And put it out there for people with other non-intellectual disabilities? People that don't have an actual disability? And that they can get a chance to come and see what we do and we could go on travel and tour to see what they do. So it's kind of like the way I wrote the story. So at the start when I wrote the story I was: "OK, that's not gonna work". So I said I'll write it again the second time. And the second time it worked that all I had to do was dream about the different things in my head: "OK, this will suit that, this will suit that and that will suit that". How can we put it into a set? Click our fingers. I said to Petal: "Why don't we... umm, Eileen, yourself and me sit down and talk about it, how we would put it into a play? And then have everyone sitting around in a circle there, with the rest of my friends in the theatre and read through the script? But for me not to talk or say anything, but just listen." And I could hear the way they were pronouncing all the words I had written and they were all my words. And they could understand my languages, our own languages together – all English. So it really helps, my friends all came, we'll sit down together, and we'll all talk about it. So we did in a big circle and Petal was there, Eileen was there, and Jason was stepping in as well cause he was doing the sound. So that was really good to have, some sound effects. So we did it in... we went back to Druid see, didn't we? And then we actually did a little, just a little warm-up about it and how it would look when it's set out on stage. I know it's not my part of talking about technical things. I leave that to the professionals and to stick with my own thing that I'm doing.

PP: But I think you have a very, very good understanding of theatre. I think it's in your bones. So I think what I see in your writing and also how you approach your writing, it's absolutely automatic, that all your experience of being on stage, being on a set,

being lit, as you automatically think about all of those things, which is why it's so beautiful.

KO: So I'm really looking forward to watching the play some time soon, I hope. Have you started rehearsing?

PP: September. Yeah... September...

CK: When we're all back.

PP: We'll have the exact date soon but we... well, now it's the last week in February is being talked about staging so ... yeah, fingers crossed.

CK: And toes, P. Don't forget our toes.

KO: [laughs] Petal, Charlene, thank you very much for this interview.

CK: No, not at all.

PP: Thank you, thank you, Katarzyna.

46:47 KR: Thank you to listening to the Irish Itinerary podcast. We hope you will join us again in two weeks on Thursday, the 27th of August, when we'll release the interview that James Little from Charles University, Prague has conducted with Irish drama improviser, composer, and bandleader Matthew Jacobson. Many thanks again to Gerry Smyth for allowing us to use his tune "Coming through Sligo" as a jingle. We also want to express our sincere gratitude to Culture Ireland, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Republic of Ireland as well as the Irish College Leuven for their generous support of EFACIS and of all formats of the Irish Itinerary. If you enjoyed the show, please subscribe to the Irish Itinerary podcast on Spotify, Apple, Google, or elsewhere. Tell your friends about us and like us in all the social media you're using. Bye, bye!