

## Gerry Potter

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**PARTICIPANT:** My name's Gerry Potter and I'm primarily a performance poet, but I'm much more than just a performance poet, there's a lot more going on than that. I've studied as an actor and stuff like that. I've been living in Manchester for phew! God, something like 25 years, but I'm originally from a part of Liverpool called Scotland Road. And I really do carp on about this a lot. Scotland Road was one of the roughest areas of the world you could possibly ever grow up in. It was just by the docks, by this really sort of industrial massive sort of tenement-like complex place, and I was just like this fruity little kid. I was like a single solitary petal in a nuclear destructed area, that's kind of what it felt like growing up. I felt incredibly out of place. Not all the time, but certainly a lot of the time when I was growing up. because it was incredibly machismo-driven, certainly when I was younger. It was almost fully employed, and it's something that's kind of cemented itself in my head as in many ways a class thing, because even though I describe myself as a gay man, I do describe myself more importantly as a working class gay man, and even though that time gave me some incredibly difficult moments, it also gave me some incredibly wonderful and emotional and evocative moments.

So just remembering a time of full employment for the working class, for example, is a very important memory for me. When I say full employment, I don't mean like it is now, with zero-hour contracts, it was people who were on unionised wages. So if you didn't have a big family, —which a lot of people did, it was a Catholic area— so for example my brothers, you would get a big chunk of money at the weekend, and it would be like a party every weekend. And then suddenly you saw that wind down and become the managed decline of Thatcherism. So for me, the whole journey around being a queeny kid who saw what was quite a flourishing industrial working-class area to see it sort of collapse into this literally a wasteland of unemployment and heroin addiction, was really interesting. And I say this in a way that might sound a little like— I'm not thankful for it, but I'm glad I experienced it in a sense. Because if you're going to be a writer, which I am, you got an awful lot to write about.

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**INTERVIEWER:** So, could you tell us a little bit about your family background and how you fit into that and maybe, you mentioned you were "queeny". What were your experiences of that?

**PARTICIPANT:** It's an interesting family background, actually, because I'm from immediate family of ten. So there's me, my dad, and eight kids. There's only me and my brother left alive. I mean, most of my family died through quite tragic accidents, so my family history is littered with dead brothers. Two died before I was born, then the rest died from when I was 8 onwards. They [the brothers] were really scally, hard lads. And don't get me wrong, they would mock me and stuff like that, but I knew I was incredibly safe with them in an area that was literally— it's difficult to explain where I grew up, it was so fucking hard it was just...So I was really glad at these mocking brothers who were hard, because they could knock seven kinds of shite out of the people who literally wanted to kick the hell out of me.

So I was brought up in this incredibly scally, single parent family, my dad left before I was born. And as soon as I could walk, as soon as I could toddle, and this isn't my first memory, but I remember some woman saying to Mum, "Your Gerard, he walks like a girl, May." [laughs] And I must have only been about 4, and I remember thinking, "What does that *mean*? 'Walk like a girl'?" You can't have any understanding of what that is at that point. I wasn't insulted by it, but it became insults much later on. But I remember being *confused* about it. I mean, what does 'walking like a girl' mean? And of course, where I lived, I must have walked like a supermodel! [laughs] Because the lads where I came from didn't walk like girls. And so even from an early age... [tails off]

I often think we say, "Gay people say that we felt different." I actually think we're *told* we're different from a very, very early age. We're probably even might have been told before we can remember stuff. So the difference is imposed upon you, and you think it's yours, when actually, it's societal. Well, it certainly was for me. My exploration around myself began very early because I was so camp and I can say I didn't fit in clearly and definitely. But I actually think that was imposed upon me as a child. So I don't even think it was my intention to feel like I didn't fit in, I think it was chosen for me by my peers. And I think that's the experience for a lot of queer people, [that] they think they've always instinctively known. I'm pretty sure it was imposed upon you. And then you know— because if everyone said, "You're all right, everything's fine," you probably wouldn't have had that 'I feel outside of it' feeling, because, like I say, even one of my earliest memories is being told I'm like a girl. And the whole motif of being told I was like a girl carried on.

Where I first lived, in Blackstock Gardens, which was an old-fashioned tenement, it was OK, I was protected. When we moved away from there, it became a nightmare. The people I was brought up with knew I was like a girl, and they might insult me, but it was friendly, because they knew me from the moment I was born. It sounds like I'm going back about 150 years [laughing] but it's just the 60s, and you could leave your door open, everyone knew who everybody was. I could gleefully go as a 6-year-old even, into anybody's house and I would be given a cup of tea and some toast and I would be part of this familial cycle that existed around this area.

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Then we moved somewhere else, and that's when the hell of 'being like a girl' began. We only moved 15 minutes down the road but outside of that really close communal enclave [where] I was accepted. And suddenly I moved 15 minutes down the road and I wasn't. And I moved into kind of this other school, and it was hell. It was a literal hell all the way, really. It was almost like being slain every day at school, so I chose not to go to school. Because of the family history of death, my mum had become agoraphobic. There were very famous deaths around the area, so she was kind of known as this woman who'd had a lot of tragedy. So I managed to both wangle my way off school, because of my mum's ill health and also just not go in. There was no point in me going in. It got to a point around that time and around that new area we moved into - and again, not all the memories are bad, certainly all the women were great - but the lads. I couldn't speak, because if I spoke, one, it would be a barrage of insults about how I spoke, and two, I could get hit.

I could literally just be smacked in the face for saying hello, or whatever it was, because how I spoke was so out of time and tone with the way they spoke, that it— in effect I kind of lived in a several phases of selective mutism, because at first there was no point in speaking. And [I was] able to speak to a couple of close friends, my nephew was a close friend, and my family.

So it was a very chequered childhood, on some levels a very difficult childhood, but on the plus side, and I stress this, I was an imaginative kid. So —and this is where it gets interesting for me — I wouldn't change a second of it, because me diving into my imagination was possibly far more important than me joining in. It was my ability to fly, to soar inside my head that I think gave me a lot of creativity that I was going to find later on anyway. Or gave me an easier access into that imaginative world of theatre than I would have got if I'd just been a lad, and doing all the lad things. So in a sense, at the time, being ostracised was incredibly painful, gruelling. But with hindsight, I'm glad that I didn't fit in. I'm really, really pleased. I mean, wish you hadn't had that pain, but you know, 'no pain, no gain'. In a strange, peculiar way, I think that's a life rule, as well as just a rule for the gym. [laughs]

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**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah. It's really interesting what you were saying, because in a way, what you're experiencing, it seemed to be more to do with gendered expectations with how you should be, than necessarily sexuality per se.

**PARTICIPANT:** It certainly was. It's really interesting because I was talking to someone about gender fluidity recently, and I was saying, I would never have known if I was gender-fluid as a child or as a young teenager because the language just didn't exist then. I was called 'queer', 'poof' and 'pansy' and all that, but the biggest suggestion was that I was effeminate, or 'like a girl'.

So there was an acknowledgement within the community that I wasn't like a boy, even though it wasn't like in some cultures where you're seen as some sort of elevated god, you were battered down because you were like— it was incredibly misogynist, even from the women. Because being like a girl meant you'd failed. Except with dead hard scally girls who loved you being like a girl because they would protect you. I was protected wholeheartedly by them, if it wasn't for dead hard scally girls, I probably wouldn't be here. because they would stand in front of lads who wanted to beat me and where I come from, girls can fight fellas. It's the way. And I was protected by the women of the community. It was not 100% [men] but largely the men, either [saying], "He's bit, effeminate, him, isn't he?" or they knew possibly more than I did about my gender, even without any intellectualisation of it. because it was often, "He runs like a girl", "He talks like a girl", "He behaves like a girl". And it haunted me as a child, but I get it. It wasn't always 'poof', 'pansy', 'queer'. There was a suggestion [that] there was a sign of gender blur around what I was. And that came from them, not me. It was an understanding by the quite tough, hardened community about— and I think a slightly insightful, even though it might have been painful— of my gender, which I was completely unaware of. And probably in so many ways, still am. But I'm not haunted by that anymore, except that it did happen.

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**INTERVIEWER:** So, you weren't going to school. When you said you went into your imagination and that was quite a formative time in terms of you thinking creatively, I was wondering how that developed. How did that first express itself?

**PARTICIPANT:** When I was very young, I thought I wanted to be an artist, and then I suddenly realised I didn't want to be an artist, I wanted to be an actor. And school was an absolute hellhole, and the very few times I went in, it was always a hellhole. Until one day I discovered a youth theatre in Liverpool called the Everyman Youth Theatre, and I went along, and there's a moment that typifies your world, your life, and the moment that changes your life, it was that.

So suddenly, from being brought up in a war-torn, violent thing, [I was] stepping into this new world of the Everyman Youth Theatre, which was like stepping into my imagination. It was walking into this room and feeling completely underconfident about it, and seeing all this group of imaginative, wonderful, confident, empowered young people, a lot of camp lads, younger than me, a bit older than me, and me going, and me standing, [thinking] "What the hell is this? This crazy thing?" From that to being brought into the most empowering thing, the most beautiful thing that has ever happened to me.

So from being in an environment where even the teachers were hideous, and mocking, to stepping into this other environment where the word 'empowerment' wasn't used, they wouldn't be clumsy enough to use the word, [but] you just joined in. And it was [there] that the magic really happened. And then suddenly finding out within this whirlwind of furiously beautiful creativity that you were good at something. It was the first time in my life, I was 16, that I realised I was good at something; it was acting. I knew I wanted to be it on some level, but suddenly —and the most important thing, I think, was because there were other camp lads, camper than me— my voice was no longer a thing to be ridiculed. In fact, the camper I was, the more accepted I was. And 'revelation' is too tiny a word for the complete overwhelming joyousness of the experience and how it filled you with hope. Not just hope for yourself, but hope for the future of everything. By the time I was 16 in Scotland Road, I was quite possibly suicidal as a teenager. And then one day, that all stopped like *that* [smacks one hand against another] because suddenly, there's this environment that not only embraces you —you didn't have to audition— [it] changes you. And it doesn't change you because it's trying to, it changes you because you are brought into the ethos of the place. And you become it. And that's the moment when everything in my world lit up in a way that never ever happened before or since. And I've lived quite a charmed creative life, but it's never been as intensely beautiful as that. Those first three years with the Everyman Youth Theatre are literally the best moments of my life.

[Break]

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**INTERVIEWER:** Maybe we could talk a little bit about, I don't know if this is jumping forward too much, but you can, if it then, we can come back to stuff, but I was just wondering if when you first heard about this thing called AIDS or GRID or HIV?

**PARTICIPANT:** The great thing about the youth theatre was that it gave me access to gays. And gays took me to gay clubs. And one of the things that I treasure above lots of things is that I entered a gay scene where AIDS wasn't a deal. And it wasn't a deal for about I'd say 2 years. So for 2 years, I lived without any knowledge of HIV or GRID or whatever it was, and then suddenly the magazines, the papers started to report this thing about Americans and it was all, "Oh you don't sleep with an American." We were young, we didn't know much except you didn't sleep with Americans, that was kind of the first inkling, that phrase was probably the first inkling of what it meant to be aware of the impending cataclysm that was going to befall everybody. And because we were in this kind of gay disco bubble, even reading it didn't seem real. And it didn't seem as if it would impose upon anybody within our structures.

Until someone that I knew used to work in a cafe called Food for All, called Colin, and he died. And he was one of the first people to die in England of AIDS. We didn't know it was AIDS then, it's difficult for me to remember the whole bit, but he died of 'it', whatever it was that had come over from America to catch us all with its claws. And it was powerful, his death, because it really did reverberate around the whole thing. Because we thought, naively, that we were immune to this American thing, that was touching London. You know this parochial thing. And from then on, it became, as we became more and more aware of it, I mean that common set really affected Liverpool, semi-queer Liverpool in a way that was profound. because he was such as buoyant, fabulous blonde moustachioed leather queen, he was beautiful.

And we were all, I suppose in a sense, mystified by it, because I don't think we were being hated on then, in the way it would very soon become apparent. We weren't being victimised and targeted in the same— that happened a little bit later, I think, if I'm getting it right. But that's when it dawned on us all in our tiny little gay scene, that was only a small gay scene in Liverpool, although vibrant, that this funny little thing that we'd read about wasn't a funny little thing, it was in our world and it was profound.

We still didn't know what it was, we still weren't frightened of AIDS in that sense, in that way, and I wonder if we ever did become frightened of AIDS, I don't think we ever did, I think we became very aware of it, whether we were frightened of it, I don't know. And that's too big a word, I think we were braver than that as a community. But that's certainly when it impacted first. And then it would impact further and further and further.

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And it would [impact on] my best friend Brian, who I'd met at the Youth Theatre. I'd met him in 1979 and we did absolutely everything together. We moved out of Liverpool at the same time with each other, just friends, not lovers, and we made cabaret acts, theatre companies, blah blah blah. We were two different *objets d'art*

fired in the same kiln. That's kind of what we were. And we were inseparable. And we were kind of known as 'Brian and Gerry'. We weren't just known as Brian or Gerry, we were this one-ness, and when Brian contracted HIV, it was long before the new medicines that were going to happen. That's when it hit, I suppose. This is after years of being an activist, when it hit my best friend, when the absolute horror of it dawned, and that would have been about 1980-something, late 80s.

For me, AIDS is many things, but its most difficult thing for me [is] it's about a friendship memory. Me and Brian had been, from 1979 onwards, these incredibly proactive disco bunnies who were creative and making theatre, blah blah blah, and we had this freedom that I think is possibly not allowed many people. And I'm not bigging us up, we just were. We were colossal in our hedonism, we were known in the city and stuff like that.

And as soon as Brian became HIV, it changed. Everything changed. Even though Brian on the surface was still being this— I knew instinctively the destruction it was causing [was] inside of his head. It killed him, and that was the most devastating [thing], but what it did to our friendship, was in a sense devastating, but more interesting. We were so close, and so knitted and so embedded and wedded to each other, that when HIV happened, it started to— not crumble, we didn't not become friends, but [was] the intricacies of the disease, the intricacies of the infection [that affected us]. I remember he cut himself, [As Brian] "Don't come near me!" and [As himself] "I'm going to get you something to clean up the blood," he went, "Don't!" Now that would have been an unheard-of moment in our friendship and I just said, "Fuck you, there's no way I'm not going to clean up your blood, man, you know there's no way that's going to happen." And it really caused a rift because— I wasn't going to let him think for one second— because I knew you couldn't get it from cleaning up blood— it was the first time he'd ever done anything alien to me, as a friend. We'd argued like cat and dog, don't get me wrong, but those arguments were incredibly organic, lots about friendship, competition, all that shit, but this was something else. And this was distant. And this was alone. And this was isolated, even from me, and I think that hurt the most.

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That little moment hurt the most. Him dying hurt the most, of course it did, but to the journey of his death, after sharing so much and being so involved, that little thing was like a stop in our friendship. That was vivid. Instant. It might have only lasted a few seconds as an incident, but I got it. It opened the door to his isolation, to his fear, to his positioning of me within that and his protection of me which he didn't need to do. because he never had to do it before. We protected each other equally. And it was an overwhelming moment, and that's when I knew.

Strangely, I was of awe [?] [00:26:33] because we'd done plays about HIV previously, and stuff like that, we were really active activisty-type people, but that little moment was when the whole horror of it dawned on me.

And then the next thing was —because Brian moved to London and I moved in with him to look after him— when he was in the Chelsea and Westminster. And I was talking recently about things that you can't forget, and a friend of mine's doing stuff

with refugees, and you can see that has visibly changed him. And I said, "Well, I had one of those moments and it was in the Chelsea and Westminster hospital." You walk into a room full of largely young, and not ailing men, not skinny men, not—this idea that everyone died emaciated is not right. Maybe some did, but certainly some didn't. Brian didn't die emaciated. And I remember walking in and thinking, "Most of these people don't look that ill," and for a few days, just sat talking to this guy, flirting away, thinking, "Ooh, when he gets out of here, I'll go on a date with him." And the next day, he's gone, he's dead. And the length of time Brian stayed, and he stayed there for quite some time, that happened with people who looked healthy and some people were obviously more ailing-looking, but it wasn't just the case. People were dying of things that weren't about being skinny and undernourished, they were dying of other things because so many things was going on.

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And that was the other moment, when you suddenly think, "Right, you're in a battlefield here." This is a warzone. So, you're sat there and you're bonding with all these people and you suddenly think, "I don't know if you're going to be here tomorrow." And often - because Brian was in and out of hospital - they weren't. And you got to see it in a way that you can't unsee. You can't unknow that, you can't un-experience that. And you know that most of them came from the exact same time— some were older obviously—when there was no AIDS, because I remember the bubble of joy when there wasn't AIDS. Where we came from. The dance floors we emerged from. And you think, "God, this is new." You were very aware of it being bizarre, even though you'd grown up for the past eight years or something, but it felt incredibly new, incredibly devastating, and not isolating, strangely. Not for me, maybe for Brian I think it was. Because I found other people who were ready to care and to understand and to be part of this thing. So not isolating, but certainly devastating.

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**INTERVIEWER:** You mentioned that you were an activist in your writing, in your creativity. Could you say more about that and I want to hear about the disco bubble as well, the dancefloors...

**PARTICIPANT:** Well, it's interesting, because I think I was an activist even at school in some bizarre way, even without knowing [laughs] We had to do a spoken English exam and this might be one of the last things I ever did at school. And I come from the really Catholic area, and [went to] a really Catholic school, and I was late for spoken English exam, and the teacher just said, —because normally they discuss it with you, but that didn't happen— they said, "Butler," —because me name wasn't Potter at the time, it was Butler— "what's your subject?" "Satanism." [laughs] And it was! Below a picture, of I think, Pope John Paul, is [me] carping on about the joys of Satanism in school.

So I think it started then and in a sense, it wasn't a wholly politicised activism, I think it was a natural, gay, queer camp activism, it was a reaction against. And as soon as I joined the youth theatre, the whole notion of being queer and being able to not just

be intellectually understanding about something, but [also] you could make theatre about it. You could make cabaret about it, and that's exactly what we did. As soon as I joined the youth theatre we were doing anti-CND [sic], I was on every march that you could ever be, and as soon as me and Brian got skilled as performers, that's what we did. And we didn't go, "Let's be political activists."

We did a thing called The Beige Experience which was a cabaret. And we said, we'll just do that. And everything in The Beige Experience was remarkably queer and politically motivated, perhaps not with a giant 'P', but with a giant 'Q'. Queer, politically motivated, in a way, without us even knowing. And we'd do things like— it's difficult to explain. We'd be Jesus and the criminals on the cross and it was about fancying Jesus while we were all hanging up from those backgrounds, and stuff like that. We just thought that was funny, but it wasn't just funny. It was a natural reaction against all the things that had hurt you. And you knew that the audience which was Liverpool was largely Catholic as well, or largely religious, or was once religious, would have just automatically got that.

And we did theatre. The first play we did with our theatre company, we were doing things before then, but we created a theatre company called Sex and Violence Theatre, [and] the first show we did was a play called Judy Garland, which was about this queen who by deed poll changes his name to Judy Garland because of his love for Judy Garland. And it was my life. I just literally wrote my life and put that thing in it. And I didn't think for one second that I would write a play that would be remembered or that would have any queer relevance, it was just natural, and it's still remembered now to this day as a very important piece of work within— Homotopia, the people they say what we were doing then was the seeds of Homotopia, which is a beautiful compliment. And it comes from that time when we were just— queer now, you can go online and type in 'queer' or you can go to a university and learn how to be queer. I always think that we were being passed the baton from the 70s because we came out in 1980. And we were passed the baton by the underground 70s to take that baton into the burgeoning 80s and I think that's what we did, we ran with that baton.

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The gorgeous underground 70s and all its disco glory gave us this beautiful generous push and we took it and ran. And I think that's exactly what we did. So it wasn't as if we acquired queer, like you were taught, it was osmosis. Camp osmosis. And we just fed into it, and it was that feeding ground that allowed us to create and make— without us knowing, this is the thing. We didn't think for one second we would be queer pioneers, we didn't know that. We didn't set out to do that. [Laughing] We just wanted really big parts in plays. [laughs]. And that's what happened.

[00:35:07]

**INTERVIEWER:** What were some of the venues and spaces and areas that you remember where you were going to, doing stuff?

**PARTICIPANT:** Well the first club I ever went to was called The Masquerade. It's a very important club, the old Masquerade. There's a new Masquerade now, that's not

what it was. Although it was a gay bar, a gay club, it was full of incredibly interesting bohemians, theatricals, so the people who worked in the theatres, people who make film, whatever it was, artists, you know. It was the first time I'd ever met a trans man, and that was in 1980—you know, and stuff like that. It was like the cantina from Star Wars, it was really, really dark. So you'd have taxi drivers and just-released murderers from jail, literally, this was the thing, this is what went on. Drag queens, prostitutes, the whole gamut were in there.

And have you ever heard of Ken Campbell? He's a great theatre director. He brought this thing called The Warp, it was at the Everyman, and all these incredibly bohemian London actors would all descend on it. So being in that club was a breeding ground for absolutely —not just [for] me and Brian— but so much other stuff, it was just like being inside some giant bohemian cauldron, bubbling away, basically.

And so from The Everyman to there to the Unity Theatre, which was still very much a very small theatre [to] I can't remember the place, we actually made a place a theatre because it had been a theatre, can't remember what it's called now, but when we put 'Judy Garland' on there, we put it on the map as a theatre. By accident. Everything was by accident, a glorious camp accident. When we were Sex and Violence, it was really interesting, it wouldn't happen now, but it's because we were embedded within the kind of bohemian structure of it, and me, Brian, Mickey Poppins, Maria Barrett, Lyn Kelly, we were given keys to rehearsal rooms, like The Playhouse rehearsal room. You know, "Do you want to rehearse there? Here you are, here's the keys."

And we'd go and rehearse in The Playhouse rehearsal rooms without any questions asked. Again, we didn't know, we were that embedded within the framework, we just thought people were being nice. They *were* being nice, but they also wanted us to continue to create work, so they just gave us keys to Everyman rehearsal rooms, Playhouse rehearsal rooms, and sometimes we'd nick the keys and just go and rehearse in there [laughs].

You know, but there was a knowledge in and around not just gay community, queer community, but [also the] theatrical creator community that we were doing these things and we were all right. When I think back on it, we were given, almost free reign. We were given keys to the creative city, if you like, of Liverpool. And it wasn't just us that created it, it was also people around us that egged us on. Again, they were empowering without using the word 'empowerment'. No-one was being this sort of Christ-like figure and enabling, it was very of Liverpool, of the time, it was that kind of city. You can do that. So there from The Bluecoat were Jayne Casey from— Big in Japan was then running The Bluecoat, and she really embraced us and we did a Christmas pantomime called Goosed.

Just whatever it was, I always say this about the counter-cultures largely, the counter-culture I knew has largely disappeared. But me and Brian could literally fall back with complete trust and know the counter-culture would catch us. We just knew it. It was that intensely proactive. But saying that, we were good at what we did, but it was still that. There were people who weren't good at what they were doing, they were still doing that. It was also about a counter-culture which was really fed by

queer experience and activity and confidence. It was much more than queer, queers were a massive part of the assemblance [sic] of that counter-culture, and you felt, not in a cocky way, you knew, you knew you were part of something, you knew were part of something intensely organic, and intensely creative and as breeding ground, a training ground, you know, again, I wouldn't have changed it for anything. It was the only way I would have wanted to have evolved.

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**INTERVIEWER:** Could you say a little bit more about, so you were in London, you'd moved into London, what happened then?

**PARTICIPANT:** Well it's interesting because by the time Brian was ill, well, before he was ill, I'd become a real second Summer of Love queer rave baby. I have [exhales] a profound respect for London, in many ways, but this is my major [reason why]: I'd been going to a club called Trade, which was a real hardcore techno rave thing, and I was very aware of it. I was an actor, of course, I was aware of it, but it's not until you live there, –and I lived there for three years– that you suddenly realise the community of there wasn't just about people taking care of each other in hospitals or door-to-door, or being buddies, stuff like that. The communities happened in the discos, the care for people with HIV happened in discos. You talk freely on drugs, so I met lots of people who were HIV, I know lots of people who were ill, and I met lots of people who were dying, and were still going out to dance.

And as a notion, that moved me in a way that very few things ever have, inasmuch as no-one was being told that they were being a caring person, it just existed. And so, if someone, and it didn't happen very often, took bad or was having a time, they were immediately looked after. And people were, how do you say this, we were all off our heads, but people were danced with differently. There was a suggestion at that time. You didn't know whether, because like I said before, people with AIDS weren't all emaciated, and I'd known that by then, that you could be dancing with someone who wouldn't be there, and sometimes they wouldn't be there [not long after that].

I'm an atheist, I'm not spiritual in any way, but it was a very human, spiritual response, which I think is the absolute ethos of queer, the absolute heartbeat of understanding of what we are, and what we were, and again by osmosis, no-one was being told, no-one was being empowered, no-one was being taught how to be a carer, this thing, whatever it was, and it was a maelstrom, and also fuelled by an awful lot of drugs, so it wasn't just going into a hospital ward, you were completely inflamed on every conceivable– you were hyper-you, hyper-real, hyper-everything. And I think I witnessed the best of what we were in those rave times. It happened here [too], but the intensity of what happened in London, all those raving communities, especially the big raving community of Trade, which was massive, [meant that we] knew that a lot of these people might not be here, maybe next week, but certainly within the few weeks or the months coming. There was a real cohesive, shared, almost psychic knowledge, that there was something immense, emotionally immense going on. Don't get me wrong, London's a beautiful city, but it isn't its architecture, or it isn't its politics, it's *that*. It's that queer thing that is in a sense

almost untouchable, because it wasn't spoken about. It wasn't spoken of, it just happened.

[00:44:40]

**INTERVIEWER:** What do you remember of the broader media coverage, or political context at the time?

**PARTICIPANT:** Well I've spoken about this before on film, but I have to say it. For me, the whole nightmare of AIDS, was it was overwhelming anyway. And I remember the talking about bringing Clause 28 into the— and it happening. And for me, Clause 28 was in a way the worst of my experiences around the whole AIDS thing. Because me and Brian were politically motivated, and [because] Brian was probably more aware of its impact than maybe some other people, it really mentally affected him, it really hurt him. In a way that was just so difficult to handle. Because AIDS doesn't break you down physically, AIDS breaks you down mentally. It's as deteriorating in here and in here as it is here. And that's certainly what happened to Brian. We would be up, night after night, and me trying to calm Brian down, because he couldn't understand and I couldn't understand why a government could do this to our people at this time.

I even remember one night when it was very difficult to calm us both down, but certainly [for] me [to] calm Brian down, because that was my job. It was only a tiny little room, but I remember it felt like a desert of absolute isolation for us both, in the sense of, "What is fucking happening to this country and to us? And what are they doing to us, and why are they doing it?" And if you've ever had to bring someone out of something, it's incredibly difficult when you're in there too. Because it wasn't just Brian's dilemma, it was mine. As a gay man, first and foremost, as someone who was looking after somebody who was dying a debilitating death. Brian wasn't wrong to feel isolated and hurt, and wounded and raging about Clause 28, but I somehow had to try and get him away from that, knowing he wasn't wrong, so he could live another day. But Clause 28 impacted on all these things, but it impacted on the mental health of gay men in a way that we don't talk about. Because we don't like to be political now because Cameron gave us gay marriage. You know what I mean?

They didn't just re-enact a moment that didn't have to be re-enacted, they destroyed a lot of people's heads, they destroyed my friend's head. My best friend's head. And I've said this before, I will never forgive them, I'm not going to forgive them for lots of things, but I will never forgive them for that. It was beyond punitive, because it was something that wasn't seen. Everyone was fighting, you know, [saying] "It's about schools", "It's about this". No, it wasn't just about schools, it was about a very intricate sense of our identity, our identity, mine and his even, that was being decimated by this horrific piece of legislation.

So within all of that, it's Clause 28 which is the kind of, well, the icing on the gay, you know what I mean, it was the gunpowder on the keg. That was what got me. Because it was doing things to us a community that was not being spoken about. And still isn't, because, you know, we've got that nice lesbian who's a Scottish Tory now, it's all lovely now, apparently. But those people are still there, they're still in that party. And the people who've changed their allegiances haven't changed their

allegiances I don't think, because they've suddenly seen the light. They've changed because we as a community we as a collective had made them change their minds. Even when our people were dying, we were still powerful enough to fight back, to lobby.

And it wasn't Cameron coming to his beautiful senses, that was decades of queer lobbying, that, that we can get married. And marriage isn't my big whoop, if you want to get married, get married, it's not for me. But this suggestion, that somehow, they've suddenly found their way into being kind, beautiful people I do not accept, because those bastards did that to us, and they did it when they knew we were on our knees. It's literally unforgivable, what they did. And if you need any more knowledge, to not vote for them, then that's it.

[Break]

[00:50:37]

**INTERVIEWER:** So, could you maybe take us into the 90s, the response to Section, Clause 28? Were you here in Manchester when the march happened?

**PARTICIPANT:** I was away when the march happened, but I was around it when it was building up and after that.

[00:51:01]

**INTERVIEWER:** Just say a little bit about the response both to that piece of legislation, but broadly as well, to the epidemic and your sense of that.

**PARTICIPANT:** The Manchester march I think was incredibly important on [sighs] a billion levels, but I think what it did—hopefully to the world media, but certainly to the British media—was it showed this deluge, and it wasn't just a tidal wave of people, it was a tidal wave of emotion, and within that tidal wave there would have been people like me, who had gone through very similar things, but not everyone in that tidal wave was going through the same thing. It was just this enormous response. And it can't be underestimated how empowering to the nation that that was. I remember things definitely changing in a—things had been incredibly dark for a very long time, even though we kept dancing, maybe that's the queer thing I love more than anything else, but it had been incredibly dark. There had been tremendous amounts of loss and it wasn't— This was long before medical breakthroughs. The bit that gave me and mine a collective sense of hope and fight—we were always going to fight—but it was that day in Manchester. We thought, "Oh my God!" I'm getting goose bumps, the hairs on the back of my neck going up now! [laughing] It was, "We're fucking everywhere!" You know, we're just absolutely, and we're not just everywhere in the sense that, it wasn't just about an *en masse* thing, I keep saying the word 'osmosis' but there was just a sense that, that march connected every, I think almost every gay, —maybe not [every gay], because believe it or not, there were Tory-voting gays then—but almost every gay who could be touched by it was.

And it was an incredibly intellectual thing to do, but again, it was humanly spiritual in its reach and how it did that thing. And it actually really buoyed everybody up, I

mean, it certainly buoyed me up. I mean I was going through hell then, we all were, not just me, but lots of us were. And that sort of softened the flames of hell, you know, for some time. And not only that, there was such this show of support, you could, you went out to your clubs thinking, "You could have been on that march, you could have been on that march, you could have been on that march, and if you weren't, you still could have been on that march."

It kind of reenergised the sense of what the very community-oriented scene was about. It literally looked like a giant —I mean Manchester and rave were synonymous— but it really looked like a giant rave of hope, that's exactly how it felt, and I was probably on E watching it, but it was a real moment of looking at us and going, "Right, we're spectacular," that's kind of what it felt like. It felt like we were spectacular, and we were. because everything that was being thrown at us at that time, would floor a beginner, you know, and we crashed on, pioneered through.

[00:55:10]

**INTERVIEWER:** Maybe bringing us a bit further on, I was just wondering if you could reflect back a bit on where we've come since then, and part of that might be about talking about work for example, your poetry, your performance, how that's kind of moved on, but also how you feel politically, emotionally, psychologically.

**PARTICIPANT:** I think we've moved on remarkably, and we're here doing this [interview] and this is incredibly important, and I'm very proud of us as a group. My only problem with now, and it's something which I'm increasingly niggled by, is that I don't know whether I want to be brought into the straight world. I don't know whether that's the world for me. I don't want to be equal in that sense, because after what I've been through, I'd be more than equal to the society that lambasted and damaged and wanted to damage.

Now I know that isn't the whole of straight society, but doesn't that mean the straight society is immensely flawed? So why do I want to align myself with something which is profoundly flawed, even though within that society there are great and wonderful people, and I know, some of my best friends are straight, blah blah blah. "So why do I want to be equal to that?" is the question I ask myself, and I don't want to be equal to that. I don't want to be on that level. Because your society did its best to wipe me and mine out, at one point, and you even brought in a law that was determined to do that, to poison kids' heads against us.

And so whilst I look at the great leaps forward, like I say, marriage isn't my big whoop, but it is a great leap forward if that's what you want, personally, I'm not that keen to join in. I, as a profoundly able outsider, I'm not a disabled outsider, I'm an able outsider, I can see where it might take us. So for example, and I'll say it, a growing number of gay people are now voting Tory. I can't see how that's possible, personally. And if that's about joining in and becoming equal, then I'm not best pleased with that. It's something I'm displeased about, it's something I don't like.

So for example, I've been talking to gay people about cruising and cottaging, and they're starting to be incredibly disparaging about it. And I'm thinking, "Wait a minute 'ere, babe! You can't be disparaging about this thing! This thing is an absolute

integral part of our histories and where we come from." And also, I mean, really disparaging, like a straight bigot might be disparaging. And I'm saying, "There are still people in the closet who need that moment. There are still people who are gay who know there are people in the closet who want to have sex with people in closets, in toilets, blah blah blah. The myriad of complications and freedoms that surround cottaging and cruising, you're anti [-cruising and -cottaging]?" And you have to ask why that is. And that's because if we're going to be force-fed heteronormativity normative-ness as our way forward, then that's part of it. Whether we like it or not. Not all of them, but the basic of it.

[00:59:37]

And the other phrase I hate is 'family-friendly'. I loathe it with every fibre of my being. And I'll tell you why. Whilst I understand it has to exist because we are developing families, we cannot underestimate historically how families have been unfriendly to us and how they still are within certain cultures, within certain parts of, you know, whatever culture a gay, a queer person an LGBT+ person may come from. They may be coming from incredibly unfriendly families, so to lumber that, intellectually, to give me the words 'family-friendly', I react badly to that because I'm from a place where families were incredibly unfriendly to me and mine. Even mine, who even was kind of friendly was sometimes unfriendly.

So to sort of develop it as a kind of, a queer notion, I think sometimes we have to intellectually put on the brakes. Because we have to go, "Wait a calm [01:00:45] [?] minute here, what does this actually mean? And what are you actually asking me to be? And what are you telling me is good for me?" When I'm telling you now, it wasn't. If you're going to be disparaging about queer behaviour, secretive, queer behaviour, God, why are you doing that? So whilst I embrace, you cannot hold back anything, life is like a giant meme, it just rolls over you. You know, it just gives you everything, so you can't hold it back, but you can question it and you can suggest to it, it's not wholly right.

And I don't think, where we are, queer-wise, is wholly right. Particularly for people like myself, who enjoy being really queer, not going-to-college-and-learning queer, really I'm from-the-gutter queer, and who understand, not only the isolation of being an outsider, but the empowerment of being an outsider. And when you are on the outside, and if you can take that position, certainly from my perspective, and I will stay it 'til the day I die, you can see what the inside's doing. If you suddenly say, "I'm inside now," you're blocking yourself off to an awful lot of stuff. You might one day say, "Well I don't really agree with cottaging, I think it should stop," and you might be gay and you might be taking it up the arse that night, do you know what I mean? That's, that's where I find it difficult to balance.

[01:02:38]

**INTERVIEWER:** OK. We're kind of out of time, but is there anything that you'd like to add that we haven't covered? I mean, we haven't covered a lot of stuff, we have covered quite a lot as well. Is there anything else you definitely want to say?

**PARTICIPANT:** I want to say something about slamming actually. I'm very aware that there's a real concern around slamming. I do understand why it is because we must be a concerned for each other, but there's a kind of almost, and it's about this thing I was saying before, you know, about becoming in the middle, operating from a normative position. I completely understand slamming, I completely understand why it exists. If we're having a decimation of our queer areas —and we are — certainly London is, we have to remember though, our history isn't old.

If we come from a normative position about anything, we say "We're confident queers now and we don't do that," or, and I sometimes think that's the suggestion, that's being— we're forgetting that our history is really young. We are from an incredibly politicised hedonistic history, which is only a tap away on a computer, so I don't know if you're 14, 15 and you type in 'queer', you're going to see this kind of New York queer scene burgeoning and you're going to want a bit of that. Of course you're going to want a bit of it. And suddenly, what we have now with our app culture is that you have to box yourself into this little piece of thing, so you can't be this vibrant thing, all costumed up and dancing in a disco, you have to be this thing with very few words to describe you. And then within that slamming thing, I'm pretty sure someone's got some music, and you're on drugs, I would say that's not that different to being in Studio 54 and getting off your head, and having sex in a toilet on loads of drugs.

I don't think there's a real differential between our hedonistic, our powerfully hedonistic, visually entrancing history, to this little partying of taking drugs. I think that they're actually sort of little cubes of Studio 54. And I think that's really understandable. I don't think we should have any— I think we should be concerned if it means that people have, you know, diseases have always been passed on, but if that's happening, then we have to be very, we have to be very aware of that.

But there's a kind of suggestion where— I've been to meetings where they [say], "I don't understand why this is happening, after all we've done." Well I'll tell you why! Because it's inherent within our history. Our recent history, you can't erase it and go, "Let's start from now, now we're normative." You can't do that, because a young gay is going to be sat in a pub and he's going to hear some ravers talking about how fabulous it was in the 90s, and how it was like *this*. You can't erase all that. So I completely understand why the whole slamming culture exists because it's like just little cubes of the hedonism we've historically had, from probably the late 60s, certainly in America, onwards. And you can't not see that history, it's there. And I think we have to be a little bit more understanding of ourselves, as a recently historically evolved thing, because we're only young. We're a very young movement. I'm pretty sure gays have existed, I mean, we know they have, and we know they've been accepted in other areas in a beautiful way. But we are young. And to behave like we know everything in a way that can benefit, I don't think is sometimes terribly helpful.

**[01:06:52] End of transcript.**