

This is 54 this is what we can do

Joanna Donnelly wants to use
her Dancing With The Stars
experience to show women
that age doesn't matter and
we have our power still

REPORT: MAEVE QUIGLEY PICTURES: TOM HONAN

Contestants will tell you that being on Dancing With The Stars is like a whirlwind of sequins and glitter so it's right that Ireland's favourite weather woman Joanna Donnelly will be swirling across the floor this year, turning up the temperature for viewers at home.

Today though, she's as far away from sequins as she can get – rushing into Dublin's Gibson Hotel between rehearsals in a fleece and leggings, a whirlwind of a different kind. The 54-year-old mother-of-three is wondering why she's put

herself in the position of balancing work, being a mum and four or more hours of daily rehearsals before appearing live on television.

'Before this, if someone had asked me if I could dance I would have said yes,' Joanna says, laughing. 'But I was wrong! There are 11 of us and five are 25 or 26. Those are the five that I would consider the kids – they have no problem and two of them are Olympians.'

'Me and [chef] Kevin Dundon keep looking at each other going, "have you broken anything yet?" I nearly broke my neck just turning over in bed this morning – that's where we are at.'

But the reason Joanna is putting

herself through this is that her late mother Marie was always a huge fan of ballroom dancing, and Strictly and Dancing With The Stars were always something the pair of them loved watching together.

'My mum was a huge fan and we have been following ballroom dancing all my life,' says Joanna. 'Me and mum, that was our thing. I was asked to do Dancing With The Stars years ago and it didn't work out but we got tickets for the live show and we loved it. So this has been something that I thought I would love to do forever.'

After being asked the first time, Joanna had hoped she might be asked again but the years passed.

Her daughter Nicci said Joanna would be the 'old woman' if she did the show and when it came around again she had to ask her children.

'I have teenagers,' she says. 'My 15-year-old initially said no way because he would have to face his friends in school. Then he came back and said never mind, of course do it.'

'I thought I would love it and I do, but it is really, really hard. Even though I knew it would be demanding and I knew it was going to be physically hard work, it is the mental capacity that is tough. Every time I am learning something new, something old falls out. Pretty soon I won't know my kids' names!'

Rehearsals are tough going →

COVER STORY

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JOANNA WITH
HER DANCING
PARTNER
MACIEJ ZIEBA

and there is all the balancing that women do in between too. 'The first week we did four hours two or three times and then I did the five hours and I couldn't do it,' Joanna says, exasperated.

'After four and a half hours I absolutely just could not take any more. It's not the physical side of things because physically I am quite fit, it is the mental challenge of remembering every step, and every toe point and every movement as they have to be the right one. Every position is precise – hold your bum,

point your toe, lift your arm and push your hip – you aren't going up, just the hip. So the mental challenge has been a lot.'

At home in Partnarmock with husband Harm – also a weather forecaster – and her three children, Nicci, 21, Casper, 15 and 17-year-old Tobias, Joanna has been falling into bed exhausted after a hard day's rehearsal.

'Harm has been great, very supportive,' she says. 'I have been trying to uphold my end of the bargain in the house, sort Christmas,

mind the kids and so on, and still work but it is a huge challenge with the physicality of it. I am wiped out at the end of the day.'

But she's not nervous at all about tomorrow night and her first steps on the dancefloor in front of thousands at home.

'I preach this – because I go into schools and talk to kids about maths, science and meteorology,' Joanna says. 'People ask all the time if I am nervous about going on TV and doing the weather – but my answer is no because the way to not be

nervous is to know that you've done your best. Work as hard as you can to deliver the best that you can do and if you do that, then that's all you can do.'

'So I don't get nervous. I'm not nervous of the camera or the people. The only thing I am nervous of is doing myself a serious injury,' she says, laughing again.

As you might have guessed, Joanna is exactly the kind of woman that you'd love to have a night out with. She's full of fun and doesn't take herself too seriously; she keeps fit but also likes a glass of wine or two and enjoys dancing on a night out – well, she did before this.

She has also written two books so far and there's another one on the boil, this time a work of fiction that's based on her own life. She grew up in Finglas in the poverty of the 1970s and 1980s, with her mum raising herself and her siblings.

'The book is my story but it is a bit complicated so I split my life story up

'I GREW UP IN THE 1970s AND 80s AND WE WERE VERY, VERY POOR'

and gave parts of it to different characters in the book,' she says. 'If I wrote my life story for one character I think people would read it and say that's a bit far-fetched, so they have all been given a part of what I have been through. I have fictionalised my life.'

'I grew up in Finglas in the 1970s and 1980s and it was a very hard time – we were very, very poor. If you look back at Ireland at that time, it is unrecognisable from the one we know today. My father died when I was a baby so my mum had the four of us. Her mum had actually died very young so my mum was the matriarch of her family as well, so we had a lot of uncles and aunts coming and going.'

'It was a busy house and we didn't have a lot of money because nobody had a lot of money. There were the challenges of drugs and the impact that had on our family too, so it wasn't easy.'

Nevertheless Joanna excelled →



GANNI GOLD
BROCADE BOW
DRESS, €345,
BROWN THOMAS

at school and became the first of her family to get a university degree – in maths.

'The day of my graduation, there were a lot of tears,' she says. 'One of their family had gotten through that barrier, the glass ceiling and the barrier that is generational poverty and generational unemployment that permeates through large swathes of society.'

'What's that phrase, you need to see it to be it so to have the first person going to university and taking up a professional occupation, it is very important not just for the person who is first but for the whole family and the generations to come as well.'

Her job in Met Éireann came as a result of her Masters, as it dealt with the subject of weather.

'That took me to Met Éireann to gather data,' she says. 'I went to the building which is near Finglas where I grew up and there was a man

'GIVE ME THE MENOPAUSE DRUGS! I DON'T WANT TO SUFFER'

there doing maths with a pen and paper – that's how long ago it was. I just thought, imagine having a job where you could do maths all day, that would be the dream – well it was my dream.

'Nowadays I don't do any maths because it's all done by computer. But I applied. It was a public service job so it took a couple of years but I got the job and it's been great.

'In those days, you got a job and that was your job for life and then I had the kids and then you blink and you are 54. So when they called and said, "Do you want to do Dancing With The Stars?" I said, "absolutely yes!"

As a civil servant, Joanna did have to ask permission to do the show but it is something that she wanted to do for herself and for other women like her.

'What was that yer man called us? 'Middle class women of a certain

age," she says, referring to Gregg Wallace, whose syntax was the embodiment of a common and ignored prejudice.

'I am 54, I wanted to show women that your life isn't over and that we can learn new things and have new experiences.'

She's a great believer in HRT for menopause and didn't really suffer with symptoms because when the first one came along she hopped on the medication.

'Why should we suffer? Joanna says. Absolutely not. Give me the drugs! I don't want to suffer.

'I didn't have many physical symptoms but the mental symptoms – the anxiety and paranoia – really take the rug out from under you.'

Joanna swims, runs and cycles to work from Portmarnock to Glasnevin and she also does a bit of yoga. She is tiny, slim and small, so it will be easy for her

professional dancer Maciej Zieba to twirl her around. 'There hasn't been a woman over 40 who has made it to the final since Deirdre O'Kane,' Joanna says. 'She was 50 on the day of the final and all of the other women that did well were under 40.'

'I am 54 and I want to say to women: This is 54, this is what we can do and we can do it the same as the 25-year-olds – maybe not quite as well but we can accept new challenges. We are not ready for the scrapheap just yet. We have our power still.'

It's a great message to send out to women everywhere and rehearsals have been tough but also a joy as the rest of the contestants are great fun too, she says.

'I am beyond middle age now and I don't have any self consciousness left which is great, it's a benefit of growing old. I think it is menopause

RIXO BLUE VELVET, FLORAL MOTIF DRESS, €370, BROWN THOMAS

and I love it because you finally get to say, 'No you're grand, I'm not interested in that' like the way men do their whole lives.

'They put themselves first and think about themselves first. Women put everyone else first and then we hit menopause and our hormones change and all of a sudden we get a bit, "No, do you know what? You're grand!"

She loves learning to dance with Maciej though she says she has to stop telling him he is gorgeous. 'That's not nice, he is more than just a good-looking guy,' she says.

'The things that he has achieved – he left home at 16 to become a professional dancer and he is so smart and so patient,' she says, admitting that she worries about sweating too much or having an egg for breakfast when they have to dance close together.

'The best thing about this is learning to dance professionally, to have a professional dancer take your body and teach it how to do these things,' Joanna says. 'I have been admiring these professional dancers and looking at them for years and thinking they were amazing and to have a professional dancer dedicated to you to teach you to do that is actually the best.

'The payment you have to make for that is doing it in front of the audience, that's what it costs.

'While the rest of us are taking the job seriously, I don't think any of us are taking ourselves very seriously. We are taking the rehearsals seriously and we are having fun.

'I know I will be absolutely heartbroken if I am voted off because I am already thinking how am I going to give this up? It's really hard, it's killing me and I am falling into bed exhausted every night but it is a great way to be.

'All of this is positive – the music, the glamour, the tan, the make-up, the clothes. It is all fun and gloriously positive and I think that is the appeal of Dancing With The Stars. Being part of that is making the hard work worth it.' With that, off she breezes to her next rehearsal.

The new series of Dancing With The Stars begins on RTE One and RTE Player tomorrow at 6.30pm



PHOTOGRAPHER TOM THOMAS, MAKE-UP SONIA MONROE, STYLING ROSE MARY ROCHE, SHOT ON LOCATION AT THE HERBERT PARK HOTEL, AN INDEPENDENT AWARD-WINNING FOUR-STAR HOTEL IN MALLSBRIDGE, DUBLIN 4. #HERBERTPARKHOTEL