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Al Porter exclusive: ‘I had a big ego. I was naive. But I paid the price’

Six years after he stepped back from his career amid allegations of sexual misconduct, the comedian talks about facing down thoughts of ending his own life, working in a warehouse to make ends meet, moving to Donegal, getting sober, and owning the mistakes of the past



Comedian Al Porter pictured at The Civic Theatre in Tallaght. Photo: Steve Humphreys

Al Porter is back on stage. Photo: David Conachy



Dónal Lynch

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In the depths of Al Porter’s disgrace, a rumour went around that the comedian, once one of Ireland’s most beloved stars, had taken his own life. A friend called him to see it if was true.

It wasn’t, but he had seriously considered it. In 2017, after numerous allegations of sexual misconduct and inappropriate behaviour had forced him to step back from his career, he felt trapped in “a purgatory of my own making”, long years of “non living”, months where he “didn’t even get out of bed, and longer [periods] when I didn’t leave the house”.

“Everything I’d ever done in the past was erased, bulldozed, and anything I had imagined for my future had turned to dust. Your head goes to such dark places, and that’s when I was thinking, ‘I need to end it all’.”

One thing stalled him in this dark spiral. “I thought, ‘well, I’m too fat to do it because...’ And this is just the madness. I thought, ‘well, they’ll have nothing to bury me in. I don’t fit into any of my suits, and I don’t want to be laid out in my swimming shorts.’ There would be people at the funeral going, ‘yeah, he really looks like himself on holidays if he’d had a really good time and done a lot of coke.’ And so I thought, ‘no, I need to lose weight to kill myself’.”

What followed was what he describes as “a *Rocky* montage”.



Al Porter is back on stage. Photo: David Conachy

“It was me putting on the leg warmers and the short shorts and going out jogging. And everyone was so happy for me. They thought, ‘oh my God, he’s really turned a corner’. My neighbour saw me going past and was waving, going, ‘oh, you’re going to be back on telly?’ And I was thinking, ‘God no, I’m killing myself’. As I jogged down the road, thinking: it’s a done deal.”

It’s a story he tells, not to make light of suicidal ideation, he adds, but to remind himself that “you do those things. You get out of the house, you exercise, you meet people. And through it all you do realise that there are people who know you’re a f**k-up, who know you’re a stupid p***k, but who still, somehow, wish you well”.

On the day we meet, Porter is sober, slim and athletic-looking, wearing a tennis T-shirt and shorts. The suit, which was for so long an “armour”, has been discarded, and, having just turned 30, he seems oddly younger than he did in his years as a comedy prodigy.

We meet on his home turf, the Civic Theatre in Tallaght, not far from where he started his “first career” and where last year he began his first tentative moves back into live performing. He sold out one show there, then another, then another. A nationwide tour was soon under way, with standing ovations greeting him from Killarney to Belfast.

Then, in June, a date in Vicar Street was announced and sold out in a few hours. Due to demand, another date will soon be announced for 2024. He has just travelled back to the Edinburgh Fringe, where he was once in the running for the best show award. He’s co-writing and co-directing Panto at the Olympia this Christmas.

After six years in the wilderness, Al Porter is very much back.

Not that there is a hint of triumphalism. During his show he makes reference to the past without making light of it. As he says on stage: “People deserved better from me. They deserved a better friend. They deserved a better colleague. A better person. And they were right to expect better from me.” He is the target of his own jokes after that, with ridicule reserved solely for himself and his “absolute mess of a life”.

There was a long way to fall. By 2017, Porter seemed well on his way to a comedy stratosphere occupied by the likes of Peter Kay and Frankie Boyle. Still in his early 20s, people regularly assumed he was 35 or 40. He had a television show, *Blind Date*, a radio programme on Today FM, and the keys to the Panto kingdom: he wrote, starred in and performed hit shows at the Olympia. He was in talks with Netflix to do a special.



Al Porter as Polly in 'Polly and the Beanstalk'. Photo: Brian McEvoy

It was all built on his stand-up career, which saw him become one of the few Irish comedians to sell out shows at the Apollo in London. British critics praised his knowingly camp, almost retro, act. He had somehow taken the strikes against himself – being working class and gay – and spun comedy gold from them. He was the ultimate underdog made good.

“It was fun to make money,” he recalls, “that kind of money for doing something that you love was crazy.”

And yet, what looked like an effortless ascent, was, behind the scenes, something quite different. He was drinking heavily, he says. He “romanticised” himself as an “old-fashioned hellraiser” in the Oliver Reed mode, and was defiant when challenged about it.

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“I remember Gay Byrne saying to me, ‘I didn’t like you drinking on stage, I think you’re going to have to look at that’. And of course, you’re 21, you go: ‘Thanks, Gay. Yeah, whatever. But no, thanks for the advice.’ And I actually met him before he died when he was in Herbert Park. And it was one of the things that he asked me. He said, ‘Did you ever knock the drink in the head?’ I think at that point I was saying: ‘Oh, I’m giving it serious thought.’”

Life had become a cycle of work, pressure, and medicating himself to get through it all.

His manager, Stuart O’Connor, became concerned that Porter wasn’t sleeping. “I was trying to party and at the same time do every job God sent. It was just a highly intense, anxious, pressurised time. There was the feeling that the wheels were coming off the tracks. And then that weekend came, when everything fell apart.”

On November 18, 2017, the Irish edition of *The Times* reported that allegations of sexual misconduct had been made by three different Irish comics and that a separate complaint was raised with Today FM management regarding unsolicited sexual messages that Porter had allegedly sent to a musician earlier that year.

The following day it was reported that a patient in St Patrick's mental health hospital had claimed that Porter had kissed and groped him while visiting the hospital in 2015 when the comedian was presenting a radio show to promote Mental Health Awareness Week.

Porter was presenting his Today FM radio programme when the first story broke and was told about it when he came off air. Already the frenzy of condemnation had begun online.

“ I knew if I tried to weather it publicly, I was going to be dead

“Someone would've said to me: 'There are tweets, people are talking about you...' And from then, everything happened extremely quickly... I was totally overwhelmed, totally unprepared in terms of maturity and I didn't understand or know how to deal with it”

He took an immediate decision to step back from everything.

“It hadn't even been discussed. Nobody had raised it. I wrote on a piece of paper, 'I quit everything'. And underlined it and handed it over. And nobody had asked for that to happen yet. I walked away. I could have been pushed eventually, but I didn't hang around to find out.

“I knew if I tried to weather it publicly, I was going to be dead. I couldn't do it. I was on a knife-edge.”

The allegation by the patient of St Patrick's was the subject of an independent investigation which found Porter had “uninvitedly kissed the complainant on the cheek, in a pose for a photograph”. Through a newspaper article, Porter also learned there was a complaint of sexual assault against him made to An Garda Síochána. He immediately contacted gardaí, but it was a year before he was told what the accusation actually was, which he denied, and it was another year before the Director of Public Prosecutions withdrew the charge against him.

It's clear when talking about it all now that Porter weighs his words very carefully. He's highly wary of “raking over old coals” and doesn't, and probably can't, go into the specifics of the allegations. His focus is on his “fundamental truth, that I had a lot to learn”.

Looking back, he says: “I see an idiot who was really so immature, really naive, and arrogant and insensitive and obnoxious and I could go on and on, but such a stupid young man. And yet I was clueless, oblivious to that fact. As I've learned, we judge others by their actions but we judge ourselves by our intentions. You have to get past [saying] 'what I meant was...' and see it from the outside.”

The allegations against him came just as the MeToo movement was gaining momentum and perceptions were shifting. There were new conversations about the wielding of power.



Al Porter at The Civic Theatre in Tallaght. Photo: Steve Humphreys

Given that he had only been successful for a few years, he never perceived that there had been a power differential between himself and the comedians who had made the allegations. He alludes to the fact that, during the period to which the allegations related, he was young: in his late teens and early 20s.

“But by 24 I had gotten a radio show and my first TV series, it was brand new to me. People started to see me differently but I didn’t. I didn’t move on in my head from being that 20-year-old doing karaoke in Tallaght where everyone knew ‘that’s our Al’. Now I was a ‘public figure’ getting bigger chances and bigger responsibilities.

“At that point in my life, I had never once had the self-awareness to have the conversation about what my position as a public figure meant. Or any conversation that we’re all familiar with now from newspapers about power and influence or anything like that. Those words were alien to me. I’d never given it a second thought.”

That blitheness is there in a 2016 interview with Patrick Freyne in the *Irish Times*, which begins with Porter flirting with the waiter who serves them. “I say that I’m a feminist because I make men feel how they made women feel for hundreds of years. That’s my aim as a feminist hero,” he is quoted as saying.

“I’ve looked back at that comment since and, thought, it was a stupid thing to say,” he says now.

“At that time, I thought the caricature of ‘getting with anybody, anywhere, anytime’ was really funny. And I was under the impression that for somebody to be on the receiving end of that humour, that they might, on the face of it, be the target of the joke, but ultimately you and your caricature is the real target of the joke. But I see how flawed that is now.”



Al Porter took the stand-up circuit by storm. Photo: Tony Gavin

He’s careful to emphasise that nothing in his background serves “as an excuse or way of minimising” what happened. But growing up gay in Tallaght in the Noughties a certain armour was necessary. He saw other boys “disappear into themselves” because they were called a fa**ot.

Porter, dressing in suits, “like a little Joe Dolan”, stood out as obviously gay. He knew, he says: “That I need to own this and use humour as a defence. I remember being 14 or 15, saying to my friend, a girl, ‘I’ll come on to them before they come after me’. I remember lads saying, ‘Al, you f**king fa**ot’. And you’d say: ‘Shut up, you. I wouldn’t ride you. I’d rather get up on a Monday.’”

It was “a way of pointing out the elephant in the room. Of puffing out your chest and saying, ‘I don’t fear, you calling me a fa**ot’. But there was a time and a place for it and nobody arrives when you are leaving school to say, ‘you won’t be needing that now, nobody’s going to call you a fa**ot in the office’. And, to be honest, if you do pre-empt it with, ‘Jesus, you’re gorgeous, I’d love to ride you this weekend’, then ... you’re probably going to get a HR complaint.”

Of course there would be no “office”. As a kid, Porter always seemed destined for something with a shinier floor. He used to put on a white suit and sing Tom Jones’s ‘It’s Not Unusual’ for the neighbours (with some murmuring “it is kind of unusual”, he recalls).

“I think I had a lot in common with Frankie Howard and Larry Grayson and Kenneth Williams in terms of working-class upbringing, very close to [my] mother. Very close to my nana, very close to my sister.”

At 18, he did 10 minutes at a local comedy night in Captain America’s in Tallaght. “I was paid €20, but I would have paid them to let me on. I decided there and then it was what I wanted to do.” He started a degree in English and Philosophy at Trinity College but dropped out – the stage was already calling.

He had a rapid ascent through the world of Irish comedy and while there was some snobbery about the broad material, which leant heavily on camp and double entendres, he had audiences eating out of his hand like few comedy acts before or since. At 22, he sold out Vicar Street for three consecutive nights and his British shows earned rave reviews; the *Guardian* called him a “steamroller crowd-pleasing talent”.

He would sometimes think back on those heights during his sackcloth and ashes years. His weight ballooned as he ate his feelings. “I looked at a menu the way an actor looks at a script where I just flick through pages one to five and go, ‘I’ll do it.’ It was just a challenge to have as much as possible. And I joked about being LGBTQ+. I was the +.” His friends called him Al Porker.

He shakes his head ruefully at the memory of obstructing an arrest on Camden Street in 2019. He was spared a conviction after telling the court it was a “momentary aberration” and that he “was trying to be peacemaker”.

Looking back, he calls it “the greatest example of projection ever – I was like ‘leave him [the person who was being arrested] alone, what if he wants a career in TV?’ And so they arrested me instead. Obviously, I was very, very drunk. And it was the height of it. Let’s just say I was very familiar with the Tesco €20 deal for a litre of vodka.” Weed was “a crutch”, too, he adds, as was Xanax.

With his income decimated, and money running out – he says he hasn’t had any “for a very long time” – he took work in warehouses, packing wine and beer into boxes. CAO forms were filled out and not sent. He applied for visas in the hope of emigrating. He worked behind the scenes in panto, as a lighting technician. He recalls Googling “unpopular Als”. “I was number one, number two was al Queda.”

Through it all he continued going to therapy.

“So I don’t have a mortgage, but I do have insight,” he adds with a twinkle. “Which is small comfort when you’re rocking back and forth in your room going, ‘your health is your wealth’. My friends would text me going: ‘Could you Revolut me the €20 you owe me?’ And I’m there going: ‘No, but I can help you align your chakras.’”

He has worked hard to get sober, and has stayed so for the last two and a half years. He considered coming back to comedy, but then the universe, in the form of the pandemic, intervened. Theatres were shuttered, a comeback was not going to happen.

It was a period when he felt the rest of the world could relate to what he was going through: “Not able to go to work, drinking at home, dreading the future, wondering if you’ll ever have a job again. Everybody was going: ‘What the f**k is going on?’ I was going: ‘Hi, I’ve been here for ages. Hop into my boat.’”

He’s been with his partner for the last seven years. The partner is a “posh southside boy” – “I’m like Pretty Woman,” Porter quips, “except he’s not paying me.”

They went through the worst of the last few years at each other’s side. When the parents of Porter’s partner both became seriously ill, he recalls speaking to his counsellor.

“He said: ‘Tell me what’s going on with you.’ And I said: ‘Well, I’m a national pariah. I can’t show my face outside the house. I’m unemployed. My boyfriend’s unemployed. Both his parents have cancer.’ And the counsellor said: ‘Well, there’s always going to be challenges in your life.’”



Al Porter. Photo: Mark Condren

He moved to an island off the coast of Donegal that has a population of about 400. “My friends were like, ‘Are you trying to go to the furthest place until nobody knows you? Because you’re f**ked if they know you. You’re going to have to go to Greenland then.’ But it’s not about isolating yourself in the world or making yourself remote.

Money has been an issue. He recalls the suicide rumour which says he was found “in his own home”. “My own home?” he says. “In this property market?!” His earnings have been a tiny fraction of what they were. When his brother got married he felt he couldn’t show his face in Louis Copeland, the Dublin tailor shop, because he owed €20,000 there.

He can still laugh at some of the worst times from his downfall. There was a moment after the scandal broke, when dick pics of his made the rounds on social media and he recounts a friend teasing him by reading out an ad for penis enlargement injections. Porter protested that his “photography days” were behind him.

“No, never mind,” his friend added, “it says you have to top them up and the injections cost 10 grand a year.”

“That’s nothing,” Porter quipped, referring to the financial cost of his downfall, “my dick pics cost me 500 grand.”

But behind the jokes, it’s clear that there is a lot of pain and remorse. He looks back on his earlier fame as if through a hall of mirrors, “with all these distorted reflections of yourself looking back at you”.

Now, all these years later, there is a congruity to the man he sees in the mirror. He’s “hyper aware” of the rarity of real second chances, and goes out of his way now to make sure the behind-the-scenes people who work on his shows feel respected.

“I had a big ego. I was naive. But I paid the price. I look at it now and go, ‘Jesus Christ, what were you thinking?’”

The sellout gigs and the groundswell of support they represent are evidence that people want him back. His mission for the tour, titled ‘Al Porter: Now’, is that “people can forget their troubles for an hour and a half.

“I think of my obituary sometimes,” he says, bringing us back, close to where we started. “And I think, ‘If I was hit by a bus tomorrow, the majority of it would be a tough read.’

“It’s a goal to myself to go: ‘Please God, should I be lucky enough to get a long life, I’ll have done so much good that the time between the ages 19 to 23 is a small part of the obituary – and not the whole thing.’

“I can’t change the past but I’ve a chance now to make the future better.”

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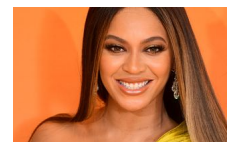
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