

Flying high

Trevor Kaneswaran never had any intention of becoming an actor until he was pipped at the post for a huge movie role. That disappointment inspired him to train and pursue acting as a career and he's soon to be on your screens in three big projects

Words by
Stephen Milton

Photography by
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Growing up, Trevor Kaneswaran loved the Aladdin mural at his childhood Dublin home in Blanchardstown. Having watched Disney's 1992 cartoon treatment of *The Arabian Nights* fairy tale, his older brother David was inspired to paint the mural on a bedroom wall and, for young Trevor and his Sri Lankan-Irish siblings growing up in a white monoculture at the time, it symbolised a rarely encountered racial representation.

Times change, and nowadays even Disney recognises that some of the depictions of people and cultures in the film are problematic, but as a child, Trevor saw none of that. "*Aladdin* was one of our favourite movies because we were the only brown family in Dublin, that we knew about," he explains. "David would always paint murals on the walls, and we all loved Aladdin and Jasmine. As a working-class Dublin family, they were the only thing that was even close to what I looked like."

When an invitation to audition for Guy Richie's live-action revision of the Disney movie arrived in Kaneswaran's inbox in mid-2017, the opportunity felt predetermined – though he treated it with scepticism initially.

"I didn't have an agent, had no training. I replied back: 'Sorry, this

doesn't sound like it's real.'"

At the time, Kaneswaran was an electronic engineer in London. He'd flirted with being a singer-songwriter over the years, but had never considered acting, despite amateur dabbling at university. He requested the script for the film. Official pages arrived, indicating the opportunity was real.

How did they find him, given his lack of agent? On Spotify, he reveals. "I'd released some music and they said not only did I look the part, and could potentially act the part, but as a singer, I might do justice to [*Aladdin* theme song] *A Whole New World*."

Kaneswaran met casting directors and impressed them with his laid-back assurance. "Because of doing music and

various auditions, I didn't fear a no, I was so used to it. But as it happened, I nailed the audition."

What followed was 12 weeks of intense call backs and months of chemistry tests with actors contending for the role of Jasmine. Kaneswaran juggled this shiny opportunity with his work as an engineer, while managing his burgeoning high hopes.

"Then the mail came. 'Hi Trevor, we decided to go in another direction..." Without an agent, I don't know how far I got. I was a bit dejected – that was it. I told myself I was done with acting. Then, I was talking to a friend, an actor, and he goes, 'Are you stupid? You tried, in your very first attempt, a crack at an iconic

Hollywood movie. You got close without any agent, without any training. You're an absolute idiot if you don't pursue this'."

Kaneswaran is a weaving, wandering storyteller, a style inherited from his mum, he admits. "Lily Ten Stories, we call her. She'll start off on one story, work her way through a few more, then stop and say, 'Wait now, what was I saying?'"

It's morning when we meet. The 36-year-old is at home at his apartment, a 90-second walk from Kensington Palace. Acting must have its rewards, I remark. "I'm only renting," he clarifies. "This place was pure luck. After 12 years in London, I was due some."

Time has moved on since the *Aladdin* disappointment.



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Kaneswaran has trained extensively as an actor, secured agency representation and is now anticipating the release of three big projects. First, will come ITV drama *Riches*. *The Guardian* described this as a "high-gloss, high-stakes family saga that has already been called *Succession*, but Black and British".

And next year, there's *Clean Sweep*, an RTE six-part thriller series starring Charlene McKenna as a woman grappling with her torturous past.

Also in 2023, Kaneswaran will be on screen in *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves*, a big-money medieval saga based on the classic fantasy game, with a cast that includes Chris Pine, Hugh Grant and *Bridgerton*'s Regé-Jean

Page. "It's going to be a huge," Kaneswaran says, "a proper cinema movie."

He's the first actor out of his family, I offer. "Funnily enough, the twins, Kumar and Siva, were the first to do anything, acting-wise. And my sister Gail had a day role on *Fair City*. But even when they were doing it, it never felt like a possible career to me."

Trevor is one of eight siblings, many of whom have previously danced with fame. Eldest sister Gail is a well-known fashion model, and second-eldest Hazel is a singer and TV personality, known for performing with pop outfit Dove, judging talent series *You're A Star* and narrowly missing a spot in *Girls Aloud*.

Trevor's brother David was once a member of Irish boy-band Zoo, while Siva was a member of globally successful ensemble The Wanted. Only brothers Kelly, an electronic engineer, and Daniel, an IT field engineer, sidestepped the limelight, though Daniel wrote some music for The Wanted in their heyday.

"I can't remember having any 'you can do anything' conversations with my parents," he says when asked about the family's self-belief. "But it was probably Gail who was the catalyst. She was the eldest and chose an aspirational career. She opened the doors for us to do whatever we wanted."

Kaneswaran's parents met in London in the 1970s.

Mum Lily was a printer and dad, Kanes – pronounced 'Ca-niss' – was a merchant mariner from Singapore, raised in Sri Lankan Tamil culture. They married in Singapore, returning to Dublin and settling in Blanchardstown neighbourhood, Corduff, to start a family.

Kanes worked for Dublin City Council. Adapting to a racially homogenised community didn't come without problems.

"When my mam brought my dad home for the first time, there weren't a lot of Indians or Asians, it wasn't the easiest path. But once he got in with the Council, and the camaraderie of his colleagues, it wasn't an issue as much." »

Interview

» Tragically, his father died of a heart attack at just 44. Trevor was only eight, but warm memories endure. “Remember the Fun Factory in Blanch? It had slides and ball pits. I remember he’d come home from work and I’d be on him about going to the Fun Factory. He’d say yes, go get his jacket, and I’d have gone around to all the other kids on the street, already got their mams to say yes, and there’d be 10 other kids waiting to go. And he’d say: ‘They’re not coming!’ And I’d go: ‘Their mams said they could!’ Poor man was the Pied Piper. And he’d always say yes in the end.”

When Trevor was 15, Lily moved the family to Cavan, which was a culture shock for the four kids still at home – David, Trevor, Kumar and Siva. ‘It was ‘fish out of water’ twice. Dubs in the countryside and somebody of colour in, at the time, a largely all-white environment. People would slow down cars, mouths agape.”

On the first day at Moyne Community School in nearby Longford, the spotlight on the brothers intensified. “The entire school happened to be on lunch break and soon as we stepped out of the car, everyone went quiet. The principal welcomed us in, through the double doors, and there were two lads resting with their backs against the wall. And one of them says: ‘Look at them Chinese boys.’”

A flair for excellence in multiple fields proved beneficial for Trevor. “Joining the football team, scoring lots of goals – that immediately brought status and respect among the lads. And there was a talent show in the school and I wasn’t sure I was going to go for it but my brother went in playing guitar, and I went for it too. And I won.”

I remark on what sounds like rare confidence for a teenager. He attributes it to his sisters’ success. “With dad dying, Gail and Hazel were surrogate mothers. And because our older sisters were a model and a singer, just by association, we absorbed the kind of bravado they had from going out there and succeeding at their passions and becoming famous for it. It rubbed off on us.”

Hazel’s success in music held the

most appeal for young Trevor. While studying electrical engineering at Dublin Institute of Technology, before transferring to London’s Brunel University, he performed solo sets at live mic nights, crowd-funded his first EP and auditioned where opportunity arose – including for *The X Factor* in 2008. “It had nothing to do with music or talent. It was all about the drama with a lot of psychological games being played out.”

Despite failing to make it to the finals of the hit talent show, he connected with judge Louis Walsh who kept him updated on subsequent opportunities, including the assembly of a new boyband – who would go on to be *The Wanted* – in 2010.

Feeling generous, Trevor

extended the invitation to his twin brothers, Kumar and Siva, both gifted singers. All three made it to the final call, where Siva was ultimately selected. “The ribbing I got – ‘you’re *The Unwanted!*’”

The handsome actor is chatty and expressive. And, while training at London’s Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, after the *Aladdin* close call, he fostered perseverance.

Still a student, he reached out to Dublin casting director and agent, Louise Kiely, introducing himself, his brush with Disney and his appetite for employment. Impressed, she sent Kaneswaran on a series of auditions, ultimately landing the actor a role in the 2020 movie *Finding You* with Vanessa Redgrave.

He got his first London agent, and bagged a small part in British soap *Doctors*, and quickly hit paydirt with a lead in Virgin Media crime drama *Penance*. “It was my proper induction into the acting world. Debuting *Paddy’s Day 2020*. It was all happening.”

The pandemic could easily have killed the dream for the new actor. “I’d walked away from my career in engineering, a steady income, to absolutely nothing.”

However, Kaneswaran soldiered on with a call centre job in East London for back-up, but struggled with despondency. Salvation came with BBC’s *Line Of Duty* – one of the few productions still



It was ‘fish out of water’ twice. Dubs in the countryside and somebody of colour in, at the time, a largely all-white environment. People would slow down cars, mouths agape

shooting during the early months of the pandemic – though his face was entirely concealed by a Swat mask. “At least I was working.”

Kaneswaran’s scrappy familiarity and ease is arguably his secret weapon, giving the impression he could simply walk and talk his way into an on-screen role. Like he did with Sharon Horgan’s latest series, *Bad Sisters*.

“When I was filming for *Dungeons & Dragons* in Belfast, my friend [actor] Daryl McCormack walked into the hotel where we were staying. He was staying there while shooting *Bad Sisters*. I ended up spending some time with the cast and crew of the show.”

Fast-forward a few weeks and Kaneswaran secured an audition for a small role in the hugely popular comedy. “And the producers recognise me from the hotel, and say, ‘Oh Daryl’s mate, we remember you from the hotel.’”

Kaneswaran nabbed the part without any audition. ●

‘Riches’ begins December 2 on ITVX

THE REAL ENTOURAGE

Hollywood agent James Farrell began his career in finance, but in a move right out of the HBO comedy drama *Entourage*, the Meath man got a job in a top LA talent agency – and now Jack Reynor, Tom Holland and Eve Hewson are on his books

Words by
Stephen Milton

By his own admission, James Farrell doesn't rate his skills as a Hollywood talent broker. "I'm actually terrible as an agent," he flatly remarks, leaning his frame against an industrial stand-up desk. Behind him, I watch traffic and pedestrians negotiate a bustling Los Angeles boulevard, bathed in West Coast sunshine.

Framed by tall windows, the vibrant view from the corner office indicates Farrell is probably not terrible at his job at all.

"I'm terrible in just booking [jobs for my actor clients] for the sake of booking," he clarifies. "I'm never trying to fill a slot. Every job should be furthering their progression, get people where they want to be. A 'filler' job, it distracts and allows clients to not focus when the right opportunity comes in, and then they don't have the time. It's better altogether to be singularly focused on your goal."

He names long-time client Austin Butler – the actor who startled audiences last year with his performance as Elvis in Baz Luhrmann's vibrant biopic – as an example of this approach. Prior to his turn in that movie, Butler was a virtual unknown, a one-time



Agent to the stars James Farrell. Picture by Emilio Madrid Inset: Jeremy Piven as Ari Gold

Nickelodeon child actor whose greatest height since then was a largely supporting role in Quentin Tarantino's 2019 saga *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*.

"Austin said he didn't work for more than 12 months [before booking *Elvis*] and it's because when we really started changing the course of his career, we said, 'Let's only focus on things that are incredible and if that means you don't work, you don't work. Let's find the undeniable opportunity that will shift your career'. With agents who book filler jobs, I think, 'Do you not believe in your clients, or are you just trying to get rid of them for a few months?'"

Raised in Co Meath, before a stint in the UK, and educated at The King's Hospital School in

Palmerstown, Dublin, Farrell's singular investment in his clients has produced sizeable wins.

A talent agent for more than a decade at Hollywood behemoth William Morris Endeavor Entertainment (WME), his trades and dealings have landed Irish-American actor Jack Reynor a starring role in the *Transformers* franchise straight off the back of *What Richard Did*; and also led to Tom Holland's casting as Spider-Man.

In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* in May last year, Baz Luhrmann revealed how a "cold call" from Denzel Washington about Austin Butler's incredible work ethic convinced him to seriously consider the virtually unknown actor for *Elvis*.

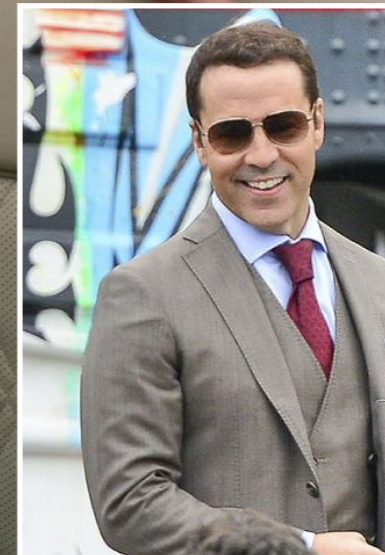
On paper, the connection seems random but on closer inspection it appears designed by Farrell. Moving to Los Angeles after landing an entry-level position at WME, Farrell's roommate was close friends with John David Washington, son of Denzel.

"We'd go over to the Washingtons to hang out, and when JD [John David] was in the NFL [American Football league], I remember him telling me he wanted to act."

Farrell (41) has since represented JD Washington since he followed his double Oscar-winning father to the big screen, securing breakout lead roles for the newcomer in Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman* and subsequent turns in *Tenet* and David O Russell's *Amsterdam*.



I will do every single thing I can, and I will. If that means calling every single person, every single day, I'll do it. It's an Irish tenacity thing



The talent broker, also currently representing Henry Cavill and Jessica Biel, chalks success down to relentless pursuit and flagrant networking.

"If you find the job for your client, you have to do absolutely everything to get it. You will run through every wall; call everyone; write a letter [to the director or casting director]; have the client write a letter; send a tape; have another director tell them your client is great; have another producer tell them they're great. You have to be zeroing in and, all the while, building momentum through that process," Farrell says.

"Once I see it, once I've read the script and visualised the character, I will do every single thing I can, and I will. If that means

calling every single person, every single day, I'll do it. It's an Irish tenacity thing."

From a farming background and raised between Meath and Derbyshire, in England's midlands, Farrell grew up fascinated by the entertainment industry. Initially drawn to the music scene, significant connections helped nurture his ambition.

"After moving back to Ireland in third year from the UK to attend King's Hospital, I went to Portobello College to study business and tried to get into music industry." Different contacts such as his two godfathers – the late Tayto Park magnate Ray Coyle, and Dermot Gallagher, once secretary-general at the Department of Foreign Affairs – helped him out. Ultimately, it led to an interview with U2's then manager Paul McGuinness, he says.

Before that interview, however, a chance encounter with Shane Flynn, then chief operating officer at financial institution MBNA, laid out an alternative path. "I'd never met someone from the corporate financial world, and he was intrigued by this kid with big ideas. He ultimately offered me a job at MBNA in their global training programme, straight out of college at 21."

On the fast track, Farrell moved to the bank's US HQ in Wilmington, Delaware, and swiftly excelled. "I had 11 jobs in four years there. I was still obsessed with Hollywood, reading entertainment books – *DisneyWar*; *The Mailroom*; *The Operator* by David Geffen – but all the while learning so much about project management, execution, how to communicate, learning you don't need to analyse the data – you analyse the problem and use the data to solve it. All lessons I could apply as an agent," he explains in the faintest Irish accent, which is eclipsed by extended Americanised vowels.

When MBNA was subsumed by Bank of America, Farrell, then 24, was made vice-president of the MBNA's credit card business division and relocated to the UK. "I was running corporate strategy for the card business mergers and acquisitions. These were pretty »

» sizeable deals. You had this Irish kid running a deal team. At one stage I bought a bank.”

But the young executive felt stifled. “When I made VP, I called my dad and said I wanted to quit. Great thing about money, it can afford you a lot of opportunity, lets you buy a house, but I felt like it could trap me very easily. I had to walk away.”

Knowing the only path for him was the nuts and bolts of the entertainment industry, and being willing to start from the bottom again, he interviewed and applied to UK and US talent agencies, and was knocked back repeatedly owing to over-qualification. “I wish I’d kept all the rejection letters from everyone.”

Perseverance paid off and a year later, he applied again to WME in London, finally clearing the first hurdle, travelling to Los Angeles and completing 11 rounds of interviews before landing a role in the mailroom of William Morris Entertainment, the department charged with ferrying incoming and outgoing post and deliveries. In corporate America, it’s typically viewed as the first rung on the ladder, where plucky rookies pay their dues.

At 26, however, Farrell went from purchasing financial institutions in high-stakes deals to menial administrative tasks. Was the transition difficult to stomach? He shakes his head. “I’m running around at WME, my first week, and Steve Martin was walking around the office, playing the banjo, singing. I thought, ‘This is greatest place on earth.’ And I found it so liberating, I couldn’t have done it in London. There, all my friends were making money, but here all my friends were all broke.”

Just like in the financial sector, Farrell learned on his feet. He absorbed practical knowledge; established relationships with agents, sitting in on their conference calls to studio heads and movie stars. By night, his new LA-raised workmates would introduce him to their showbiz circles. “They were friends with actors, grew up with them. And we’d always hang out with them



I didn't tell anyone I'd signed Jack Reynor until 'What Richard Did' was screened at the Toronto Film Festival. I'd seen it and it was special. Soon as the buzz started, I announced we signed Jack and the whole agency was like, 'Wow, we got the new guy'

because they were cool and fun, go to clubs, get in for free, free drinks, the whole fun of Hollywood.”

Just like *Entourage*, I remark, referencing the 2004-2011 HBO series inspired by Mark Wahlberg’s introduction to the Hollywood machine.

“It was on TV while I was applying to all the agencies and my friends would say, ‘Do you want to be Ari [Gold, super-agent character, said to be based on real WME head honcho Ari Emanuel]?’ and give me grief and say ‘You’re going to end up being his assistant, Lloyd’.”

After less than two years in the mailroom, Farrell was promoted, joining former WME agent John Fogelman’s team, who at one time or another had represented JJ Abrams, Michael Bay, Courteney Cox and Whoopi Goldberg. The new young agent landed his very first client, Tom Holland.

“He’d just done *The Impossible* [2012 film starring Naomi Watts about the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami] and they wanted someone who Tom could connect and relate to. I grew up in the UK and Ireland, had no real connection with Hollywood. I was younger and Tom and I sort of grew up together in this business, and that created a unique bond.”

Along with fellow agent Andrew Dunlap, Farrell steered Holland from relative obscurity to sharing significant screen time alongside Chris Hemsworth and Cillian Murphy in Ron Howard’s *In The Heart of the Sea*, and on to eventual *Spider-Man* glory, reportedly beating Timothée Chalamet and *Sex Education* actor Asa Butterfield. It was a titanic accomplishment for the young agent.

“We pursued this for a long time. Tom shot two movies in between his first audition to actually getting it, and there were a lot of nuances to [landing the titular *Spider-Man* role]. For so long, we knew we were down to final few actors.”

But Farrell didn’t get to break the news to his client. “One day, it was on *marvel.com* – ‘Tom Holland is *Spider-Man*’. And Tom rang me and said, ‘Dude, is this real?’”

While working with Holland,

Farrell took on another newcomer, the then young Irish-American actor Jack Reynor, shortly before the general release of his breakthrough performance in Lenny Abrahamson’s film *What Richard Did*.

“Getting Jack into *Transformers* [in 2014’s *Age of Extinction* with Mark Wahlberg] was one of my first ‘gets’ as an agent. It’s funny: part of the strategy I had with Jack was signing him before the Toronto Film Festival the year *What Richard Did* came out, but I didn’t tell anyone I signed him. I was waiting for the movie’s screening at the festival. I’d seen it and thought it was really special. Turned out it was. Soon as the buzz started, I announced we’d signed Jack and the whole agency was like, ‘Wow, we got the new guy’. The whole mechanism kicked in; Jack was offered a number of competing franchises at the same time but wanted to work with Michael Bay in *Transformers*.

“Jack and Tom were basically my first two clients. We’ve grown up together. I love them. They stay with me when they’re in town. Jack’s coming into LA next week for premiere of [new Amazon Prime series] *The Peripheral* and will crash in my house for a few days so we can hang out.”

The remarkable wins for his fledgling client list have attracted a growing inventory of actors and creatives over the years, intrigued by Farrell’s shrewd instinct and drive. Along with Henry Cavill and leading actress Jessica Biel, he now represents stars Orlando Bloom and Joel Edgerton, while taking successful punts on rising newcomers: singer Andra Day – an Oscar nominee for her debut role in *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* – and Sasha Lane, a standout in the drama *Conversations with Friends*.

His client list has a notable Irish contingent; along with Reynor, it features *Outlander*’s Caitriona Balfe and *Once* film-maker John Carney.

“I got to know John through *Sing Street* when I got Jack [Reynor] in it. Caitriona, I’ve known forever. Met her before *Outlander*; she’s really good friends with a couple of my friends and we only started working together maybe in the



last six, seven months.” He also represents Eve Hewson, who most recently performed in Sharon Horgan’s hit series, *Bad Sisters*. At the time, the Dublin-raised actress had primarily appeared in US productions: Nicole Holofcener’s *Enough Said* and period medical series *The Knick* for director Steven Soderbergh, with little profile on this side of the Atlantic.

“One of the first things I said to Eve when we first met was, ‘You’re an Irish actor but right now, you’re an American actor because you’ve only worked in America. Unlike every American actor however, you have a superpower. You have

Left: Eve Hewson attends the launch of *Bad Sisters*. Picture by Dave Benett

Top left: Jessica Biel in LA in 2022. Picture by Matt Winkelmeyer

Bottom right: Orlando Bloom attends the UNICEF At 75 Celebration in 2001. Picture by Gregg DeGuire

All three actors are represented by Farrell

additional markets like the UK and Ireland where you can work so we should be doing that too.’ No one knew her [there].”

Working with the new strategy, Hewson landed BBC drama *The Luminaries* and British Netflix mindbender *Behind Her Eyes*. “She quickly got a few Irish, UK jobs, [which were] really helpful in cementing her foothold over in those markets, opening up many opportunities.”

Farrell shares the actress with fellow WME agent Elyse Scherz.

Hewson, who is the daughter of Bono and Ali Hewson, has admitted it was Farrell who

insisted she submit an audition tape for Horgan’s *Bad Sisters*, a global hit already renewed for a second season. “I got the script the day before Christmas Eve.” Hewson told *Glamour* last August. “My agent told me to read it, and I was hoping it was shit so I didn’t have to cancel my Christmas plans. But I was like, ‘Oh, f**k, this is so good!’ Now I have to put the Guinness down and make the tape’.”

Once again, Farrell’s tenacious instinct paid off. Hewson has earned some of her best reviews, with *Vanity Fair* describing the performance in the family saga as “radiant”, while Hollywood’s *Variety* magazine praised her ability to find “a charming groove” with her character.

It’s evening in Los Angeles, inching close to 6.30pm, but Farrell is energetic. He stands throughout the duration of our interview, breezily swaying and gently pacing while I catch his eyeline frequently darting towards what I can safely assume is a furiously hectic mailbox. His look is supremely polished and handsome – crisp white shirt, tailored to accommodate a lean, muscular frame, a sun-kissed complexion with a pearly white smile.

He lives in the Hollywood Hills, just off Laurel Canyon, with his husband, who also operates in ‘the industry’ – that’s as much information as I glean – and tells me about the work-life juggle. “The two lives become one. So many of my clients I love and spend so much time with... work inevitably bleeds into weekend. Hardest thing is being home with my husband, or you’re away and you haven’t seen your friends for two years and you’ve had a glass of wine and you’re starting to relax, and your phone starts going like crazy. If someone needs you in that moment, you suit up and walk into battle for them, no matter what time zone you’re in. It’s the caretaker role, and it’s a privileged position to be in.”

Does he ever ignore a call from a client? Farrell smiles and replies, “You can.”

It’s clear he doesn’t. ●

'Once I decided on the amputation, I felt excited about life again'

Only the second day of shooting her acting debut on Netflix series *The Midnight Club*, Ruth Codd grappled with a troublesome word in the script. Every take, she fluffed the line, and with every stumble, her anxiety increased.

"I sat in my trailer and thought, 'Well, I'm done, that's it. It was nice while it lasted.' But at least I could be like, 'Remember that time I was in a Netflix show.'"

What was the tricky word? I ask.

"Acetaminophen," she responds, rolling vast, optimistic eyes, "which is paracetamol. After all that, I was like, 'Could you not have got me to say paracetamol?'"

For show creator Mike Flanagan, architect of some of Netflix's biggest horror shows, such as last year's highly original, divisive *Midnight Mass*, Codd's stuff-up was simply entertaining.

"He still takes the p**s out of me about it to this day. And I learned after that, no one is ever expecting you to be completely perfect. You're not a machine, so I stop putting pressure on myself. I'd never done [acting] before."

Never ever? I ask. "Well, I did play Villager Number Four in a school production of *Pirates of Penzance*."

The background part appears to be the only training needed for the 26-year-old raised in Ferrycarrig, 10 minutes' drive from Wexford town. Part of a spry ensemble cast in *The Midnight Club*, a 10-part series set at Brightcliffe, a hospice for teenagers with terminal illnesses, it's Flanagan's annual Netflix offering of horror (Netflix and chiller, if you will) after the success of skilfully creepy *The Haunting of Hill House* in 2019; *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, a misty adaptation of *The Turn of the Screw* in 2020; and last year's aforementioned *Midnight Mass*, a blood-curdling ode to Catholic hegemony.

Beginning with the arrival of Ilonka (Iman Benson), a young woman who refuses to accept her terminal cancer prognosis, she stumbles upon the secret Midnight Club, a clandestine gathering of hospice residents outdoing each other with scary stories around a roaring, threatening fire. As a spooky aside, each member of the circle promises if they're next to pass away, their spirit will return with a sign from the hereafter. What could possibly happen next?

Brandishing a cast list of fresh screen newcomers, including Benson, who previously appeared in legal drama *Suits*; William Chris Sumpter, a series regular on 50 Cent crime saga *Power*; and Igby Rigney and Annarah Cymone, both leads in Flanagan's *Midnight Mass*, it's rookie Codd, as Ilonka's gloom-ridden roommate, Anya, has earned unanimous critical applause.

"An astounding layered portrayal by newcomer Ruth Codd," wrote *Time* magazine, while *The Guardian* mused on the "beguiling heights of Codd's screen debut". Even revered and reviled Hollywood critic Roger Ebert called the actor a "standout star".

And after the series was released, an Instagram post read: "Wicked cool to see myself represented on screen in a way I never

have before. Getting to see someone else with a prosthetic leg just like mine has been so refreshing and validating."

An avid horse rider, Codd was just 15 when she broke a bone in her left foot. "It was just from me arsing around in PE and it never healed, so from when I was 15 till 23, 24, I had one or two operations every year. It was a pretty simple break on the outside of my foot, and I was just unlucky it never healed, and it spiralled. Most people, if they broke that bone, it would have healed perfectly.

"And I didn't realise it at the time, [the doctors] never said it wouldn't heal and I always had that hope. But after three years, I realised my life wasn't going to be the same as it was."

In a brightly lit living room in Vancouver, Canada, the actor sits on the floor in front of her couch. Her dog, Betty, black and white with flecks of Staffordshire terrier and greyhound, enters the screen and nuzzles her face before settling on the couch behind. Periodically, Betty opens one eye at the rising sound of Codd's biting cackle as she describes the road to disability and the complex impact.

"Nobody understood how frustrated I was, going from normal things — horse riding to crutches for eight years. And crutches are so hard and difficult to drag yourself round. It's unsafe, and Ireland's not the most disability-friendly place."

"Then I started to have problems with my other leg, because it was carrying all my body weight for three years — that's when I started to use a wheelchair."

Moving to the UK at 19 to pursue a career in hair and makeup for theatre, her health deteriorated, largely due to Codd's refusal to accept her disability's debilitating impacts. "I wasn't willing to admit to myself that I was injured and can't physically do the same things I was able to do, so it took running myself into the ground and ending up in hospital for a year on and off."

Codd developed osteomyelitis, an inflammation or swelling occurring of the bone, in her left leg. "I used to let the infections get so bad because I didn't want to take the time off work."

But the lengthy stint in hospital provided the clarity, and acceptance, she finally needed. "During that year, I learned letting go and giving up is not the same thing. This was my life now, and I needed to look after myself."

In doing so, the then 23-year-old decided to take back control the only way she knew how. "[The doctors] say they could have fixed it, but I would still have a brace, and I walked with a really bad limp. I was in a lot of pain all the time and it got to that point where I was like, 'Chop it off, and move on. I've given it a fair go, we've tried everything.'"

"I'm glad I had those couple of years of struggling, because once I decided on the amputation, I knew I had made the right choice. It was like a relief, and also the first time I felt excited about life again. Back to doing new things, looking forward to not being in pain all the time."

It was the end of 2019 when Codd made her life-altering decision, and by the beginning of 2020, she was recovering and learning how to walk with a new prosthetic. Living in Dublin, she completed an apprenticeship in barbering and landed a new job at a men's hairdressers in Jervis Shopping Centre. With a new lease on life, nothing could stand in her way. Almost nothing.



PICTURE: PATRICK BROWNE

"I was two weeks into the job when we went into lockdown," she cries, throwing her hands up and brandishing a superbly ornate manicure. Every nail is needle sharp, each with their own kaleidoscopic cacophony of vivid design.

"I couldn't afford to live in Dublin after a couple of weeks, so me and my friend packed everything in his car and went home to Wexford. The two of us just looked at each other and said, 'Ah s**t!'"

It was the cruellest twist. "I didn't want to make the pandemic about me, but after eight years of it, I'd just had my amputation, I was raring to go. But I was then back at home in my parent's house, in my old bedroom, and I was like, 'F**k sake.'"

Codd found solace in her phone, and happening upon social media platform TikTok, decided to upload her own content with her take on disability and general musings on life in lockdown.

"I started uploading stupid little things, just random stuff. And when you're from a small town, I was scared of people seeing it, and told myself if it got to 10,000 views, I would just delete it. But overnight, one of my videos went viral, and in the morning, I had a couple of million views and my subscriber count had gone up 80, 90,000. I thought, 'Everybody knows now.'"

What was the first video to go viral, I ask?

"All the Times Someone Compared me to their Cat who got Run over by a Lawnmower."

Literally overnight, Codd was a TikTok sensation. Fans couldn't get enough of her warm self-awareness and deprecative perspective delivered from her bedroom in Ferrycarrig. "I would get comments on my wallpaper, which is an absolute headache in itself."

In social media, she also experienced a foreign concept — popularity. "It felt like, 'Oh people like me.' School wasn't a nice time; I didn't have a lot of friends. I was the only disabled girl and I was also quite weird. I struggled to keep friends and felt maybe it was my fault, which was something I carried into my adult life. I ended up being quite guarded, becoming this 'I don't give a f**k' person. But TikTok massively helped me to understand it's okay to be yourself. I'm not for everyone. Some people like me, others don't. Life's not that deep."

While Codd was sharing her lockdown life in Wexford to nearly 730,000 TikTok followers, a casting director for *The Midnight Club* was searching for their Anya. "Casting was harrowing on this," creator Flanagan recently recalled. "Anya was a really hard part to cast. She's written to be an amputee, and we really wanted an actor who was. We cast a huge net, looking [for her]."

Finding Codd on TikTok, casting reached out. "They asked did I want to audition. I thought someone was taking the p**s out of me but I looked them up and they were legit."

Flanagan was astounded by her natural talent. "She sent in an audition, and it eclipsed everybody else."

By February 2021, the new actor was on set in Vancouver, struggling with new-fangled ways to say paracetamol. In portraying terminally ill Anya, however, some friends had concerns the role would act as a trigger for Ruth.

"They thought I was reliving the worst parts of my life, but it was healing to play her, to understand why I behaved in a certain way and forgive myself for a lot of things. Sometimes Anya is a d**k and it's understandable and it wasn't coming from a place of maliciousness, just her way of dealing with things."

"My aunt died from cancer but you wouldn't have even known she had cancer because it never changed who she was, didn't define her. That's what is brilliant about the writing in *Midnight Club*. Yes, they all have terminal illnesses; Anya is in a wheelchair, she has a disability, but the emphasis is their character, and their personality. When you are sick or disabled, you don't sit around all day taking about it. Those parts of Anya, I took from my aunt."

With her TikTok account no more, Codd is an actor now, fully feathered. Not only because she recently wrapped her second TV series (Flanagan's scary Netflix follow-up for next year, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, based on an Edgar Allan Poe short story), but because she's preparing to begin production on a new project, a non-Flanagan feature — "which I can't tell you about," she says, adopting the universal code of the celebrity. I tell her that's when you know you've made it. Her quivering cackle is unleashed again.

Further evidence to Codd's supernova rise is a tightening schedule. Days after our interview, she's due back in Wexford, with plans to stay till Christmas. But shortly after travelling home, she's summoned across the pond. "Ruth needs to travel to LA," her manager directs, speeding up planning for this article's photoshoot.

Back to our chat, I ask if Vancouver is now home. She looks around and gently, vaguely nods. "Yeah, for now maybe. It's a city built on the side of a mountain, very scenic. But I'm not really an outdoorsy person, I'm not really into hikes or anything."

She stops and smiles. "It's not a one-leg thing. I'm just lazy."

'The Midnight Club' is streaming now on Netflix