

Ann-Christine Simke and Catriona Fallow

Leading the Way: Stellar Quines and Intersectional Feminist Working Practices

[TITLE SLIDE] Preamble

Hello, I am Dr Ann-Christine Simke and (CF) I am Dr Catriona Fallow and we are both Lecturers in the Performance Programme at the University of the West of Scotland.

[ACS] We would like to start by setting the scene¹:

[SLIDE 1] The stage is dark. There is a mechanical surging sound, like an aural zooming in – calling the audience to attention. A black, female presenting performer starts walking slowly around the perimeter of the stage while a recorded male voice with an American accent relates the following information to the audience:

“On August 9th, Mike Brown was shot and killed by police officer Darren Wilson. Within minutes, various accounts of the incident began appearing on social media. Accounts filled with speculation and little if any solid, accurate information. Almost immediately, neighbours began gathering and anger began growing because of various descriptions of what had happened and because of the underlying tensions between the police department and a significant part of the neighbourhood.”

The performer comes to a stand with her back turned towards the audience. She watches the images projected onto the back wall of the stage. Footage of news reports of African-American protestors and US state troopers, culminating in the image of the raised black fist that has come to be known as the symbol of the Black Lives Matter movement. A recorded male American voice asks provocatively: **“Is Black Lives Matter a hate group?”**

The image dissolves into black and white archival footage of the 20th century civil rights movement while a historical audio recording of an American news report claims: **“The Black Panthers are recruiting criminals and hoodlums and are encouraging them to engage in a broad range of terrorist activities.”** Accompanied by photographs on the screen, a historic recording of a female voice introduces herself as Assata Shakur “born and raised in the United States”. The civil rights anthem “Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round” starts playing while historical news reports present the Black Liberation Army activist Assata Shakur as a dangerous woman and terrorist. Meanwhile, a second performer makes her way

¹ Performance description of: *Through the Mud*. Directed by: Caitlin Skinner, Lyceum Theatre Edinburgh. Premiere: 2 November 2023, attended performance: 17 September 2024.

slowly around the perimeter of the performance space and comes to stand next to her fellow performer. The last lines of the song fade out: “Keep on Walking, keep on talking, marching up to freedomland.” The performers turn around to face the audience.

This prologue to the performance “Through the Mud” is just about 2 minutes long and situates the performance firmly within the context of the historical and contemporary US American Civil Rights movement. The performance builds on this to interweave the story of a Black Gen-Z student and her journey to join the 21st century Black Lives Matter movement with the historical case of the Black Liberation Army revolutionary Assata Shakur. Carried by the two Black female leads, the production makes the case for the urgent need to stand up for and join Civil Rights Movements in the face of ongoing racial injustice.

Despite this decidedly American context however, we are in a theatre in Edinburgh, watching a production by the Scottish intersectional theatre company Stellar Quines as part of the Made in Scotland Showcase at the Festival Fringe 2024.

Brief SQ Intro

[SLIDE 2] Stellar Quines was founded in 1993 by theatre practitioner Gerda Stevenson as a company that explicitly addressed the lack of opportunities for women in the theatre sector. According to Stevenson: “One aspect of being female is that, unless you’re careful, you can become invisible. I founded Stellar Quines Theatre Company in 1993, because I felt that Scotland’s female theatre practitioners - particularly women of around 35 and over - were prone to this fate.” (https://www.gerdastevenson.co.uk/directing_stellarquines.htm). Over the last 30 years, Stellar Quines has developed from a company focused on creating opportunities for women in the Scottish theatre industry by nurturing new playwriting and representation of women in all areas of production to an intersectional feminist theatre company that would go on to broaden its remit to include diversity issues, and finally sharpen its focus to an explicitly activist and community-led programming, advocating and working towards intersectional social justice for people of marginalised genders.

We would like to ask today how Stellar Quines’ commitment to intersectional feminism currently manifests in their working practice and institutional infrastructure as they prepare to embark on a new era of development, and why these working practices could “lead the way” in a changing Scottish and, indeed, British theatre and cultural sector. Or, to borrow a phrase from yesterday’s Keynote from Caroline: how we might focus on *action over talk*.

Since 2021, Stellar Quines has been sharpening their mission statement and overall identity as a company and institution from a generalised attention to diversity and equality to an explicitly intersectional feminist approach with a focus on the feminist of colour roots of this

framework. [SLIDE 3] Speaking to the difference between diversity and intersectionality, in *On Being Included* (2012), Sara Ahmed warns:

“If diversity is a way of viewing or even picturing an institution, then it might allow only some things to come into view. Diversity is often used as a shorthand for inclusion, as the ‘happy point’ of intersectionality, a point where lines meet. When intersectionality becomes a ‘happy point’, the feminist of color critique is obscured. All differences matter under this view.” (p. 14)

It seems that heeding this warning, Stellar Quines has emphasised increasing POC representation in their programming as evidenced by our opening example as well as other collaborations and projects that put POC artists and stories at the centre. However, and this is crucial, it is clear that in significant areas of their infrastructure, Stellar Quines is also changing their company working practices and company make-up as well so that these ideological commitments tangibly manifest in their working praxis. We’re using the term praxis here deliberately in the sense that we see these changes as an example of the company putting theories or understandings *into practice*. As Cultural Studies researcher Anamik Saha states for the Cultural Industries:

“(…) representations of race and ethnicity are shaped by the commercial rationales of industrial production. Therefore, understanding and intervening in the politics of representation must pay due attention to production and industrial context in which symbolic goods are made.” (p. 18)

This is why, in this paper, we are interested more in examining and presenting on Stellar Quines’ working praxis than in analysing their artistic output. Although, as performance scholars, we do love focussing in on the performative event itself - as you might have been able to tell from our intro.

Stellar Quines is currently run by a *white* woman, their CEO Caitlin Skinner who has been in post since 2021. Her way of fulfilling the company’s intersectional mission is to actively decentre the company away from her sole authorship and curation. She does this amongst other things by working together with the board of directors to increase the POC representation as well as anti-racist competence on the board, by emphasising co-creation in her directorial work and by developing programming circles that influence the company’s artistic commissioning and programme. In recent years, the company has also foregrounded their research and activism into intersectional feminist issues, with their intersectional attention encompassing their youth work and community outreach work. And my colleague Cat will talk a little more about that.

[CF] As Ann-Christine has signalled, Stellar Quines is about to undergo several radical changes to its location, structure, working practices, and programming; ‘radical’ in the sense of being both drastic and in the political sense of underscoring the company’s core ideologies. These changes also reflect the company’s understanding of intersectionality as speaking not only to gender and race, but other identity markers like age and class. Drawing again on the work of Sara Ahmed, I want to briefly highlight some of these key changes as noted in the company’s 2025-2028 Business Plan to reflect on what they are choosing to ‘commit’ themselves to and how this is being enacted.

(Re)Location

[SLIDE 4] First and foremost is the decision to relocate from the company’s long-term base in Scotland’s capital metropolitan centre, Edinburgh, to Kirkcaldy, Fife]. The socio-demographics and attendant markers like access to cultural activities between the two areas is marked and something that Stellar Quine has been attuned to for some time. In 2021, the company initiated *Young Quines*, a theatre and drama group for young women aged 12-19. As noted in their Business Plan:

‘To further our **commitment** to this initiative [Young Quines] and to the young people, the company will move our office from the city centre of Edinburgh to Kirkcaldy, where our ongoing presence will signify **commitment** to developing this collaboration with Young Quines and other communities in the Kirkcaldy area. This work will become central to all activity, subverting the traditional notion that engagement work should be a separate and supporting area to the professional programme.’ (p. 6).

In her exploration of what she terms ‘diversity work’ in Higher Education Institutions Ahmed proposes that statements of commitment – in Ahmed’s case, specifically concerning EDI – are “non-performatives’ in the sense that they often do not bring about the effects they name’ (p. 17). [SLIDE 5] She continues:

‘To make a commitment is to pledge to do something. Commitment used in this way would be close to its etymological root as a “sending out.” We also use the term “commitment” to refer to a state of being bound to a course of action or to another person or persons. [...] Statements of commitment are sent out and are institutional means of sending commitment out. But an institutional commitment would also refer to something more substantial: what an institution is behind or gets behind.’ (p. 114)

What is clear from scrutinising the company's plans for the coming three-year planning cycle is that they are preparing to *action* these commitments, thereby binding to and abiding by their core principles. The physical relocation of their centre of operations is core to this.

(Re)structuring and Working Practices

Throughout the business plan, the move to collectivism and community – both in the sense of engaging targeted community groups in Kirkcaldy and across Scotland, but also 'communal' in the sense of a coming together – at an organisational, infrastructural level is also clear. For example, as well as prompting the company's relocation to Kirkcaldy, it appears that *Young Quines* will also become core to some of the operational structures of Stellar Quines, who have committed to 'centre young people throughout the organisation so that their artistry, experience and opinions are celebrated and prioritised and shape the work of the company' (p. 9). What is striking here is that this is by no means a 'rebranding' of the company as a youth theatre company; rather, that young people will be given a 'seat at the table' to shape the practices of the organisation for all its activities.

Following on from Ann-Christine's observations about current Artistic Director and CEO Caitlin Skinner's long-standing commitment to avoiding a 'top down' model of sole authorship and curation there are several new initiatives that are designed to democratise decision making and enhance lateral practices of skill-sharing. For example, the introduction of 'Practice Jams', where '[p]ractitioners working on engagement projects will come together for monthly Practice Jam sessions to share and develop skills, expertise and have space to explore topics such as safeguarding, access, anti-racism etc.' (p. 16).

These initiatives clearly aspire to be anti-hierarchical, or in some cases directly inverting traditional hierarchical or pedagogical models and value structures around how knowledge is shared and who is 'authorised' or given space to share it. And again, to borrow from Caroline's Keynote, they create the conditions for "radical transparency".

Programming

As the above examples suggest, Stellar Quines advocates for an audience-centred, artist-led approach in their programming. They describe how,

'Our approach to programming means that we place priority audiences at the heart of our decision-making, informing the ways we make choices about what to programme. We seek to develop our activities in dialogue with artists,

participants and show audiences, so they are relevant and in line with their needs and ambitions as we work together for gender justice' (p. 19)

This involves engaging their priority audiences and collaborators in different kinds of programming initiatives, such as 'Programming Circles' (note the collective 'circle' rather than a unidirectional linear structure) where a group of people who represent the variety of communities and priority groups Stellar Quines connects with are invited to review potential commissioning and programming; or the ongoing practice of 'Quines Cuppas', an open opportunity for practitioners (deliberately framed as informal, 'low stakes' and person-to-person) to meet with Skinner and reflect on current practice and projects.

'Co-Creation' with other organisations is also key and is evident from the forthcoming 2025-28 seasons that will see the company formally collaborate with other Scottish and UK arts organisations such as the Royal Lyceum Theatre and Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, Dundee Rep, Glasgow Citizens Theatre, Northern Stage, and Fuel, as well as other non-arts orgs like Civic Digits, or non-UK organisations such as MPower (based Germany). In this way, despite its geographical relocation, Stellar Quines remains very much 'plugged in' to Scotland's wider theatre and performance ecology.

Look Ahead / Leading the Way

[CF] We began with a brief snapshot of Stellar Quines' recent show that - while explicit in its engagement with questions of racial and gender justice globally and historically - left us wondering what such a show might look like if it were to engage as fiercely and directly with these issues in contemporary Scotland. Happily, it seems we will not have to wait too long to find out. The company's forthcoming 2025-26 season will include a new play by Hannah Lavery, *For Us Girls*, that 'explores intergenerational experiences of women of colour living in Scotland' and 'the intersections between race, class and gender in our nation' (p. 12) produced in collaboration with Royal Lyceum Theatre with a creative, production and performing team of majority women of colour based in Scotland.

[ACS] Beyond the shows themselves, in this paper we've shown how the company's core commitments are set to be even more tangibly reflected in their working praxis going forward. Ahmed urges us to 'think about and through the points at which power relations meet. [...] A concern with meeting points requires that we attend to the experiential: how we experience one category depends on how we inhabit others' (p. 14). Beyond this, and linking back to Anamik Saha's cultural materialist position, our ongoing concern is about the material conditions and relations that shape those experiences, or, **[SLIDE 6]** as Stellar Quines puts it far more poignantly in their Business Plan:

“Creating realistic conditions for feminist theatre practice helps to model equity in a radical way.” (p. 18)

References:

Ahmed, Sara (2012). *On Being Included*. Duke University Press.

Saha, Anamik (2017). *Race and the Cultural Industries*. Polity.

Stellar Quines (2024). Business Plan 2025-28.

Through the Mud. Directed by: Caitlin Skinner, Lyceum Theatre Edinburgh. Premiere: 2 November 2023, attended performance: 17 September 2024.