

# FRONT LINE

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# THE QUEER FELLA

## Queer Thinking, Review, Hot Press Dublin 1997

**Humorous, provocative  
and profound –**

**PATRICK SCULLY'S**

**Queer Thing was one  
of the highlights of**

**the recent Pride**

**Festival in Dublin.**

**PAUL O'MAHONY**

**meets the acclaimed  
performance artist.**



Patrick Scully: the Pat in the hat

**"IF** SOMEBODY who was also HIV Positive said to me 'Well, Patrick, I'm gonna go to Ireland for a vacation, how likely is it that I'll meet Irish men to have sex with?', I'd say to him that if he's upfront about his HIV then he's gonna have a really dry time! That's not to say there haven't been men that I've met

who I've been attracted to or could've connected with sexually. The reality is that there may be men who, intellectually, think it would be okay to have sex with someone who's HIV but, on an emotional level, I think most gay men in Ireland are quite terrified of the notion.

"It's intriguing, because I would hope that awareness of safe sex is such that people operate under the assumption that they should have sex as if anyone they were having sex with is positive. Because that's what you need to do to protect yourself."

Patrick Scully, the Minneapolis-based performance artist, dancer, writer, film-maker, and gay activist, whose *Queer Thinking* show at The Project brought the reality of HIV sharply into focus, and illuminated the recent Pride festival, is ruminating aloud.

*Queer Thinking* sees Scully adopt three different personae of his own character: drag queen, radical faerie, and gay activist. As Tanya, he dons leopard-skin mini-dress (too small), stilettoes (too tight), and shoulder pads (too big), all the while waxing lyrical to hilarious effect on countless issues of personal concern, including the difficulty in choosing which toilet to enter. His logic is irrefutable. If segregated toilets were designed to separate people who might be sexually attracted to the opposite sex, argues Tanya, then where does that leave 'her'? And what happens when another drag queen comes in to whom she might be attracted? What of 'conventional' gay men in the 'Mens' and lesbians in the 'Ladies'? Taking it ad infinitum, basically everyone needs their own cubicle!

Part two, even more remarkably, finds Scully totally naked before his audience, discussing HIV and homophobia. While both realities are disturbing, he is astute enough to lighten proceedings with some comic relief, including the admission that 'for the last ten minutes I've been holding my stomach in!'. He then slowly paints on a washboard stomach!

Such interjections, however, do not detract from Scully's more serious messages and, in particular, his belief there are those in society who would wish he were silent, or even dead. "There are people who feel that strongly," he claims, as we sit backstage at The Project the day before he flies back to the States. "There are also other elements that would modify that, and wish that I, and other visibly queer people would fit in more, that we wouldn't be quite so different and that it might be okay for us to do what we want, but that they don't have to be aware of it. These certain elements want us to live our lives on their terms, which is the usual request that's made of any kind of minority, by the majority. We'll all get along, as long as you play by our rules."

What effect did being diagnosed HIV Positive twelve years ago have on Patrick Scully's psyche and, in particular, his enthusiasm

for performing?

"I've always been a pretty energetic person," he admits. "We're all mortal, and the only 'given' is that one day each of us will die but, when I learned I was HIV Positive at thirty-one years of age, it was clear to me that I needed to make the most of every day. I had a hyperconsciousness of mortality that just pushed me to take more chances, to not be afraid to do things, to move in the direction of living my life on my own terms, which I was already fairly good at doing."

Would he, one wonders, have stood in front of an audience for a prolonged period, totally naked, prior to his diagnosis?

"Yeah," he replies, emphatically. "I started in the dance world and when you're in tights and leotards on stage in front of people it's like 'how much is actually concealed?' I also used to support myself by working as a model for life drawing classes so that kind of activity gave me a degree of comfortableness with my body."

"The reason I'm naked in *Queer Thinking* for so long is that, initially, everybody looks at your dick because they're not used to such a scenario in a theatre! The audience might think I can't see where their eyes are, even though I can and, sometimes, I might even tease them and say, 'Now, look up here, I'm talking to you!'. It's partly to get people to deal with it. I mean, I was raised in this strict Catholic tradition which was very repressive around issues of nudity, where nudity was equated with sexuality and they were both bad, evil things. I want to challenge that. We're all here in flesh and blood, and it's a good thing."

Does his Catholicism not give him the opportunity to break more rules, to have more fun, in a way?

"For me, it was a bigger deal to be sexual than it was to be homosexual," he reveals. "In the first sexual connections that I had in my adolescence, even though they were with other men, it was a bigger barrier to overcome in letting myself be sexual than it was to deal with the fact that I was being sexual with another man. In high school, for instance, I was aware of my attractions for other

guys and, in the Sex Education class, homosexuality was in the last chapter with prostitution and venereal disease! With that kind of trinity, it wasn't something you were going to aspire to!

"The first time I went to a gay bar, in the company of a female friend, it was a revelation! There must've been five or six hundred guys in the club and I remember thinking 'Oh, my God, all of them are homosexual! This is a hundred times as many as I ever imagined existed, and they're my age, attractive, and look like they'd be fun to be with'."

A keen observer of sexual relations generally, does he see any fundamental differences between a heterosexual relationship and a gay one?

"More of the heterosexual world is willing to buy-in to a mythology that isn't true," he says. "That a man and a woman meet and live together for the rest of their lives in a monogamous relationship. That's clearly the paradigm that's presented in the straight world, but for what percentage of hetero people is that true? I would imagine that it's a very small percentage who truly have one partner that they live with for the rest of their lives and never have sex with anybody else from there on. The reality for many gay people is that, since we're already outside that paradigm, then there's more freedom to think about 'what really is the situation?'. I think we can define things better on our own terms as mature adults."

Does he not think, then, that homosexual lobbying for same-sex marriages is falling into the hetero-trap – evidence of a desire to be accepted as more conventional?

"There's a lot of privilege that's accorded to marriage in terms of property rights, taxation, pensions, and so on," he counters. "If you're a US Senator and you die, your wife is taken care of. If you're a US Senator who's gay, and you die, your partner is shit out of luck. What we're saying with the issue of marriage is that some of us want to be able to define our relationship so that we have access to the same rights that 'straight' people have in partnerships. We want to get a validity to our relationships in the eyes of the state, and in society, that straight people get to have."

Whether it be manifested in the obstruction of gay marriages or resistance to allowing openly gay people to join the military, homophobia is still an unavoidable reality.

"I think a lot of homophobia comes out of fear and ignorance," says Scully. "I don't think most people who know a significant number of openly gay people harbour massive amounts of homophobia. I mean, we all harbour some homophobia. We live in a world that's so homophobic it's impossible to not, on some level, be homophobic."

In saying 'we all', is he including himself?

"Well, I do know that I have to continually work to get beyond my own homophobia. If you didn't know me, for instance, at what point do I tell you I'm gay? If I'm staying with someone and they ask me at some point if I have a wife, do I decide that this is the moment to 'come out' to them? That's an example of how I encounter my own internalised homophobia, in that moment that I have a hesitation to tell the person I'm gay, that I don't have a wife, but I have a husband and we can't be legally married. I have to decide if my relationship with this person is such that I want to disclose this information, because in some ways, it can be easier not to disclose it, yet in the moment that you don't disclose it, a little piece of yourself dies."

"I was in a taxi in Belfast and I'm talking to the driver," he continues, "and I tell him I'm in Northern Ireland doing my show *Queer Thinking* and he says 'I think things are more tolerant now of gays' and he goes on and talks about his wife and kids, but then he adds that 'I don't really have a problem with gays, as long as they don't push it in my face'. So I said to him, 'Well, I already know that you're married and have kids, so aren't you pushing your heterosexuality in my face?'. He never hesitated for a moment to talk about himself in heterosexual terms, but the moment I do it as a gay person, straight people think I'm shoving my homosexuality in their face. When, in fact, all I'm doing is just talking about my life." ■

### Séamus & Vera



By E.O.B.