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Review: Panti's 'High Heels in Low Places' Delivers Identity Politics in Stilettos



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The Dublin-based drag queen Panti, whose speech last year about homophobia went viral, in this one-woman show at the Irish Arts Center.

BY LAURA COLLINS-HUGHES

Strolling in stiletto heels amid the audience members, Panti gauged the crowd packed into the little auditorium at the Irish Arts Center. Then she gave a warning: Anyone seeking “inspiring words of wisdom” from her show would leave disappointed.

It's not every drag queen who has to manage expectations this way. But for Panti — a Dublin-based performer also known, offstage, as Rory O'Neill — things have been a little weird ever since she gave an address last year at the Abbey Theater. The topic was homophobia, and a video of it went viral. The Irish Times columnist Fintan O'Toole, invoking a 19th-century statesman, described it as “the most eloquent Irish speech since Daniel O'Connell was in his prime.”

Panti's ensuing life as a bona fide national treasure, as she derisively calls herself, is the ostensible topic of “High Heels in Low Places,” her New York stage debut — though she inserts a dismissive, unpublishable modifier between national and treasure.

And this is part of the considerable, contradictory charm of this slightly reluctant gay-rights figure: Even under stage lights, talking about the straitjacket of fame in a pile of blond ringlets, a pair of camel-length lashes and a demurely glittering, nearly wasp-waisted dress (by James-David Seaver), she has what seems like genuine personal modesty.

A rubber-faced raconteur who speaks with sweeping gestures and deploys air quotes with hilarious abandon, the Panti we see here is funny and vulgar, dignified and dishy, sometimes earnest, never acid.

But what she says about no words of wisdom turns out not to be true, and anyone who comes to “High Heels in Low Places” hoping for a discussion of identity politics is in luck. Directed by Phillip McMahon and presented by the Irish Arts Center and Thisispopbaby, the 90-minute show wraps its serious intent in layers of bawdy humor, yet its core is a well-constructed argument for the freedom to be yourself.

On one of her walk-throughs of the audience on Tuesday night, Panti spotted a critic. “You can touch me,” she said, offering a soft hand with French-tipped nails. “I'm flesh and blood.”

This is not a bad strategy, reminding a reviewer that you're human. In her speech at the Abbey Theater, she was saying much the same thing to Ireland, which surprised itself last month by approving same-sex marriage. As the results of that historic vote came in, there was Panti on national television, alongside the Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams.

The one puzzling thing about “High Heels in Low Places” is that Panti hasn't updated it since the vote. So here is a request: Postscript, please.

“High Heels in Low Places” continues through Saturday at the Irish Arts Center, 553 West 51st Street, Clinton; 866-811-4111, irishartscenter.org.