



MANCHESTER
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EXHIBITION
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MAKE PACK by Kate O'Donnell





Kate O'Donnell

The driving force behind all my work is to see more trans stories in the world. I came back to performing at the age of 50 with an autobiographical solo piece called "Big Girl's Blouse." This was the catalyst to me giving up my job and becoming a full-time creative. It also inspired me to set up trans arts organisation Trans Creative in 2016 and to curate our annual trans arts festival "Trans Vegas."

My inspiration

This can be a memory, a piece of vintage clothing or a song.

In "You've Changed I set the show in the 1930s to represent how transitioning in the early 2000s may as well have been the 1930s. This led to a whole host of things to draw on. I started the show as a queer Fred Astaire and ended it as a be-jewelled Ginger Rogers wearing a red wig. I used the 1930's song "Let's face the music and dance" for the finale - it was my message to queer trans people. The same is true of my version of "Stand by Your Man" - where I changed the lyrics to Stand By Your Trans. #STAND BY YOUR TRANS" became a hashtag campaign appearing on T-shirts that we sell to raise money for trans artists. Who knew inspiration could lead to merchandise and fundraising!

My creative process

I start with myself: my experiences and my trans identity. I feel those stories are rarely told or seen in the cis world we live in so they are still rich; creatively, socially and politically.

Two of my shows were based on insults I received as a child and as an adult. Reclaiming those insults felt very Queer (a word which has itself been beautifully reclaimed) empowering and honest. The more honest I can be, the more connected I feel to the work. The more I reveal, the more powerful the work becomes for me and for the audience. I have made shows about my body, using my body, most notably in the cabaret show "A short history of my tits" and in my larger show "You've Changed." In "You've Changed" I have a Q & A on stage where my Transgina answers questions from the audience.

"Ask for money - lots of money! Your work is so important. If you can't ask maybe get someone who can. Trans work is still rare so you need to know its value. I have an agent now so that helps but I also have a friend who will negotiate for me sometimes as they have no problem asking for money. Having a day-rate can really help too - this can of course be flexible. I always ask if there is a budget quite early on - that way if it's going to be for free, at least you know from the start."

"Titles can really help you get going and keep you on track with what the piece is about. A good title can also be useful if you're explaining the idea or selling the idea to others."

My advice

I don't think we are encouraged to make art, that stops at about 9 years old (if it ever started for you at all). So, it's your job to get creativity back into your life and to see it as important. Art is not valued culturally as we have seen recently in how the arts were treated during the pandemic. Art is powerful and can change lives. I believe that 'if you can't see yourself you can't be yourself' so, it's my drive to create stories where I can see myself and other trans people.

I gave up making art for about 20 years. I think it was related to being working class as art and performance were never seen as 'real jobs' in my family despite the fact that growing up everything I did was creative in some way. When I wanted to study Art at 16 my family said they wouldn't support me so I chose Business Studies just to be able to stay in education and still live at home. I wish I hadn't stopped creating for those 20 years and have to keep reminding myself that I am an artist and it's a real job!

Sometimes with the Arts you have to have to make a leap of faith and jump in, the Arts will catch you but you do need to think about how you will eat and pay the rent. I gave up my 'real' job at the age of 50 and started performing and making work again. I diversified; I started directing other shows and took acting jobs when I wasn't making my own work. I also set up a trans arts organisation which now curates trans work in our annual festival, so I have found ways to be in the Arts and get paid.

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Creative prompts

I always say even a bad start is better than no start. When I get an idea, even a bad one, I use my Notes app on my phone and jot down a few lines or record a voice memo if it's a song/script idea. Those notes have become shows. I looked at my Notes app just now and saw one called "My boyfriend made me a better feminist." I mean, I should get going on that one! I like to find a title for ideas or shows that I am working on and I even get asked to help others find title for their shows.

I like to have fun with an idea and research things associated with it like music, costume, history, a YouTube clip or a visual reference from Pinterest. When I started to create the show "Hayley and Me" about the trans character Hayley Cropper in Coronation Street, I googled Hayley Cropper's story lines and that became the show - me responding to that character's fictional story. I also wrote a jazz song about her anorak - have fun with it!

A starting point could be being asked to make some work for a festival or an open mic night or a party (I have done shows in people's living rooms). I would always say "yes" as it helps prompt you into action and gives you the chance to try out an idea. You may even want to get some people over to see your work in progress and give feedback. With "Hayley and Me" I did a little sharing after a dinner party and the host got very involved helping me to select Spice Girls tracks to go with each scene.

One last one - if you're really stuck - check out the brilliant book "The Artist's Way" by Julia Cameron. It's a great way to recover your inner artist and find out about yourself ...it actually helped me to realise I was trans so be ready!

"Collaborating with other creatives is an exciting part of the way I work. Partnerships with choreographers, jazz musicians, writers, film makers, set-lighting and costume designers brings a whole new level of creativity to my work, pushing me to learn new things; write songs, dance and recently perform burlesque angle-grinding!"