

Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2023 – new play trys to pray the gay away

The Orange Works, a Kent based theatre company, are returning to the Fringe with Locusts, a timely play about conversion practices and the belief that you can pray the gay away.

Spoiler warning – you can't. The UK Government have made vague moves to introduce a very weak ban on the conversion therapies, allowing them on grounds of "consent." Quite often people give their consent after being convinced by their community or family that their sexuality is sinful and wrong and that their god can heal them. The Scottish Greens are now bringing their own legislation forward at Holyrood due to Whitehall's inaction on the issue. Given that, this seems the perfect time to explore the subject and the production team were happy to discuss the play and its relevance today.

[The Orange Works](#) have previously performed in Edinburgh over the last five years with their plays [From Today Everything Changes](#), Trans Pennine, Being Frank and Hobnobs & Fruitcake. Locusts is partially drawn on the experiences of Ian Tucker-Bell, who co-wrote the play with Garth McLean.

As a teenager in the Eighties Ian was part of the Methodist Church and a local Evangelical Church and it was through them that he underwent conversion therapy. He's processed the

experiences over recent years but recently felt the need and determination to explore the issue artistically after avoiding writing about it. "I had the idea of writing about it going round my head for three years but it was quite a painful experience. I also found other things more fun to write about but the impetus hit me to start the play last year.

The play is rooted in his own experience, although fictionalised, as well as made more dramatic. The timeline of what happened was compressed and adapted to also include Garth's experiences of growing up in North America in the Seventies while coming to terms with his sexuality.

Ian found writing with Garth incredibly helpful, saying it was a much safer process for him, but also brought a different perspective and voice to the story. Garth explained to me that he met Ian in 2018 while both were at the Fringe and became friends. "While I never experienced conversion therapy the idea of acceptance while growing up rang true. We both felt it was a topical subject that needed exploring, not just specifically about the process but also how people deal with social pressures to conform and be somebody they are not." Ian agrees with that and explained that while his own experience was not as dramatic as what happens in *Locusts* these actions are insidious, coercive behaviour that damages vulnerable teens and adults.

Phil Holden, the play's director, joins in with this theme, saying that exploring these issues is a real opportunity to take audiences on an interesting journey. He adds that the play is not just about conversion therapy and the experiences around it but also how people react and deal with their feelings, suppressing who they are to please others. Phil makes it clear that the play does not seek to demonise Christians and he can, in some ways, understand that their actions come from a position of love. "However, the play shows us a character who is in a conundrum over their feelings and their place in the world. That's a very universal

experience and I think most people will see something of themselves in the play and the characters. I know I'm biased but this is a very powerful and moving piece and more people need awareness of what is happening around the subject – it is an important topic for this time.”

For those unaware of the background, church groups are lobbying the UK Government, arguing that conversion treatments are voluntary and not harmful to the person going through the process. The morning we spoke the Guardian had published an [article covering LGBTQ+ campaigners urging for a ban on conversion practices](#) without loopholes now after the UK Government had failed to follow through on pledges during the last five years to end the practices. Theresa May, as Prime Minister, vowed to ban conversion practices in July 2018, describing the process as abhorrent and having no place in a modern Britain. Since then the draft legislation has failed to appear, although in January this year Whitehall promised to publish a draft Bill “shortly.”

Recent research by Galop, an LGBTQ+ anti-abuse charity, found that one in five LGBTQ+ people and more than a third of trans people in the UK were subjected to attempted conversion, approximately 400,000 people. Proposed limitations would still allow the abuse to continue through the back door by arguing that vulnerable people can ‘consent’ to it and giving exemptions for medical settings. Ian said, “I find it interesting that the topic is suddenly becoming a bit of a national issue, with the Government looking to introduce a very weak ban on the practice. I consented because I’d been convinced as a 16-year-old that being gay was sinful and God would heal me. Of course, God never did.”

Garth adds that growing up he could not fully express who he was or his feelings, all of which made him feel less than others and not fully part of society. “I developed guilt and shame about who I was and how I felt. I was made to feel that because I didn’t fit into the right box then there was

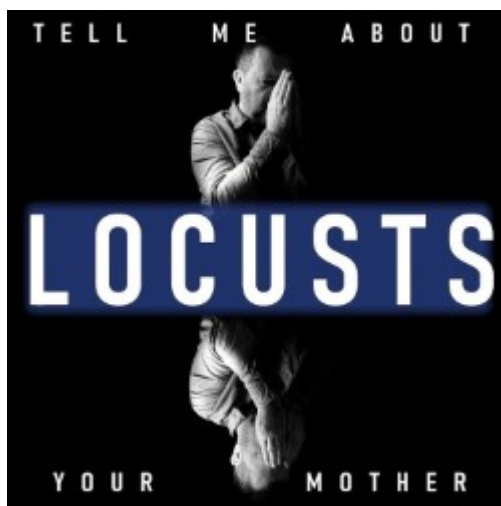
something wrong with me. That damages a person and we should ban these practices as soon as possible."

Moving away from the play's subject, I asked how Ian and Garth found writing the play, given one was in Kent and the other lives in Los Angeles. They laugh at this and admit that it involved lots of Zoom meetings at odd times of the day due to living in different time zones. They found that Sunday was the best day for their respective schedules, with Garth joining in at five-thirty while Ian was enjoyed the evening in the UK. "We both found it a lot of fun," Ian explained; "We weren't sure it would work but since we both act we recorded the meetings, which involved improvising around the subjects and bullet points we had put up on the White Board tool." Garth agrees, adding, "I found it very creative and a rewarding experience. The process was very collaborative, although we benefited from Ian's nimble fingers letting him edit dialogue in real time. Throughout it all we explored the characters' depth and backgrounds, it was a wonderful experience and very rewarding. The only downside is that I'm going to miss seeing the play in Edinburgh due to other commitments but I'm looking forward to seeing the rehearsals this afternoon. I trust Phil and Ian, they are both very good at what they do."

All agree that the Edinburgh experience is more direct and intimate, with the performers having a closer relationship with the action than in other theatre spaces. Garth feels that it benefits the play's emotional material, the physical intimacy will add to the experience. Phil agrees, adding that you communicate more authentically in a small space. "You don't need to shout at the audience in these situations, you benefit from the closeness and getting to see the body language at play. As you watch it you can connect with real and complicated people and their relationships."

So why people should come and see *Locusts*? Phil is quite clear that it offers more than people might think on the surface.

“This isn’t a play just about conversion therapy, it’s really about people, their place in the world and their feelings. Ian and Garth are giving audience an opportunity to go on an interesting journey while learning about something that is happening everyday and affects people’s lives. People will see a character in a conundrum in their own life and hopefully see a connection to something of themselves in the characters.” Garth agrees, describing the material as very timely, “This is about people exploring who they are and their feelings, as well as learning how to feel comfortable with who they are rather than who others want them to be.”



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[Locusts](#) is on at Theatre 1 in Surgeons' Hall from 14-26 August.