

Natural History of Hope

A live performance by

Fiona Whelan

Rialto Youth Project

Brokentalkers

Project Arts Centre

May 2016



‘My Ma is up there now
shouting at me,
don’t be telling them that
or she might be saying
good girl, well done, tell
them, dedicate it to me’.

(Anonymous)

This performance is dedicated to all our mothers.

Natural History of Hope

An unflinching exploration of gender and class inequality, and the complexity of women’s lives told through real stories of oppression, resilience, solidarity and hope.

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Credits

Natural History of Hope

is a live performance presented by artist Fiona Whelan & Rialto Youth Project in collaboration with Brokentalkers.

Cast

Primary cast Audrey Wade, Lydia Lynam, Niamh Tracey, Michelle Dunne, Vicky White, Sharon Cooney, Lisa Graham, Nichola Mooney, Dannielle McKenna, Amy White, Gillian O Connor & Fiona Whelan

Majorettes Lydia Lynam, Megan Whelan, Robyn Donovan, Chelsea Lynam, Chloe Donohoe, Aoife Fitzgerald, Kaylee Dunne, Neveah Wade, Saoirse Ashton, Kelly Donohoe, Ella Kenny & Jamie Byrne

Knitters Gemma McKenna, Maureen O'Dwyer, Aine Dempsey & Sadhbh Lawlor

Stilters Shannon Madden & Robyn McGrath

Project Coordination Team

Rialto Youth Project staff
– Nichola Mooney, Sharon Cooney, Gillian O Connor, Dannielle McKenna, Michelle Dunne & artist Fiona Whelan.

Sound Design

Jack Cawley

Lighting Design

Sarah Jane Shiels

Video Design

Kilian Waters

Production Manager

Sean Dennehy

Production Team

Nichola Mooney, Irene O'Donoghue, Tina O'Sullivan, Sue Fagan, Zoe Lawrence, Debbie Collins, Doireann Counihan & Erika Jean Freeney

Archive Footage

Comes from 'Inside Out', including vocals from Carmel Quinn with Paula Cook & Tina Lawlor; A Rialto Youth Project production, 1996, filmed by Enda O'Brien

Original Music

'Someone to blame' written & performed by Niamh Tracey

'Something Outside' composed by Sean Millar & performed by Jodie Kearns, Claudia Cooney, Amanda Bowes & Chloe Moore

Mannequin Construction

Ger Clancy

Mannequin Costume Design

MAGS (Gemma McKenna, Maureen O'Dwyer, Aine Dempsey & artist Sadhbh Lawlor)

Stage Props

Stitch and Bitch group and Knitted Together project (of Fatima Groups United), Elaine Sheridan, Gary Gowran, Gerard O'Connor, Rialto Men's Shed, Marian Mooney and James St. Primary School

Children's drawings

Arts Sparks, a project of Rialto Youth Project

Programme Photos

Chris Maguire

Rialto Youth Project & The Arts

We did a play here years ago.
A lot of the cast from that play are dead now.
We couldn't save them.

Natural History of Hope is a live performance presented by artist Fiona Whelan and Rialto Youth Project in collaboration with Brokentalkers. While it takes to the stage as a new piece of theatre, this work has its roots in community youth work, collaborative arts practice, radical education and activism.

Deeply connected to a local network of community development groups, Rialto Youth Project (RYP) has acquired a strong reputation for taking an independent stance, showing leadership within the field of youth work and always advocating for the voices of young people to be heard. The story of the arts' role in RYP's work starts over thirty years ago when a group of youth workers recognised a value in engaging with the arts and artists and developing art processes to create spaces for young people to engage with their lived experience and particular outlook on society.

Through the 1980s and 1990s RYP built a strong capacity for arts-based work, driving a practice committed to the exploration and representation of social issues – including youth incarceration, unemployment and the HIV/AIDS crisis. It also contributed directly to national, citywide and north /south cultural dialogues and co-produced a range of community / youth arts publications and films in this period. Such work was made possible through carefully negotiated collaborations with a wide range of arts organisations and individual artists – in both national and international contexts – across most all art forms, through which a rich body of work and shared cultural confidence arose.

This sustained cultural engagement, ultimately led to RYP developing its own arts policy as well as a rudimentary local arts infrastructure through which to pioneer new forms of arts education for children and young people (Arcade with Vagabond Reviews funded by Atlantic Philanthropies), which – as well as a variety of strong trans disciplinary practices – has become an embedded and highly valued aspect of its community youth work practice.

In that context, in 2004, Fiona Whelan began working with RYP building a strong collaborative relationship that drives the work. Together the artist and community organisation have developed a number of complex durational enquiries interrogating power relations at micro and macro level, leading in unanticipated directions and producing multiple manifestations. Recognising and valuing difference but working from a place of shared interest, Fiona Whelan and RYP work to harness the power of the arts when working along side other forms of knowledge, in the pursuit of social change.

Natural History of Hope – A Four-year Project

Hope was conceived by women. By young women and older women. By mothers and nannies. By single women and married women, gay women, bi-women, straight women. By psychologists, homework club workers, sisters, aunties, thinkers and dreamers. By educators, activists, cooks, sociologists and godmothers. By students and youth workers, cleaners, leaders and dancers. By care workers. By singers. By fighters, artists and lovers. By little girls and daughters. By great grandmothers and friends.

Natural History of Hope is an intergenerational art project (2012–2016) from artist Fiona Whelan and Rialto Youth Project, which brought together a diverse group of women to explore contemporary equality issues over four years. Tapping into the generations of women connected to RYP and the majority female staff, the project set out to engage individuals, families and friendship groups to explore and respond to women's experiences of life. A coordination group of eight women (the artist and seven RYP staff including youth workers and homework club workers) have led the project through many phases. Phase 1 of the project involved facilitating brainstorming, leading writing and performance workshops, hosting meals and events and slowly and carefully gathering stories anonymously from generations of women including the coordination group. The ambition was to build a strong collective of women committed to exploring themes of power and hope as they relate to gender and class.

Along the way, external analyses were invited in from Dr. Martina Carroll (Psychology) and Professor Kathleen Lynch (Sociology) to compliment ongoing internal analyses and to uncover new layers of meaning within the stories and shared experiences. While Martina highlighted the theme of resilience within the personal narratives, Kathleen identified core social themes that were emerging, giving the group further material to work with and build from. These themes included class, lack of safe space, grief, gendered identity, men as a liability, the affective domain, survival and the struggle for dignity.

In a practice that harnesses female leadership styles, a solid network developed as a base for this project. A strong group of women refused to allow the dark and difficult life experiences being shared to lead to a position of victim or invoke feelings of pity, instead investing in the power of coming out of silence and creating solidarity with other women. The second phase of the project included a series of local events focused on listening. The Listeners series began with a large event on International Women's Day 2013, in which a collection of anonymous stories were scripted by the artist to bring the audience of 70 women through the multiple complex experiences of women's lives from childhood to old age. Subsequent listening events revolved around specific groupings of stories, all the time bringing acts of voice and listening together.

Phase 3 of the project saw Studio 468 converted into a temporary school, signaling an ambition to harness the approach built here into a long-term educational platform which will extend far beyond this performance. Taking power, solidarity and personal truth as the three values of the school, the intention was to unite across difference, examine and grow power and self-direct our own schooling based on each person's own truth at a pace suited to their own life. In this school, everyone is a teacher, everyone is a learner and the curriculum emerges from the process. The school was dedicated to creating learning spaces for those sharing their own stories and creating possibilities for new understandings of lived experiences when considered as part of a broader social script. However it became equally important to identify and target others who needed to learn from this school and create moments to speak publicly and generate dialogue in relation to core themes emerging. This performance marks a significant moment in this ongoing project





Natural History of Hope The Performance

Hope is a happy child.

She is always smiling. She doesn't see the world as it really is.

She doesn't see the danger or the cruelty. Not yet.

She hasn't had to test how loud she can scream.

Or heard the sound of her mother screaming.

She hasn't had to see how fast she can unbuckle a seatbelt

when under the weight of a local businessman who is

making it hard for her to breath.

She doesn't know yet what it takes to raise someone else's kids.

She doesn't know that someday other people will want to talk
about her biological clock.

She's only a kid. She hasn't learnt how to make her bed

Or realised that once you make your

bed, your supposed to lie in it.

Central to the Natural History of Hope project over the last number of years were five characters who channeled women's experiences, ambitions and lived realities while being introduced to the networks of love and support that exist for women in community. These five characters came to life as life size structures. They were brought to dinner. They attended local events. They were talked about, talk to, talked through. In one weekly meeting in the fifth block art studio in Dolphin House, a decision was made that these characters needed a survival guide to assist them in their lives, based on women's advice, learned from experience. This idea became the bedrock for the development of this major new performance, that would take the same name as the project. In the development of an initial script for this performance, one more character emerged. Her name was Hope. Hope was born and Hope refused to die.

After three years of collaboration; compiling material, building relational networks and exploring layers of analyses, in 2015 Fiona and RYP invited theatre company Brokentalkers to work with them to co-develop this performance. The performance sees Hope's life unfold on stage, while sharing some of the processes that led to her inception and the networks of support that she might encounter in her life. Thematically this performance is about class and gender inequality but it's also about the relationship between truth and fiction and processes of voice and listening. It's about female solidarity and the power of collaboration. Due to its origins and the values of collaboration that underpin it, the collective makers refuse any simplification of roles and identities. No contributor can be reduced to one role. There is no single 'writer', no 'director', no 'researchers' and there are no 'participants'. The lead artist and coordination team of RYP staff shared stories like everyone else and also take to the stage as cast members. We are at once women, subjects, mothers, thinkers, writers and performers. We recognise our diversity of knowledge and skills and have created a hybrid practice in the murky in-between space of collaboration.

Brokentalkers entered our process with a wealth of experience in dealing with complex themes and working with non-professional actors. For six months, we have worked side by side to combine our skills to co-develop what you see today. While we have numerous plans for future stages of this project, we trust that new directions will also emerge in the process of performing this work and the subsequent conversations that will happen with multiple audience members, including you. We look forward to your feedback and conversation...

‘The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you were going to say at the end, do you think you would have the courage to write it? What is true for writing and for love relationships, is also true for life. The game is worthwhile insofar as we do not know what will be the end.’¹

¹ M. Foucault, ‘Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault’. In: L. H. Martin, H. Gutman and P. H. Hutton (eds) *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (London: Tavistock, 1988) 9–15.





Fiona Whelan

www.fionawhelan.com

Fiona Whelan is an artist with a multifaceted practice whose work explores power relations through sustained engagements with people and place. Working with personal testimonies to explore broader societal issues, her practice is concerned with simultaneously growing power with others while developing creative approaches to speaking to power. In 2014, she published a critical memoir, TEN: Territory, Encounter & Negotiation, focusing on a long-term project with Rialto Youth Project exploring young people's relationship to power and policing. This project manifested in multiple events involving An Garda Síochána including The Day in Question (2009) in IMMA, and Policing Dialogues (2010) at The LAB. Fiona is also Joint Coordinator of the MA Socially Engaged Art at NCAD, Dublin.

Rialto Youth Project

www.rialtoyouthproject.net

In an age of inequality, where working class people are oppressed, Rialto Youth Project are working towards bringing about social change, providing an integrated youth service, based on the needs of young people and in particular those most at risk. The aims of RYP are: to offer educational, cultural, social and recreational programmes for young people in a safe and secure environment; to communicate with young people and to continue targeting and working with those most at risk; to network with other groups to improve social conditions in the community; to develop the project's structures based on co-operation and participation; to plan, review and evaluate the project on a regular basis and to develop accordingly. It is a particular irony that RYP – with over 30 years of dedicated arts / cultural practices – at once sophisticated, innovative, carefully evaluated and progressive – can find little or no traction or support from within current State Cultural policy or Arts provision. The absence of commitment to this form of community based arts development – foregrounded in the Rialto Arts Plan 2012–2016 – remains a constant and frustrating political struggle.

Brokentalkers

www.brokentalkers.ie

Brokentalkers are an award-winning Dublin-based theatre company formed in 2001. Under the artistic directorship of Feidlim Cannon and Gary Keegan, since 2003 Brokentalkers have built a reputation as one of Ireland's most innovative and original theatre companies. Their work has been presented in a variety of spaces, ranging from theatres to public spaces, disused sites and the internet. Productions by Brokentalkers include The Blue Boy, This Beach, Have I No Mouth and Silver Stars. Brokentalkers are Project Artists, an initiative of Project Arts Centre.

Thank You

This performance receives financial support from the Arts Council through the Project Awards for Arts Participation and the Artist in Community Scheme, managed by Create in addition to Rialto Youth Project's core funding and in kind support from Project Arts Centre. The process was also supported through a long-term residency in the fifth block art studio, Dolphin House and a two-stage residency award in Studio 468, co-managed by Common Ground & Rialto Development Association.

Sincere thanks to all the anonymous story tellers without whom this performance wouldn't exist. To the management and staff team at Rialto Youth Project for all the behind the scenes work on this project. Thanks to Dr. Martina Carroll and Professor Kathleen Lynch for their support and analysis over the last number of years, and to Dairne O'Sullivan for marketing support. Thanks finally to all the partners, friends and relatives for the extra child minding and hidden labour needed to make a performance like this happen. We couldn't have done it without you all.

Support Services

Domestic Violence

Inchicore Outreach Centre
Mon-Fri 9.30am-5pm
01 454 5239
www.domesticabuse.ie

Sexual Violence

Rape Crisis Centre
70 Leeson Street Lower, Dublin 2
1800 778 888

Addiction

Rialto Community Drug Team
468 South Circular Road
01 454 0021

Homelessness

Focus Ireland
9-12 High Street,
Christchurch, Dublin 8
01 494 0224

Family Support

Rialto Springboard Project 3
Reuben Plaza, Rialto, Dublin 8
01 471 6700

LGBTQ Support Service

Belong To
Parliament House,
Parliament St, Dublin 2
01 670 6223

National Women's Organisation

National Women's
Council of Ireland
100 North King Street
Dublin 7
01 679 0100



Links

www.rialtoyouthproject.net
www.fionawhelan.com
www.brokentalkers.ie

For more information
Rialto Youth Project
01 453 1638