



And Suddenly I Disappear: The Singapore "d" Monologues will feature spoken English, captioning, British sign language and Singapore sign language, among others. PHOTO: MEMPHIS WEST PICTURES

Challenging notion of normal

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Arts Correspondent

For over a decade, British playwright Kaitie O'Reilly has turned the unrecorded experiences of the deaf and disabled into fictionalised stories presented on the stage.

She collaborates with Singaporean theatre-makers in *And Suddenly I Disappear: The Singapore "d" Monologues*, which runs from Friday to Sunday at the National Museum of Singapore's Gallery Theatre.

The production is directed by British director Phillip Zarrilli, with Singapore's Peter Sau acting as associate director, researcher and performer. Well-known United Kingdom-based Singaporean Ramesh Meyyappan, who is deaf, performs and is the show's visual director.

It is rare here for productions to be entirely led by artists who are deaf or disabled – O'Reilly has "two invisible disabilities" which affect her senses.

She makes a distinction between *And Suddenly I Disappear* – disability arts – and the "charity model" of arts and disability more common here, where the deaf and disabled are provided access to the arts for "socialisation and therapy".

"It's a very different power dynamic," she says.

Disability arts is about empowerment and changing perceptions of people with disabilities or the deaf. "We very much as a company want to embrace all the notions of human

variety. We want to challenge the notion of what's normal," she says.

And *Suddenly I Disappear* is supported by UK arts commissioning programme Unlimited, which supports disabled artists; as well as the Arts Council of Wales and the British Council.

Apart from spoken English, the theatrical production features captioning, British sign language, Singapore sign language and the "visual language" employed by the deaf, where space and positioning of objects are as important as heard words. Judging by the trailer online, it is a uniquely moving and enchanting experience.

This fits in with O'Reilly's point that tweaks which make art more accessible for the disabled or deaf, end up benefiting many more.

Take ramps in theatres and galleries for wheelchair users, for example. Ramps in public spaces are equally useful for parents pushing prams or people hobbled temporarily by a fractured limb.

She says: "If you live long enough, every one of us will be disabled through wear and tear. If we're all going to need extra help, doesn't it make more sense for there to be an accessible environment for all of us?"

O'Reilly has visited Singapore regularly since 2004 to teach students at the Intercultural Theatre Institute. Sau was one of her students and helped conduct the interviews with disabled and deaf Singaporeans that the playwright used for her scripts.

Sau also conducts a training programme for artists with disabilities, Project Tandem, supported by the British Council.

Some emerging artists from this programme are part of the cast and production team of *And Suddenly I Disappear*.

O'Reilly and Sau emphasise that the actors are not performing their own stories on stage. Such assumptions are demeaning, as if "the only thing we can do is tell our own stories", adds the playwright.

Sau says: "Every single one of us on stage is speaking on behalf of a larger group of people. It's not just one story."

O'Reilly adds: "This production is not about what it is to be disabled or deaf. It's about what it means to be human in all its wonderful varieties."

BOOK IT / AND SUDDENLY I DISAPPEAR: THE SINGAPORE "D" MONOLOGUES

WHERE: Gallery Theatre, National Museum of Singapore, 98 Stamford Road

WHEN: Saturday, 8pm, and Sunday, 3pm. All other shows sold out.

ADMISSION: \$32 from bit.ly/andsuddenlyidisappear or accesspathproductions.com/tickets