

Ticket

THE IRISH TIMES culture magazine

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I'm 38 putting this album out now, and the album was made with this ticking clock – banging, not ticking. And why? Ed Sheeran doesn't feel like that. David Grohl doesn't feel like that

Self Esteem



BOOKS

At heart Poet Seán Hewitt wants to bring 'beautiful things to the centre of the novel again'

CULTURE

Donald Clarke *If Warfare's* not an anti-war film, what is? *Apocalypse Now?* Don't make me laugh

BOOKS

America, América An extraordinary new history of the New World

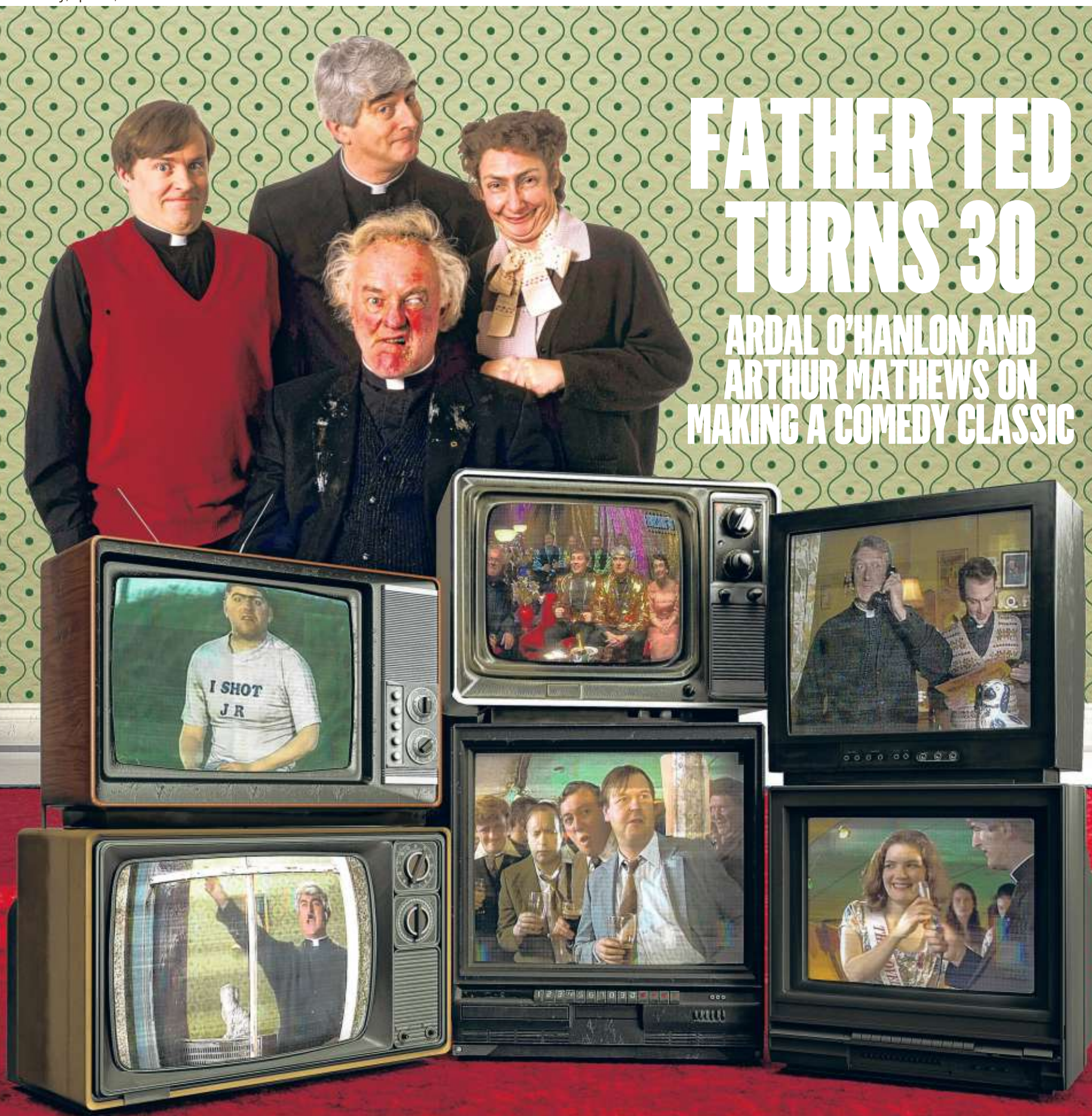
Reviews *The Best of Everything* by Kit de Waal; *Barley Patch* by Gerald Murnane

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FATHER TED TURNS 30

ARDAL O'HANLON AND
ARTHUR MATHEWS ON
MAKING A COMEDY CLASSIC



'I THOUGHT IT WAS A SH*T IDEA'

Ardal O'Hanlon wasn't convinced in 1994 that he should put his stand-up on hold to join a strange-sounding new sitcom called *Father Ted*. He and other key players look back at making what quickly became a TV great



Careful now: it's 30 years since viewers were introduced to a comedy about three priests and their tea lady on remote Craggy Island. Photographs: Channel 4

MARTIN DOYLE

Father Ted first aired 30 years ago on Monday, on April 21st, 1995. By the time the 25th and final episode was broadcast, on May 1st, 1998, it had been canonised as one of the funniest TV sitcoms of all time, identifiably Irish but anything but parochial.

Its memorable lines have become catchphrases and memes, its three series are eternally repeated, converting new generations, and an annual Tedfest still attracts hundreds of devotees dressed up as characters from the show.

Such success was not preordained. Even Ardal O'Hanlon, who played Fr Dougal McGuire, had doubts about a sitcom featuring three Irish priests banished to the godforsaken parish of Craggy Island and kept afloat on a sea of tea by their housekeeper, Mrs Doyle.

Fr Dougal was his first serious role, I say, then check myself – obviously it's a comedy – but O'Hanlon agrees. "Comedy is serious." He first acted as the Ophelia

character Owen in *Hamlet* and *Her Brothers*, Ferdia Mac Anna's take on Shakespeare for RTE.

"Apparently that's where Arthur and Graham" – Arthur Mathews and Graham Linehan, *Father Ted*'s creators and writers – "saw the first inkling that I might be Dougal, combined with my stand-up. I was in about two scenes and didn't know what I was doing, but they obviously saw enough to give them a glimmer. It's such a cliché, but it's true: there is no such thing as a small role."

What did he bring? "A naivety, one of those south Co Dublin airheads, someone who has no self-awareness."

O'Hanlon had spoken to the writers after stand-up shows in Dublin, and they had mentioned he might be suitable for the sitcom, "but I thought it was a shit idea. Who in England is going to want to watch a sitcom about Irish priests? It wasn't something I was remotely excited about."

He had moved to London in February 1994. "It was a very exciting, kaleidoscopic time, the middle of the Blair years. There was prosperity, optimism, a cultural renaissance, Cool Britannia, Britpop. And comedy was absolutely exploding.

"It happened very quickly for me. I won a few competitions, got a lot of work. Comedians were being plucked from the circuit to front chatshows. The day I went for my *Father Ted* audition I was also asked to audition for a role as roving reporter on *The Big Breakfast*, and I got that. It was a toss-up: which do I do? But my focus was stand-up. Even *Father Ted* was a distraction.

"I got a call from Arthur Mathews at half four one day saying this is our last day of casting: could I come in? I had a show that night so wasn't even sure I could make it. I read Dougal; I think Arthur read Ted. Arthur and Graham were laughing away, but the others were stony-faced.

"I just slipped into it very easily. It sounded so natural in my voice. It matched my sensibility exactly. Arthur is from the same part of the world as me, the northeast, and has that same droll, deadpan, dark comedy. Pat McDonnell and Joe Rooney" – who play Eoin McLove and Fr Damo – "have it too. From day one I instinctively got it."

Weeks later O'Hanlon was performing at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, in Scotland, and got a call asking him to fly to Dublin for a "chemistry reading" with Dermot

Morgan, who was to play Fr Ted Crilly.

"They wanted to see would we dovetail. Again that was a massive pain in the arse. I had to go and come back in the same day. It was all a stress. I didn't think I was an actor, and it wasn't as if I had unlimited confidence in Arthur and Graham at that stage."

How much of his DNA is in Fr Dougal?

"Too much. It probably helped not training as an actor. I just relied on my instincts. What I kept coming back to was: how do I play this stupid Irish character? The intention was to send up that trope, to exaggerate. I didn't want to play it out-and-out stupid. The trick I relied on was to think of a dog, someone who is loyal, obliging, lovable, energetic, always up for whatever his boss wants to do."

He channelled two other touchstones. "My little sister Dearbhla was a good few years younger than me, very innocent, so the innocence of a child rather than stupid. And the third thing was Graham Linehan himself. I hope he takes it in the right spirit. He had this enthusiasm for comedy, almost this innocence about him, a bit of naivety and social awkwardness. If I was ever stuck for inspiration, 'What's Graham doing?'"



O'Hanlon's stand-up persona back then was similarly bewildered and wide-eyed rather than gormless.

Because he was around the same age as the writers and they all lived in London, "I was their mate in a way Dermot and Frank" – Frank Kelly, who played Fr Jack Hackett – "weren't. We socialised, so what would happen is you might say, 'Wouldn't it be funny if Mrs Doyle gave Dougal a bath?' – just say it for the craic – but then the next series comes round and they've taken on the suggestion."

There was also scope for improvisation. "The biggest joy for an actor is when you come up with something on the spot. My favourite bits are things that happened in the moment – for example, the time when Dougal doesn't hang up the phone but just throws it down. It just seemed right."

"My favourite is the postcredit sequence of the big fight at end of the priests' sports day, and Dougal happens upon it and just gets a rush of blood to the head and kicks a priest on the ground. It's the boldest thing he's ever done. You can read it on his face, the excitement and guilt."

O'Hanlon recalls another aspect of the

I couldn't believe how good it was and that I was part of it, but even then I was thinking, 'No one is going to see this.' I couldn't see how a British audience would go for it

mid-1990s zeitgeist. "There was a huge appetite for all things Irish in London at that time. You had Riverdance, Ballykissangel, The Corrs, Graham Norton, a wave of Irish comedians, Irish theme pubs. I remember a stat: 20 per cent of British people were claiming some Irish ancestry. There was also the peace process, a thaw in relations."

That added to the shock when the IRA broke its ceasefire with the London Docklands bombing on February 9th, 1996. A few kilometres upriver, I'd just watched O'Hanlon record an episode of the second series of Father Ted. We were in the green room when the news broke on TV, tragedy trumping farce again.

"It was devastating. We didn't know if we could show our faces the next day. I did a gig the next night: I was verbally attacked as soon as they heard my Irish accent, but I was overwhelmed by the support from the rest of the crowd. English people are fair, by and large."

His doubts about the show had long dissolved. "I knew by the audience reaction – and my own reaction to the scripts – that it was great. Even before it aired I went to Arthur and Graham's flat and watched all six episodes back to back."

"I couldn't believe how good it was and that I was part of it, but even then I was thinking, 'No one is going to see this.' I couldn't see how a British audience would go for it. Also, being brought up in Monaghan, you don't think anything good is ever going to happen to you."

Father Ted reminds O'Hanlon of Fawlty Towers and Blackadder, which also star "someone who clearly thinks their talents have not been recognised, surrounded by fools. In terms of the relationship between Ted and Dougal, you'd definitely think of Basil Fawlty and Manuel, Blackadder and Baldrick. I was hugely influenced by Stan Laurel as a stand-up, never mind as an actor, always undermining the pompous person who supposedly knows better."

The Irish media was initially hostile, with accusations of Paddywackery. "The generation that I and the writers were part of, we had confidence. We weren't carrying that baggage. We felt we could play with those stereotypes. The first series was a sleeper. By the second series everyone was on board. The third series went through the roof – not just audience figures but the cultural impact."

I ask him to describe the key players. "Arthur is so funny, very droll. I think he's really shy. His conversation is very anecdote-based. He is an absolute trove of great stories. My picture of Arthur is he's not quite Nosferatu but in an attic room

♦ watching multiple TV screens. He is an absolute authority on TV. I just love Arthur. We have a lot in common, a love of comedy, football, music.

“Graham has just this phenomenal energy, incredible attention to detail, obsessed with comedy, a breadth of knowledge of TV comedy, an endless store of references, always very certain about what was right – and he usually was.

“Dermot was a lovely guy, generous. Maybe not unlike Fr Ted, he felt his talents were underappreciated. His mind was always racing in a hundred different directions, always trying to make up for lost time, frustrated by how he was treated by RTÉ. He was so thrilled to be working on British TV; he was an Anglophile.

“He was easily distracted, which could be frustrating to work with – he wasn’t always on top of his lines – but we got on great. We both felt like outsiders in the world of TV acting. I used to love when he popped up in the audience as Fr Trendy on *The Live Mike*, and his columns in the *Sunday Tribune*.

“I admired his doggedness. It was so rewarding that he got this role that he absolutely nailed. He dreamed big. He could be irrepressible. I loved him in his quieter moments. I felt I knew a realer Dermot, a person with normal insecurities.”

Pauline McLynn, as Mrs Doyle, “was great, coming from very much an acting background, great fun, the life and soul of the rehearsal room, also larger than life.

“We wouldn’t have watched much TV growing up. It was considered a bad influence, so it was rationed, but we always sat down as a family to watch Hall’s Pictorial Weekly. Frank Kelly” – who had been one of its stars – “was my earliest exposure to comedy. He was a slightly intimidating figure at first.

“Like a lot of comedy actors, he wanted to be taken seriously as a stage and screen actor. He was well built, walked with his chest out, but he was a lovely guy. He felt a little bit isolated, I think. His character wasn’t always integral to the plots, so he felt a bit frustrated.”

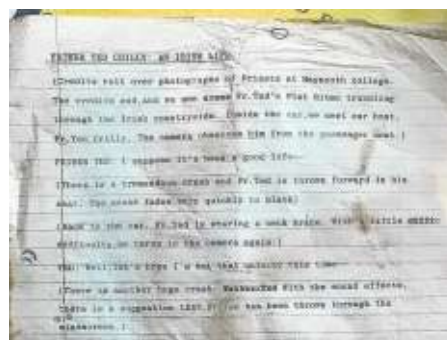
O’Hanlon, the son of a former Fianna Fáil minister, comes from a conservative, rural Catholic background, but the irreverence didn’t bother him.

“I was delighted to be part of a show that was satirising the church, which I felt was really ripe for satire. Gentle satire can be incredibly effective, not confrontational, like a light drizzle getting under your skin. It is certainly one of the reasons it became so popular in Ireland. We are always lampooning the priest figure.

“My family would definitely have had misgivings, but by the third series they were coming to recordings. It was fun. It captured a unique Irish comic sensibility but also channelled American and British comedy, a very sophisticated comedy product. It was verbal, it was visual, it was clever, it was slapstick. It’s not even about priests, it’s about men – about anything but religion.”

“When I did my first play in London, *See You Next Tuesday*, Prince Charles and Camilla came along. He told me he loved Father Ted – and Camilla corroborated that. In the same week Roger Moore and Michael Caine came. They had a monthly supper club called *See You Next Tuesday*, by coincidence.”

O’Hanlon began his career in Mr Trellis, a



Clockwise from above: Ardal O’Hanlon; O’Hanlon and Dermot Morgan during rehearsals; Frank Kelly as Fr Jack Hackett; and the original script for Father Ted. Below: Pauline McLynn as Mrs Doyle. Opposite page: The Joshua Trio – Kieran Woodfull, Paul Woodfull and Arthur Mathews. Photographs: Channel 4; courtesy of Arthur Mathews



comedy trio with Kevin Gidea and Barry Murphy. They once supported The Joshua Trio, the U2 spoof band Mathews played in with Paul Woodfull, at Whelan’s in Dublin. “It was really funny, but I don’t think I realised Arthur was the drummer; he can be quite reserved.”

Woodfull played at O’Hanlon’s wedding in his various guises, including Ding Dong Denny O’Reilly and the Hairy Bowsies (which also featured Rooney).

O’Hanlon got married on December 30th, 1995, between the second series’ location shoots and studio recordings. On the

morning of his wedding he got a very short haircut, which caused a huge continuity problem. A wig had to be commissioned at great expense, which he wore for five episodes, until his hair grew.

“That wig had its own career. It went on to *The Fast Show*. Paul Whitehouse wore it in the ‘Suits you, sir’ sketches. It’s probably in Bridgerton now.”

I first met Mathews and Linehan in October 1994, at the launch, in a posh French restaurant in London, of their debut sitcom, *Paris*, which starred Alexei Sayle as a talentless French artist. (Linehan provoked the haughty waiters by deliberately mispronouncing dishes on the menu.)

Mathews, then 35, and Linehan, 10 years his junior, had only recently moved from Dublin to London, but they had already established themselves, scripting Sayle’s comedy sketch show as well as writing for Griff Rhys Jones, who became a patron, renting them his flat in Kilburn cheaply.

For all its madness and flights of fancy, Father Ted was rooted in realistic elements and recognisably Irish traits and traditions

that made it believable and lovable. But from the outset the writers tended to downplay the extent to which the show subtly satirised the Catholic Church as well as other odd aspects of Irish life.

Mathews had previous. A graphic designer, he had been art director of *Hot Press* magazine, where he met Linehan, a witty, acerbic music and film critic. Mathews had created a spoof religious magazine, *Majority Ethos*, which he claimed had been snapped up from church porches and praised by bishops. “It was a cat thrown into Battersea dogs home for a laugh,” he said.

Father Ted’s launch the following April was at the Irish Club on Eaton Square, an elite address in Belgravia that perhaps subconsciously flagged the quality of the series.

It was immediately obvious that Channel 4 had a hit. It had already commissioned a second series. The scripts sparkedled with one-liners and absurd but engaging plots. Morgan and O’Hanlon, hardened veteran and brilliant newcomer, made the perfect double act. Kelly managed to make Fr Jack, an alarmingly hideous caricature of the whiskey priest, lovable, while McLynn often stole the show as Mrs Doyle, with her gift for physical comedy.

But part of the show’s genius was its supporting cast, which drew on generations of Irish acting and comic talent: Graham Norton as the insufferably enthusiastic “youth” priest Fr Noel Furlong; Michael Redmond as the gloomy Fr Stone; Jim Norton as the irascible Bishop Brennan; and Tommy Tiernan as the suicidal Fr Kevin.

Mathews and Linehan married a sophisticated comic sensibility rooted in an encyclopedic knowledge and appreciation of *Seinfeld*, *The Simpsons*, *Fawlty Towers*, *Steptoe and Son*, and *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin* with an unerring eye and ear for Irish eccentricities, which made the show authentic to a home audience without alienating an international one.

Take our obsession with the weather. “God, it’s lovely out,” Dougal says at the window as a typhoon rages. Or the priests’ variety show – “the holy shows, as they’re known colloquially” Mathews said. But Father Ted is “not an ethnic show. There’s no Irish thing in it that excludes people.”

The series evolved from Irish Lives, a mockumentary about a priest tracking down his old seminary pals that the pair had submitted to Hat Trick, the prominent

production company. Geoffrey Perkins – “the classic Oxbridge, slightly posh producer,” as Mathews puts it – whose credits included *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, saw the potential for a sitcom; his unerring instincts were invaluable.

It is all but forgotten now, but Father Ted – which was called *Father Ted Crilly* until, at the last minute, a friend of Linehan’s suggested dropping the surname – was once anathema to many Irish viewers, particularly among the diaspora, which tended to be more religious and more sensitive to perceived anti-Irish mockery. Ireland was changing. By the time the second series of *Father Ted* aired, in March 1996, Ireland had voted to legalise divorce.

The Catholic Church had been beset by scandal. In 1992 *The Irish Times* had revealed that Bishop Eamonn Casey had fathered a child, a plot line that *Father Ted* lifted for Bishop Brennan. Casey had also misappropriated diocesan funds – echoed in *Fr Ted*’s refrain that his ill-gotten gains were “just resting in my account”. In 1994 the paedophile priest Brendan Smyth was convicted of child sexual abuse; paedophilia would be too dark for a sitcom, of course, but *Fr Jack* is seen in flashback lusting after schoolgirls.

Nevertheless, the letters pages of the *Irish Post* in London, where I then worked, were exercised more by *Father Ted*’s gentle send-up of the church than by the real-life priests whom the criminal-justice system sent down.

Its characters are caricatures, cleverly subverting stereotypes, not reinforcing them. *Fr Jack* gets drunk on Toilet Duck and Castrol GTX, not just whiskey. British and American sitcoms are full of idiotic characters, but some Irish viewers in Britain, subject to decades of “thick Paddy” abuse, saw in *Father Ted* the perpetuation of anti-Irish stereotypes: drunken, priest-ridden, stupid.

Linehan told me at the launch of the second series, “I can understand people who are a bit oversensitive being offended by our treatment of the Catholic Church even though our treatment of it is quite gentle. My parents are the most Catholic people in the world, and they like it.

“But the anti-Irish thing confuses me. It’s a caricature of a stereotype. If you exaggerate something until it’s just bizarre, hopefully people won’t take it seriously. What they say about *Father Ted*, the drunks and the violence, you can say about *The Young Ones*, about *Bottom*. You’ve always got the stupid guy, the belligerent guy. It’s the Laurel-and-Hardy thing, the idiot who knows nothing and the idiot who knows everything.

By the third series *Father Ted* was unsailable, armour-plated with awards and astronomical viewing figures. RTÉ had belatedly bought the rights, so it was as big at home as it was in Britain.

The writers had decided, however, that the third series would be the last. As Linehan noted in *Tough Crowd: How I Made and Lost a Career in Comedy*, “the fact that all the characters bar *Ted* were rather extreme caricatures was beginning to make it more and more difficult to come up with new things for them to say. You can only play the out-of-character card once per series.”

Fate would ensure that the show would come to a natural if tragic end. The final



episode, *Going to America*, was recorded on February 27th, 1998, at London Studios, next to the National Theatre. It begins with *Fr Kevin* threatening to jump from a ledge at an *It’s Great Being a Priest!* conference until *Fr Ted* manages to talk him down. During rehearsals, Morgan had raised a laugh by ad-libbing, “Jump, you bollocks.”

I was a supporting actor in the scene, playing a priest alongside my fellow journalists *Frs Liam Mackey*, *Liam Fay* and *Ken Sweeney* – old friends of the writers from *Hot Press* – and *Fr Brian Eno*.

The episode ends with *Fr Kevin* – having been cheered up by *Ted* playing the theme song from *Shaft*, then made miserable again by a bus driver playing *Creep*, by *Radiohead* – back on the window ledge. *Ted*, his hopes of a transfer to Beverly Hills parish thwarted, joins him.

Linehan told me at the wrap party of his concern that the series had ended on too dark a note. Morgan was ebullient, having escaped the island whose broadcasters were too conservative for his ambition.

Less than 24 hours later Morgan died of a heart attack, aged just 45. He would win a posthumous Bafta for best comedy performance. The final scene was replaced by a montage of highlights.

Morgan, a fan of *Monty Python* and *Not the Nine O’Clock News*, had told me in 1992, “That’s one thing I envy the Brits: their tradition of comedy. One of the great saving graces of a postcolonial power is they always reserved the right to slag themselves to death. That comes from running the show for centuries. I wonder, though, why it is we’re still suspicious of satire in Ireland. Perhaps it’s national insecurity.”

He likened himself to *Danny*, the tunnel king in *The Great Escape* played by *Charles Bronson*, every TV proposal a tunnel he was digging to break out of Ireland. In the end he smuggled himself out disguised as a priest.

In 2018 Linehan announced Pope Ted:

The Father Ted Musical, written with Mathews, with music by *Neil Hannon*. “It’s the real final episode of *Father Ted*.”

Woodfull had also written songs, *Risteárd Cooper* played *Ted*, and there were lots of rehearsals and read-throughs. “The songs were great,” Mathews tells me, “the best thing about it. There’s an *Over the Rainbow*-type epic, which is just fantastic. And then all hell broke out. It’s tragic. Graham was into the whole trans thing, from a feminist point



If Graham hadn’t been so furious there might have been some hope for the Father Ted musical. He blames me for not backing him. I’m perfectly happy for him to say whatever he wants. He just got so angry

of view he would say, and there were a lot of cancellations.

“Terry Gilliam had just had one of his shows cancelled, and *Hat Trick* thought we won’t be able to get financial backing with Graham attached – which was crazy, as he’d written most of it. They offered him money to step away, and he decided not to, which was fair enough. It was bizarre, but that was the cancel-culture zeitgeist.

“I think if Graham hadn’t been so furious there might have been some hope for it. He blames me for not backing him. I’m perfectly happy for him to say whatever he wants, free speech or whatever. I never criticised him, but he just got so angry.”

Woodfull recalls the origins of *Father Ted* in long *Hot Press* production weekends that were made for mischief. “*Fr Ted* was a character Arthur dreamed up and would perform for us in the office. Arthur’s version was a camp priest. We wouldn’t have been aware that so many priests were gay, so it was a great observation on his part.”

Mackey says of Mathews, “I always remember *Declan Lynch* saying, ‘You have to hire this guy. He’s one of the funniest people I ever met.’ Arthur used to rally the troops in the wee hours playing this pious priest, steeping his fingers, giving a homily with an invisible broken microphone, his voice fading in and out. It was genuinely hilarious.”

Woodfull and Mathews formed *The Joshua Trio* with Woodfull’s brother *Kieran*, who played bass guitar. “I would claim that

Bono had appeared to me in a dream and wanted me to spread their music to a wider audience,” Woodfull says.

Mathews recalls, “One of my favourite moments was the *St Patrick’s Day* parade in Cork on the back of a trailer. We turned the corner and the Irish Army were there, and Paul just said, in his Bono Jesus character’s voice, ‘Throw down your weapons!’ Getting a donkey on stage at the *Baggot Inn* was another famous incident.”

Woodfull continues, “Arthur, myself and Graham put a comedy sketch group together called *The Fun Bunch*. *Fr Ted* first appeared on stage in a comedy night at the *Project Arts* theatre. After that Arthur’s *Fr Ted* would come out during the set of my other musical comedy act, *Tony St James* and the *Las Vegas Sound*, and give a sermon.

“He used to talk about his concern for a priest colleague on the missions named *Dougal McGuire*, who had been voted most unpopular priest in Africa for two years running and was spending Christmas up a tree in the grounds of the *Bob Geldof Centre*, where he worked.

“*Fr Ted* later featured in a series we used to do called *The Starship Róisín* for the *Ian Dempsey* show on RTÉ radio in the late 1980s. It was basically an Irish *Star Trek*.”

Mathews lives in south Dublin with his partner, the literary agent *Faith O’Grady*, and their daughter. He is guarded initially, but as he warms up he laughs readily.

Linehan wanted Mathews to play the part of *Fr Ted* on TV, but Mathews says he never considered it. “It would have been too much pressure. I knew *Dermot* would be perfect. *Ted* is a fully rounded character, very common in sitcoms, someone with aspirations beyond their abilities, like *Reginald Perrin*, wanting to escape to a better life but completely stuck, which makes it poignant.”

What are his standout memories?

“I remember being in a pub in Clare, and *Dermot* sent out for pizzas from 20 miles away. He was very generous. I remember the star names – *Richard Wilson* and *Clare Grogan*. I’ll tell you who’s in it, though: this guy I’m obsessed by, *Vernon Dobtcheff*, one of the Nazi priests. I saw him in *Mary, Queen of Scots* the other day. I started watching *The Saint* and *The Avengers* and ticking off all the actors I’d worked with who’d been in them. That was a thrill, part of TV history.”

Mathews loves comics. He and his friend *Mick Nugent*, now head of *Atheist Ireland*, created *Gak Bag*, which was heavily influenced by *Viz*. Every Christmas he created a spoof provincial newspaper, the *Border Fascist*, for *Hot Press*. “One of my favourite books was *Bruce McCall’s Zany Afternoons*.” The Canadian illustrator was a huge influence, he says.

Mathews insists that *Father Ted*’s approach to the Catholic Church was closer to *Monty Python* than to *Dave Allen*. “He was angry, but Python just found big pointy hats funny.”

What was his attitude?

“I bought into all that stuff up until my 20s, but I was really damaged by it, all the supernatural stuff. I remember I had a big fear of the end of the world and demonic possession at the age of eight or nine. I always say if I had watched internet porn around the clock it would have been less damaging.

“I found it really grim, dark and



❖ superstitious, from the same place as vampires or ghosts – scary stuff. I did believe in Catholicism. My father was quite religious. I just thought about it too much. It was very bad for my mental health.”

How did that feed into Father Ted?

“Dougal doesn’t believe. Ted would like to believe, but he sees it as a career. The main thing is never to analyse it. You’d realise it doesn’t make any sense. We didn’t set out to undermine the church. It coincided with revelations about all the bad things priests had done. There’s a danger of tarring them all with the one brush. It’s weird how their power is gone and they’re now derided. I never thought I’d see that day.”

Two of Mathews’s uncles were priests. “I was quite fond of my Uncle Tom especially. He was a very good man. Uncle

“

I think you are better off with a really good cast and an imperfect script rather than a really good script and an imperfect cast

Paddy died in 1989. I don’t know what he would have made of it. I found myself once watching Prince live in concert with him, Prince singing Sexy Motherf**ker. There was a pause, and my uncle goes, “Very austere”. What the hell would be going on in his head? Brilliantly surreal. All that stuff would go into Ted.

“He once said my mother’s anniversary Mass for us in his car. I was flying to London. He was flying from Birmingham, so he said, ‘I’ll hire a car in Dublin Airport and we’ll say it in the car.’ My sister Ria and I were in the back, he was in the front, all these air hostesses passing by. It was fantastic. He said a little homily about my mother, looking at us in the mirror like a taxi driver.”

Another inspiration was Liam Fay’s *Beyond Belief*, “a great book about mad Catholics, very funny. There was a thing in that about seeing an image of Jesus in a skirting board. I’m sure that’s where the

idea comes from where they kick the bishop.”

Mathews remembers the comedian Kevin McAleer, whom he loves, turning down a role, and Dave Allen asking for so much money to be in the Christmas episode that it was just another way of saying no. Brendan O’Carroll did a great audition for the role of Pat Mustard, the milkman.

“You have to get the cast right. Writers won’t agree, but I think you are better off with a really good cast and an imperfect script rather than a really good script and an imperfect cast.”

How did the collaboration with Linehan work?

“I’d just sit down and write away. Even if it’s not very good, everything gets rewritten anyway. Graham would be more angry, walk around and be reluctant sometimes to sit down and get the work done, but then he did. He wrote every episode of *The IT Crowd* on his own, and it’s great.

“We had a word processor. We would do a list of 10 points. One of us would sit down and type away; the other would ponder, walk around, say ‘How about this?’ The best ones take less work. My favourite is probably *Entertaining Father Stone*,” he says, referring to the episode in which an unbearably dull priest arrives for his yearly visit. “It’s very simple, and the pace is quite slow – not as frantic – which is untypical. I like the awkwardness of a conversation with someone who is impossible to talk to.”

What was his favourite line? “I was with Paul Woodfull, watching archive footage of a very shaky-looking Adolf Hitler in 1945, about to send out 15-year-old boys to defend Berlin. Paul remarked, ‘It’s funny how you get more right-wing as you get older.’ We put this into the show referring to an old Nazi priest.”

“I think Father Ted was primarily just good fun,” Liam Mackey says. “To make larger claims for it is to play down what was its great strength. It was brilliantly funny. All those catchphrases and memes it generated are the sign of something really good. It was timeless, outside its time, not of its time.

“There is a tendency to see it as a satire of the oppressive church, but it was played for laughs. The slapstick, the wordplay, the casting was perfect. It’s funny and warm-hearted. It has a cartoonish quality which means it never fades. It has this appeal to every generation.” ●

THINGS JUST GOT WAY MORE COMPLICATED

Self Esteem has always taken an honest approach to her music, but as a woman in her 30s having hits, there are now new pressures to contend with

ED POWER

During the making of her third album as Self Esteem, the songwriter Rebecca Lucy Taylor was struck by an uncomfortable realisation. This would, in all likelihood, be the last record she releases in her 30s. In 2026 she turns 40: in the eyes of the music industry she will soon be a woman of a certain age. “I’m 38 putting this album out now, and the album was made with this ticking clock – banging, not ticking,” she says.

“And why? Ed Sheeran doesn’t feel like that. David Grohl doesn’t feel like that. I couldn’t figure out what was wrong with me. It sounds crazy, because I subscribe to ‘my gender doesn’t matter to me’. So I was, like, ‘It can’t be that.’ And then the penny dropped. And I was, like, ‘Oh, it’s because I feel like, societally, I’ve got a couple of years maximum to make all the music I want to make, before I’m considered not worth listening to.’”

Taylor can take heart from knowing that the new record, *A Complicated Woman*, is the best she has made as Self Esteem. An absorbing blend of confessional songwriting, escapist disco and harrowing electronica, it is superior even to *Prioritise Pleasure*, the breakout 2021 hit that earned her a Mercury nomination.

But in addition to being as catchy as anything, it is a fascinating portrait of an artist who experienced “overnight” success in their mid-30s and found the resultant attention both thrilling and overwhelming.

Taylor has never been one to hold back. On *Prioritise Pleasure*’s lead single, *I Do This All the Time*, she spoke frankly about emotional neediness and the unhealthy tendency to compare ourselves to others (“Stop trying to have so many friends / Don’t be intimidated by all the babies they have”).

The lyrics were deeply personal, yet she was struck by how universally they resonated – a fact she was reminded of when she sang the song at a 90,000-capacity Wembley Stadium when opening for Blur in the summer of 2023.

She is equally forthright on *A Complicated Woman*, which opens with the meditative *I Do and I Don’t Care*, a spoken-word piece in which she goes back and forth over whether she wants to be defined by her professional accomplishments. She does, she doesn’t... She is Schrödinger’s pop star: ambitious yet entirely aware that the music industry is manipulative and uncaring and that everyone is destined for the scrapheap in the end.

It is a remarkably confident song about having no confidence whatsoever – a contradiction that has fuelled much of her best work as Self Esteem. Still, while insecurities can make for a potent artistic aid, out in the real world they’re not a lot of fun.

Those anxieties meant that when *Prioritise Pleasure* became a hit, she seized the opportunity with both hands and drove herself to the limit. She toured constantly, cowrote the official World Cup song of the England 2023 women’s soccer team and even branched into acting when taking on the Liza Minelli role of Sally Bowles opposite Jake Shears, of Scissor Sisters, in a West End revival of *Cabaret*.

Friends told her that she risked burnout. She didn’t listen. “I never had holidays. I never had breaks. I was so bent on this goal. So my management, everyone... we all got used to the fact that I don’t like to rest,” she says. Taylor takes full responsibility. Success was dangled before her, and she went for it, consequences be damned. “It was my mistake. The people that loved me [were] saying, ‘This is too much now.’ And I was like, ‘Never.’ I burned out properly. I went really brain dead. I can’t remember a lot of it. I couldn’t think any more. I made this album from that place, which is a weird thing to say, because obviously it’s full of ideas.”

She felt pressure to live up to *Prioritise Pleasure*. As a woman in her 30s having hits, there was the expectation that she would represent something bigger than herself. It comes back to the double standards. Ed Sheeran is a 34-year-old red-headed bloke, but nobody expects him to be a spokesman for 34-year-old red-headed blokes around the world. Not so for Taylor.



Frs Ken Sweeney, Martin Doyle, Liam Fay, Liam Mackey and Greg Kyle, the casting director, who were extras in the final episode of *Father Ted*