

British Theatre Guide

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Callings

Dominic Montague
Kabosh Theatre
Lyric Theatre, Belfast
2–6 October 2024

First seen in 2022, Dominic Montague's *Callings* returns in timely fashion to mark the 50th anniversary of Cara-Friend, a counselling and support service for Northern Ireland's LGBT+ community, at Belfast's Lyric Theatre before touring the UK and Ireland.

Set in 1979, when the sectarian violence of the Troubles was well into its vicious stride, Northern Ireland even so managed to find shameful common ground in demonising those who didn't conform to heterosexual 'norms'. One might have thought love was the least of the region's problems, yet homosexuality remained illegal until 1982, the age of consent only equalised in 2001 and same-sex marriage not sanctioned until 2020.

Callings eschews outright angry polemic, favouring instead a more effective commentary in which compassion, poignant reflection and humour is filtered through the phone calls coming into the Cara-Friend office. It's overlaid by two burgeoning relationships necessarily conducted in the shadows away from disapproving families, judgemental friends, a censorious police service and unreconstructed political animosity—Ian Paisley's notorious Save Ulster from Sodomy campaign the most virulent example.

A play about yesterday, *Callings* is also a timely play for today. It's lent moving relevance by wholly sympathetic performances anchored by Chris Robinson's middle-aged Martin, whose outwardly calm reassurance at work masks his own concerns about what others might think as he contemplates living with his lover.

Robinson and Michelle Wiggins's warmly, wittily realised novice volunteer, Helen, growing from nervous trepidation to self-assured confidence, are both afforded a fourth wall-breaking address to the audience; an audacious but pointedly employed device that illuminates much of the play's wider argument.

Simon Sweeney's quaking Tommy, fixated by Irish myths and Greek legends, and Christopher Grant's Jason, more experienced though savvy enough to realise there's a world elsewhere, deliver a touching portrait of opposites attracting each other to perfectly describe the toughness and tenderness of a relationship doomed by the interference of others.

Enamoured of horror movies—"nice to see something bad happen to other people for a change"—and besotted by Jamie Lee Curtis, Vicky Allen's fidgety, fragile Bridget grows in stature to become the mouse on the brink of learning to roar.

Director Paula McFetridge moves the 80-minute piece along with a fluid, assured pace, period details deftly inked in by Stuart Marshall's cluttered office set, Erin Charteris's costumes and

snatches of jukebox samples woven into Katie Richardson's sound design, its percussively-accented, electronic pulsing adding a due sense of underlying danger and threat.

It's only recently that Northern Ireland's hitherto hidden queer history and pluralist sexual identity has begun to find its way onto the region's theatres. *Callings* takes its place alongside Conor Mitchell's recently revived *The Doppler Effect*, Amanda Verlaque's [*This Sh*t Happens All the Time*](#), Paul McVeigh's [*Big Man*](#), Declan Bennett's [*Boy Out The City*](#) and Rose Coogan's [*Rose+Bud*](#).

In making the political personal, they share similar qualities of confessional unburdening and of determined resilience. And in that, there's something joyous about *Callings* in its assertion of selfhood and advocacy for love as a right for all.

Following its Belfast run, *Callings* will tour to: [MAC, Birmingham](#) (October 10-11); [Stanley Arts, Croydon](#) (October 16-17); [Chats Palace, Hackney](#) (October 18-19); [Hawk's Well, Sligo](#) (October 23); [Market Place, Armagh](#) (October 24); [Riverbank Arts Centre, Kildare](#) (October 25); [Down Arts Centre, Downpatrick](#) (October 26); [Droichead Arts Centre, Drogheda](#) (November 2); [Garage Theatre, Monaghan](#) (November 3) and [Project Arts Centre, Dublin](#) (November 6-9).

Fifty years on, Cara-Friend remains active, its Lifeline available on 0808 8000 390.

Reviewer: [Michael Quinn](#)