

A full-page photograph of Siobhán McSweeney in a red gown, posing in a period room. She is standing next to a white column, holding a black tulle fabric. In the background, there is a large arched window with blue curtains, a potted plant, and a painting on an easel. The room has pink walls and a blue patterned carpet.

Life

Drama queen

The Traitors Ireland host Siobhán McSweeney on dresses and deception



Sunday
Independent
24.08.25

'I love the feeling of being a chancer

Set to play host of one of the biggest TV franchises right now in 'The Traitors Ireland', Cork woman Siobhán McSweeney talks about making the role her own, using her acting platform to take a political stand, breaking glass ceilings, and her dream romance...

I feel mischief is the best thing'

Words by
Chrissie Russell

Photography by
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Lady Siobhán

Until recently, Siobhán McSweeney's main association with Slane Castle was, like so many other Irish people, as a hallowed concert venue. "R.E.M. 1995," she says proudly. "It was one of the very first gigs I went to. I was obsessed with R.E.M. I used to draw Michael Stipe on my walls, I was one of *those* teenagers. When they all came out on stage, I remember I excused myself from all my friends to have a private moment watching Michael Stipe."

As formative as that gig undoubtedly was, McSweeney might now have an even stronger connection with the Meath castle. She's recently finished filming the first ever series of *The Traitors Ireland* there for RTÉ, taking on the starring role of host. "I got to play Lady of the Manor in Slane Castle," says the 45-year-old grinning again – and well may she grin because it's quite the job. Launched in the Netherlands, *The Traitors* format has now been adapted to air in more than 20 countries. In case you've been living under a stone and somehow missed it, the programme is part murder mystery, part reality TV show. It features some 20 contestants, divided into Faithful and Traitors, pitted against each other in a battle of subterfuge and deceit in pursuit of a cash prize. It's become an instant cult hit, with the UK's latest series, fronted by Claudia Winkleman, commanding record-breaking audiences of more than seven million.

So it's surprising to hear that

McSweeney's gut reaction on being offered the role of host in the Irish version was to turn it down. "Initially I said no, because I didn't think I'd be the right person for it, and I didn't think I would do a good job," she reveals. "I was like 'Oh no, they need a *presenter* for that, Claudia Winkleman does that for God's sake, I can't be doing that!' But then they came back, and they were very nice to me, and I thought 'Erra, on their own head be it.'"

"As soon as I said yes, I got really excited," she continues. "But mainly scared actually, because it's such a well-loved show, and such an immediately well-loved show – it sort of feels like a bit of a big pressure gig."

Ah, surely not? If the Bafta award winner, star of *Derry Girls*, doyenne of stage and face of *The Great Pottery Throw Down* has impostor syndrome, what hope is there for the rest of us?

"I do NOT have impostor syndrome at all!" comes McSweeney's emphatic response. "I despise the phrase. But I also don't think I'm a kangaroo. That's not being an impostor; I'm a very good actor. I'm just a fan of the show and I thought they'd get a proper presenter, but obviously not."

She glances mischievously over her shoulder at the RTÉ team sitting off camera in Donnybrook where she's taking my video call, before adding that what swung the gig for her was the





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FASHION
Dress, Oran J Aurelio
O'Reilly, Instagram
@oranaurelio.
Gloves, Paula Rowan,
paularowan.com.
Earrings, Delphi Antiques,
delphiantiques.com. Shoes,
Miista, miista.com. Socks,
Burlington, burlington.de

prospect of some epic outfits, echoing the dramatically camp wardrobes of Winkleman and Alan Cumming in the US version. "That's *immediately* what I went to," says McSweeney. "Trying to console myself with lots of wardrobe stuff, and I have many, many strong opinions when it comes to clothing and wardrobe and presenting oneself."

Between the castle setting and the melodrama of the show's set-up, McSweeney felt the need to bring the theatre with her *Traitors* ensembles, making visits to the Abbey to run through the archives there, and engaging with designers who have worked in operatic productions. "I wanted something that would speak to who I am as well, which is an overtly loud, over-dramatic lady. On my mood board I had Countess Markievicz and Enya."

"I also got really excited at the idea of showcasing Irish designers, the way that I had encountered them," she continues. "Younger designers and designers who work in different paradigms, with different kinds of bodies, stuff like that, and show the idea of Ireland that I relate to."

Antrim designer Sara O'Neill – the woman behind the Éadach brand – is one name that comes up. "That sense of dark, gothic, Celtic... Sara's amazing at that and I've worn a lot of her work before. But we have a lot of other designers who really tap into that idea of uniquely Irish things."

Representation of nature felt significant to McSweeney, who was born and raised in the village of Aherla, Co Cork. "That felt very important to me, especially as a rural woman, so we have a lot of eco clothing, natural fibres, fibres that have been recycled," she says enthusiastically. "A lot of stuff that was literally borrowed or taken from my own wardrobe and adapted or embellished. It was about forcing my own ideology of clothing and personal style onto the particular fit of the show."

Certainly, her style sounds more than a match for Winkleman, whose capes and country attire have been as much a talking point over three seasons of the BBC version as the fake accents and Machiavellian manoeuvres of the show's contestants. But there's something a little jarring in the fact that already some of the dialogue in the media seems intent in comparing the two female presenters, if not outright pitting them in competition. McSweeney finds it lamentably inevitable.

"Until we dismantle the patriarchy, we cannot escape that. And I despair, because the biggest proponents of that conversation quite often are women themselves."

"It's interesting, because you also have the 'Irish vs the UK' historical thing going on and 'Who does it better?'" she adds. "It's a lot of b*****ksology really and has absolutely nothing to do with the actual joy of sitting down and watching a good piece of telly – so shut up."

Whilst she's on a roll, it seems a good opportunity to ask what she makes of shows like *The Traitors* being branded 'guilty pleasures'? "Somebody was talking

to me today about how some influencer said her 'guilty pleasure' was eating a *whole punnet of blueberries*. God Almighty," McSweeney gives a sigh and eye roll that her *Derry Girls* character, Sister Michael, would be proud of. "Guilty pleasure", that phrase alone certainly explains why Ireland is the way it is, that pleasure is something that's not for us."

But she concedes that there is something that feels sneakily voyeuristic about watching *The Traitors*. That feeling of being a fly on the wall to the duplicitousness, the scheming, the pressure cooker of emotions that the contestants experience, can feel illicit. "It's like you're eavesdropping on something you shouldn't be listening to," reveals McSweeney. "And there's nothing we love more than seeing somebody behaving badly, because we feel seen don't we?"

Being Ireland, rigorous checks had to be made to ensure no contestants knew each other prior to filming or were in any way known to McSweeney. "Just by virtue of sample size and a small population, it is a uniquely Irish problem," explains the host. "Oh jeepers, we'll have to make sure it's not our cousin or someone going in."

Would she herself be a Traitor or a Faithful? "I would never go on it," she replies instantly. "I have the best job, which is being able to look and give out and spy on the shenanigans, but I just wouldn't be robust enough, I don't have the psychology."

It fascinates her how contestants, who could be fighting intensely to survive in the process one second, could instantly shelve those emotions on exiting the show. "The people who do this have a certain psychology, which I don't identify with, and I'm not putting a judgment on it, but they're able to drop it immediately, which is really quite robust and healthy. I'm someone who still holds grudges over things that happened to people who are not me, and who are totally fine about it."

The bluffing that often runs central to the show resonates with her though, and when I ask what her biggest bluff has been in life, McSweeney instantly quips that it's "being a presenter". Then she turns serious. "If I can be a bit pompous and earnest, the biggest bluff is that I can do what I do," she says frankly. "I have one of those lovely Margaret O'Connor necklaces that says 'Chancer' and I love the feeling of being a chancer. I sort of feel mischief is the best thing."

Has she experienced betrayal? "Yes, I have." Does she want to talk about it? "Absolutely not." She pre-emptively next question. "Have I betrayed someone? I have as well. And I'm certainly not talking about that," she smiles. "It's human isn't it? To do that."

It's rare for McSweeney not to elaborate on an answer since she's often gloriously forthright on a multitude of issues both personal and public. A quick look at her Instagram page, where she boasts more than 170,000 followers, shows her regularly using her platform to raise awareness on atrocities in Gaza.

There's often a tendency in the entertainment world to distance oneself »



» from potentially contentious causes, with so many of those in positions of power in the arts insistent on a need for political impartiality – does McSweeney ever worry that the courage of her convictions could cost her in her career?

“No, I’ve never worried about that,” she says. “Because if something I’ve ever said or done – and I’ve not always done it successfully, but I’ve tried always to do it respectfully – if I lose a job because of that, then that’s not a job I want to do.”

She instantly acknowledges the privilege in that statement, to have the choice, but equally it’s anathema to her how artists, including those in popular entertainment, can distance themselves from politics. “I believe that art is a political act. How can you do anything that is vaguely creative, where you’re trying to communicate something to an audience and try to change their mind, without it being political? Like how can you cry over poetry and not do anything to try and make the world a better place?”

Growing up in Ireland in the 1980s, her favourite programme was *Murder, She Wrote* starring Angela Lansbury as crime writer and amateur sleuth Jessica Fletcher. “I was that age living in a country where my body wasn’t my own, where my mam wasn’t allowed to divorce my da, where her ma wasn’t allowed to own property or even a bank account, and every Thursday I got to see a woman, who was unmarried, had a fantastic haircut and lovely earrings, who solved crime and went fishing at the weekend – that, my friend, was a role model and that is political.”

Surely in many ways McSweeney now herself is a role model today? She bats the label away. “No, I feel I exist and

allow people who are like me to go ‘Ah, I’m like her’ and that’s what I feel proud of, because I think there are so many women like me, who have had similar experiences, who look like me, who think the same way about certain things and – apart from Jessica Fletcher naturally – you don’t necessarily see it so often,” she says. “So, I feel proud that I can add to the lexicon, or the palette, of women who are like me. But I don’t feel like a role model.”

The continued inequality in representing strong female roles on screen today saw McSweeney recently take to social media to lament the news of Sam Mendes’ upcoming Beatles biopics. “What a bore,” she says now of the planned movies. “We tell the same story over and over again. I want to see the lives of women whose stories I don’t know. Not necessarily autobiographical but fictional and creative.”

Film, she reckons anyway, isn’t the right medium for biopics. “All biopics become ‘How much of a good mimic is this person doing? Or ‘Oh, is that a fake nose?’ rather than being blown away by the art they produced or discovering something factual about them.”

It’s the lesser-known stories that hold greater appeal for McSweeney. She recently narrated an eight-part-series of the *Lives Less Ordinary* podcast for the BBC World Service with *Hold Fast!*, telling the extraordinary story of a cargo ship locked down at sea for 188 days during the Covid-19 pandemic.

It’s difficult to conceive now, given its phenomenal success, but *Derry Girls* was once also an unlikely subject matter for a TV hit, telling the story of a forgotten demographic in an often overlooked region during conflict. It was McSweeney’s stint as the ever-sardonic

Above: Siobhán McSweeney, right, as Sister Michael in the hit comedy series *Derry Girls*

Right: McSweeney is set to star in *The Playboy of the Western World* in London’s National Theatre in December

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Sister Michael that secured her the 2023 Bafta for Best Female Performance in a Comedy Programme, and brought global fandom. “It’s really quite extraordinary, I was in the States a couple of times this year and the most random people recognised me in the middle of New York, and I was like ‘What has this programme done?’” says McSweeney.

“I still can’t comprehend it. And I do try to every so often, just so I’m not caught off guard when someone comes up to me. It’s good to have it in the back of my head that maybe I don’t owe them money, maybe they do just recognise me from the telly.”

During the coverage of Glastonbury, she was aware of a flag-bearing Sister Michael’s face being waved in the crowd and used as a meeting point. “She’d have hated all that,” she says with a distinctly Sister Michael-esque pursing of the lips.

Of course, that instantly recognisable association with a beloved TV character can be a double-edged sword, and McSweeney oscillates between acknowledging the pros and cons. “I don’t know, it can get a little bit tiring, people think that they own you,” she muses. “But I quite like it when people talk about Sister Michael, and I love the effect of the show. It’s a gorgeous thing and gives people a lot of joy and, more importantly, it’s given me an awful lot of joy, and a lot of opportunities that I just would never have gotten before.”

“I was a grand theatre jobbing actor before *Derry Girls*,” she continues. “I ordered breakfast in bed today! My life is incomparable to what it was like before.” There’s a pause. “Not better,” she qualifies with a smile. “Just incomparable.”

After graduating from University College Cork with a Bachelor in Biological Science in 2001, McSweeney moved to London to study at the Central School of Speech and Drama, going on to secure the role of Julia in Ken Loach’s 2006 film, *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*. Throughout her onscreen career she has continued to be a regular on stage, starring later this year alongside fellow *Derry Girls* alumnus Nicola Coughlan in an all-star production of *The Playboy of the Western World* at London’s National Theatre.

At the beginning of her career, McSweeney readily admits she bought into the idea of a certain hierarchy in acting jobs across different media. “When I started, I was very (she affects a grandiose voice befitting of the Shakespearean stage) ‘I will neevah do anything except the theatAH! TheatAH is my life!’” She shrugs pragmatically. “There’s room to change.”

The industry has changed too. “When I started off acting, it was very much seen to stay in your lane between doing theatre and doing film and TV,” she continues. “There’s still, not a snobbery, but a misunderstanding of the importance of comedy versus drama.”

“I think it’s getting better, I think the so-called hard border between drama and comedy is becoming a lot more porous and I have benefitted hugely from the fact that people are allowed to be many things across different media.” In the past,



McSweeney has talked eloquently about the failings in fashion for different body types, her complicated relationship with grief after the deaths of her two parents, losing everything when a fire engulfed her home in 2019 and the impact that had on her mental health.

But she's rarely quoted talking about her personal life and I'm curious is that because she's drawn a line on that area

THE TEAM
Styling by Anne O'Shea
assisted by Aoife McGuigan
and Yara Abdelrahman.
Hair and make-up
by Nicki Minshull.
Shot on location at
Slane Castle, Co Meath

or because no one asks? "Both, I think," she says. "What personal life? I've spoken about my dead family a lot." No, I clarify, I mean the 'significant other'. "Ah, the significant other. I am currently single," she replies with a wink.

There has long been, however, a list of potential husbands, who could ideally form a Mr McSweeney harem. "Gene Wilder was my first fake husband," says

McSweeney wistfully. And Slane's man of the moment back in 1995, Michael Stipe, is of course featured. "I remember saying to myself, 'One day I'll meet you,'" she laughs. "It hasn't happened yet." She gives another mischievous look. "But it's only a matter of time." ●

"The Traitors Ireland" begins on RTÉ One and RTÉ Player on August 31