

By Colm McGuirk

THE rising star of an Oscar-longlisted Irish short film has his sights set on the Late Late Show and partying with Elton John – three years on from a ‘life-changing’ appearance on Tommy Tiernan’s chat show.

Mark Smith has his first narrative screen role in *Headspace*, written and directed by Aisling Byrne and in contention for an Academy Award nomination after winning the Oscar-qualifying award at Cork Film Festival late last year.

And the Co. Meath actor, who has Down’s syndrome, is hoping to follow in the footsteps of James Martin, who had a main part in the Oscar-winning *An Irish Goodbye*, by appearing on the Late Late Show and hobnobbing with A-listers.

His long-time collaborator, Ms Byrne, told the Irish Mail on Sunday the ‘big believer’ in the laws of attraction ‘has his sights firmly set’ on Patrick Kielty’s revamped chat show.

‘He’s telling everybody that he’s going to be on the Late Late Show,’ she said. ‘There’s absolutely nothing in train for that, but he’s just speaking it into existence.’

The founder and artistic director of Run Of The Mill theatre company, whose members have intellectual disabilities, and her leading man already appeared on the Tommy Tiernan Show in 2020.

‘The appearance changed Mark’s life’

The invitation came after the ‘very pivotal’ earlier collaboration, *Making A Mark* – an award-winning semi-autobiographical one-man play starring Mr Smith, co-created by the duo with director and chief writer Shaun Dunne.

Mr Byrne said people still remark on the Tommy Tiernan Show interview.

‘We got a lot of response from people with Down’s syndrome or an intellectual disability or a family member saying “I flicked on the television and saw that and it just made me think, Oh my God, look at what this guy’s achieving.”’

The appearance ‘changed Mark’s life’, she said.

‘And his notoriety at the deli counter in Celbridge, I can tell you that. Mark is like Troy McClure [from *The Simpsons*], saying “You probably saw me on the Tommy Tiernan Show?”’

‘And I’m like, “They probably didn’t. We can’t keep dining out on that,” she laughed.

The rising actor is ‘dying to meet’ – and maybe collaborate with – *An Irish Goodbye* star Mr Martin, whose triumph at the Oscars in March saw him mingling with Elton John at an after-party, leading to mild envy from Mr Smith amid the admiration.

Any superficial similarities between *An Irish Goodbye* and *Headspace* – both comedies set in rural Ireland whose lead characters have Down’s – are a ‘happy coincidence’, Ms Byrne said.

The two films were made ‘ignorant of each other’ at around the same time and are very different, though Ms Byrne acknowledges a mild concern that ‘lightning won’t strike twice’.

She said: ‘*An Irish* film reaching the pinnacle of success in the live action short category next year again... What are the odds? And

Mark Smith hopes to achieve a second Oscar for people with Down’s... and it all started on comedian’s chat show

You probably saw me on The Tommy Tiernan Show?

CHAT: Mark Smith would love to appear on the Late Late Show



FILM: Aisling Byrne says Mark is hoping to emulate James Martin’s success (right) after he appeared on the Tommy Tiernan show (above)



In *Headspace*, Mr Smith’s character Tony struggles to get some peace and quiet in the community home he lives in, where another of the residents won’t stop playing Joe Dolan’s *Good Looking Woman*.

It won the Oscar-qualifying award at the Cork Film Festival last November, putting it into contention for consideration at the 2024 Academy Awards ceremony, though there are several more rounds of whittling down before the final nominees are announced.

The film festival circuit – essential for bumping up a film’s chances come awards season – has taken the *Headspace* cast and crew to North America, the UK and around Ireland, and Ms Byrne called it ‘great fun’.

She was so impressed with Mr Smith’s co-star in *Headspace*, Daniel Ryan, that she wrote another short especially for him, *Misread*, for which she also has ‘high festival hopes’.

Mr Ryan is another of the Run Of The Mill troupe, while another, teenager Luis Allen, will appear later in *The Obituary* star-

ring Michael Smiley and Danielle Galligan, currently airing on RTÉ.

Ms Byrne describes the growing representation of people with intellectual disabilities on screen – who are more than a prop or plot point – as ‘a quiet revolution’ kick-started by ‘trailblazer’ independent filmmakers.

‘I think we are definitely reaching a tipping point in terms of the

‘Oh my God, look at what this guy’s achieving’

appetite for inclusion and diversity on our screens and on our stages, because people are ready to hear voices from the periphery. People are ready to see rich, authentic, reflective, multi-dimensional characters that are well written on our screens.’

She said with that appetite comes ‘a huge industry-wide responsibility to do it in the right way’.

She said: ‘Without sounding cynical, inclusion can sometimes

become buzzy. If it becomes kind of juicy for casting directors to have diversity on their screen, we have a responsibility to make sure that we’re investing in the talent.’

The director, whose work ‘will always be socially engaged’ though not necessarily featuring characters with disabilities, has been ‘a fly on that wall’ of disability services in Ireland for almost 12 years working with the theatre group, which is based in Celbridge, Co. Kildare.

And her mother worked in disability services locally for 30 years, spurring her to start the group in the first place.

‘You’ve got some amazing natural characters within services in Ireland but also lots of stories from within the walls,’ she said.

‘I spent so many years making theatre with the artists at Run Of The Mill, so when I was turning to film, it felt natural to me to write from the world I knew. Also, I’m really interested in telling stories that showcase experiences that we don’t get to see or people we don’t get to hear from.’

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