

## **Birds of Paradise 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary speech**

### **Robert Softley Gale**

Good evening and welcome to our colleagues, partners, supporters, funders and guests. A sincere thank you to Patrick Harvey for hosting us this evening and to the Cabinet Secretary for her enormously encouraging words earlier. Thank you to each of you for joining us as we begin to celebrate Birds of Paradise's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

In putting together these few words to say here tonight I've been given one resounding piece of advice from colleagues – "don't just talk about yourself, Robert!". However, I now have a microphone in front of me, so I can make no promises!

The first time I worked for BOP was back in 2002 – that first show was called 'The Irish Giant' and told the story of Charles Byrne, an 18<sup>th</sup> century freak who was held up as a curiosity in shows that travelled across Britain.

I then also went off to perform in other shows for other companies across the country, becoming what is called a 'jobbing actor' – which is essentially a romanticised way of saying I had to keep selling my wares to get work! When I came back to BOP in 2005 I was gradually getting to grips with the idea of actually calling myself an actor. You see, as a young guy with cerebral palsy and a speech impairment, you can imagine that the careers advisor at my school didn't recommend a life on the stage for me. Becoming a performer, a director, a theatre maker and a writer has had a phenomenal impact upon my life – and when I came back to BOP once again in 2012 as one of its first two disabled Artistic Directors, I was extremely excited by the idea of creating work that had a similar impact on other artists and audiences throughout Scotland and beyond.

Last month Mairi – BOP's Executive Producer – and I were in Rwanda for a week, working with disabled and non-disabled artists in Kigali. We've a long-standing relationship with the British Council and they invited us to share our experience of creating disabled-led theatre with these Rwandese artists.

On the last day of working with the artists we – controversially – divided them in to separate groups – disabled artists in one room and non-disabled artists in another. Some of the non-disabled artists were panic'd by this – "They need us to support them!". Meanwhile in the other room the disabled artists were asking me how they could set up a Rwandan version of Birds of Paradise – a company led by disabled people where they are respected as leaders and where they have control over the work they make. For us, seeing the impact of our work – of telling stories and creating opportunities, be that at home or overseas, is hugely rewarding.

So it's at this point that I must praise the incredible team that make up Birds of Paradise. Mairi, Callum and Michelle are three exceptional colleagues – they all work long hours and go above and beyond in making the work we do happen. We've now reached the point where we frequently communicate through telepathy – Mairi and I have been known to grunt our way through whole project meetings. BOP also has a board of fantastic, devoted trustees – led by our wonderful Chairperson Miles Harrison.

And I also have to mention the 'recently departed' Garry Robson, who was my fellow AD for five years. Garry hasn't 'passed' but he is now working down south, which is almost the same thing!

BOP is built on the idea of collaborations and partnerships, on the principal of building relationships to create change – and as I look round this room it is incredible to be surrounded by so many of our friends, collaborators and supporters who have been on that journey with us for the last 25 years, and who we hope will still be with us for the next 25. Without the support of key funders Creative Scotland and Glasgow Life, we wouldn't be here today. But what's coming next, I here you ask? Well this August we'll bring our coproduction with the National Theatre of Scotland to the fringe. 'My Left / Right Foot – The Musical' will tell the story of an amateur theatre group as they try to stage the iconic 1980s film about Irish disabled writer and artist Christy Brown. Inevitably they get it all wrong, but luckily for us they do so with songs and dance routines! We hope to see you all there!

All that's left for me to do is to once again thank the minister and Patrick Harvie for hosting us here tonight and to thank every single one of you for joining us. Let me now hand over to Lauren for one last song, this time from The Tin Soldier.