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Small Town, Big Story
Sky Atlantic/Now, Thu

Saol na Feirme
RTE1, Mon,



When La-La land comes to a small town

Chris O'Dowd's dramedy is a labour of love. Shame about the aliens

Colliding worlds are both a blessing and a curse in **Small Town, Big Story**. Chris O'Dowd's six-part comedy-drama is a jubilantly daft and largely likeable caper about the mishaps, confusions and happy accidents that ensue when a Hollywood production sets up shop in the Irish backwoods. La-La land comes to Culchieville.

At heart it's a convoluted but amusing saga. Most of its energy derives from sparky ding-dongs between conflicting cultures and competing egos – a battle of wills and wits in which the supposed thicks from the sticks eventually garner the upper hand.

Unfortunately, however, the serial's preoccupation with clashing civilisations also extends to alien incursions of the extraterrestrial kind. From the opening scenes onwards we are left in no doubt that this is an earthy tale with an unearthly undertow – and the long shadow cast by the cosmic malarkey soon becomes a black hole. The faster the story moves away from solid ground, the quicker it loses the plot.

Silliness, in itself, is not the problem. *Small Town, Big Story* is a dramedy that revels in improbability. Much of its comedy emanates from the

cheeky flair with which a far-fetched narrative is implanted in a mundane setting populated by (mostly) believable characters, making even outlandish developments feel somewhat plausible.

Sadly, the same cannot be said about the detour into outer space. There's a slapdash, half-hearted and irredeemably second-rate quality to the sci-fi storyline, a corniness where there should be spookiness.

The titular backwater is Drumbán, a fictional outpost in the border counties. At first glance there's more than a hint of formulaic Irishry to the town's layout and make-up. But it's soon revealed as a bucolic idyll steeped in toxic secrets – *Ballykissangel* meets *Twin Peaks*.

Most of the townsfolk are stereotypes, but there's a snap and edge to much of the dialogue and dynamics that grips the interest, for a while at least.

Small Town, Big Story was clearly a labour of love for O'Dowd, who writes, directs and makes an entertaining splash as a ghastly minor character. The Roscommon-born star has been a Tinseltown luminary for over a decade, but his grip on the

Star power
Paddy Considine and Christina Hendricks in *Small Town, Big Story*

quirks and drollery of middle Ireland is still pretty tight. O'Dowd's bone-dry comic voice and alert sense of everyday absurdity are discernible throughout.

The series is also distinguished by its lead performances. Christina Hendricks and Paddy Considine provide rock-solid anchors amid what is often a churning sea of foaming nonsense. Hendricks is compellingly combative as Wendy Patterson, a heavy-hitter in lightweight American TV. Wendy grew up in Drumbán, but has long since lost her accent and all trace of affection for the auld sod. Her fondness for her home town soured following a life-changing experience in local woodland during the early hours of the millennium – and the subsequent cover-up. The truth is out there and she'd rather forget all about it.

Wendy's latest production is an adaption of "I Am Celt", a bonkers swords-and-sandals caper welded to a bonkbuster version of Gaelic mythology. Location shooting takes place around Drumbán and Wendy tags along, vaguely hoping to settle old scores and, maybe, slay old demons.

O'Dowd's grip on the quirks of middle Ireland is still pretty tight

Her most bitterly unresolved issues involve Séamus Proctor (Considine), the town's GP and most solid citizen. Séamus was Wendy's boyfriend on that fateful New Year's Eve and did not cover himself in glory. His apparently contented life is, we discover, an elaborate mirage.

All of this is engagingly told. It's soapy melodrama with darts of high emotion and a decent smattering of good jokes. Supporting roles are enlivened by spirited turns from a hefty array of notable Irish actors.

Music plays a big part, both as plot device and scene-setter. The soundtrack is a consistent highlight: an apt and atmospheric blend of pop, cabaret and trad. Joe Dolan's greatest hits are also liberally deployed to good effect.

Ultimately, however, even these considerable strengths are not strong enough to compensate for the show's inherent rickety. Oddly, for a dramedy about odd couplings, the series is itself a mismatch of elements that never quite coheres. The *Small Town* tale has a winning sparkle but the *Big Story* yarn is a damp squib.

Mud-locked pastures and uphill struggles were the defining features of **Saol na**

Feirme, the opening instalment in another run of hardscrabble despatches from the farming front lines. Yet, despite the myriad hardships and downpours on display, the show's presentation was relentlessly sunny.

Some of the most jarring notes were struck by overly perky background music. While the storylines were all about weathering the storm and keeping one's head above water, the soundtrack seemed hellbent on singing in the rain. *Saol na Feirme* (*Life on the Farm*) is elegantly made and eagle-eyed. But, like all too many programmes about rural Ireland, it seems to have been devised primarily as comfort viewing for city dwellers.

Chocolate-box vistas and kitschy-cute vignettes are afforded inordinate prominence. In tone and content, meanwhile, the voiceover is facile and sometimes laughably flowery.

Harsh realities are not ignored, but challenging news from the troughs and trenches is always delivered in a muted, diluted or artificially sweetened manner.

Like its predecessor, season two glistens with dramatic potential. Seven farming families from disparate districts and disciplines are followed across the course of a year. Poor prices, spiralling costs and atrocious weather have conspired to cut the ground from beneath several participants – and survival options are narrowing.

Tillage, dairy, sheepherding and vegetable-growing concerns dominate, and we learn a little about the rapid pace of change in each field. We also meet farmers who are trying to cultivate fresh thinking or imported ideas. But diversification is fraught with risk.

Infotainment doesn't have to be cheap fodder. With a little more rigour and a lot less romanticism *Saol na Feirme* could become a much more productive operation, offering gritty insight into the unforgiving nature of farming life. At crucial intervals, however, the programme-makers seem vastly more fascinated by the majestic grandeur of the landscape than the messy business of the land. Too much chaff, not enough wheat.

Where is Ireland's arts ambition?

We shy away from big plans for the arts, but the commitment of cities such as Oslo and Nantes could point the way forward. By Aoife Barry

Does Ireland need more "notions" (ie thinking highly of yourself, perhaps a little too highly at times) when it comes to the arts? I wonder if notions might lead those with the ultimate control over the infrastructure that facilitates art-making and public art funding here to make more long-term, forward-thinking decisions.

This feels all the more pertinent these days, with a new arts and culture minister in place. Every time a new government is elected, there are the usual worries about what will remain and what could be forgotten now that the old ministers are gone.

Recently I had a few chats with people that got me thinking about this idea of notions. The first person was a pal who works in academia in Oslo, who told me that the city has publicly funded rehearsal studios. The second was a tourist rep who told me about how the French city of Nantes had transformed itself from a struggling port city to a haven of public art. The third was a band member who was impressed by state-subsidised French gig venues that aren't centred on selling alcohol.

These chats took place around the time of the breaking news about the Arts Council's IT spend. Readers of last week's column will know my thoughts on that, which includes the necessity of funding the arts. But seeing how other countries approach the arts as a whole shows me how much more Ireland could be doing. I don't just mean with regards to money. Mindset is a crucial part: thinking outside the box, a willingness to try new things. That's where the notions come in.

Of course, we're not a country devoid of artistic pride. You can find poetry on the Dart; we put up statues of our favourite writers. And we can and do take inspiration from other countries. For

example, there's the Per Cent for Art Scheme, which has been going since 1978 and means 1 per cent of the cost of any publicly funded capital, infrastructural and building development can go towards commissioning a work of public art. It became government policy in 1997. Finland introduced a similar policy in the 1930s, as did Czechoslovakia in the 1960s.

The aforementioned port city of Nantes really interested me because of the parallels to a city like Dublin. In Dublin, the Docklands area has been transformed into a haven for big tech companies. It has some cultural spots, but nothing like what you'd find in Nantes, where public art runs riot, particularly during the summer. This didn't just happen out of the blue – it needed notions. In the 1980s

Nantes has transformed from a struggling port city to a haven for art

Notions in action
Public art in Nantes



an artistic director called Jean Blaise teamed up with the city's socialist mayor, Jean-Marc Ayrault, to change things, pledging to put on free cultural events outdoors or in public spaces. It all helped contribute to the city's regeneration.

Blaise told *The Guardian* in 2016 that he was asked by some people why their taxes were being wasted, but the attitude eventually swerved towards understanding the positive impact of prioritising the arts in Nantes.

Norway, meanwhile, has a strong history of publicly funding artists. Yet I think it's important not to imagine utopia where it doesn't exist. In an article in the publication *Elephant Magazine*, I found this quote from the Norwegian artist Anja Carr: "The grants are constantly threatened politically and we have to fight for these rights that other artists before us have given us, We never know about the future." Notions can only bring you so far.

In a small country such as Ireland we can't do things in the same way as countries with larger budgets, higher tax rates or bigger populations. But we can do our own thing. Yet I wonder if the cultural fear of "getting too big for your boots" extends to how we make long-term, impactful decisions around the arts here; if it's in part behind why it's now common for venues to be closed or turned into hotels, for late-night venues and rehearsal studios to diminish in number. Or why we haven't a strong history of turning empty industrial buildings into cultural hotspots, preferring them to be used for commercial purposes. Hopefully the forthcoming Artist Campus at Dublin Port will show that big thinking is possible and laudable.

Maybe if Ireland had notions, we'd be able to move beyond the government-by-government, piece-by-piece approach we have here. An injection of notions would make the powers-that-be realise that the arts is an ecosystem that needs enduring nourishment. That an inconsistent government approach can make people lose confidence. That public funding is less an option than a necessity. That another exciting future is possible.