

Peter Hanly in *What Are You Afraid Of?* Photograph: Dylan Vaughan/Rough Magic



THE ACTOR WHO DISAPPEARED

Peter Hanly was one of Ireland's most recognisable performers on stage and screen. Then he vanished. Now, more than a decade after his last appearance, he has found a way to talk about what happened

DEIRDRE FALVEY

‘You meet someone from the business, and they ask have you anything coming up? Sometimes I’m thinking, have they heard? Or have they heard but can’t remember whether they’re allowed to talk about it? Or is it all just too embarrassing? Either way, I’m thinking: I was an actor for 30 years, show after show after show, and then it stopped. Did no one fucking notice? Did you not miss me? No?”

“The business” is show. Peter Hanly was at the top of his game for years and years, a regular with Rough Magic, and on the Abbey, Gate and multiple other stages, as well as on screen, most prominently in *Braveheart* and *Ballykissangel*. He was an excellent actor, with terrific



range, from comedy to serious drama. Then, suddenly, he was nowhere to be seen. What happened?

What happened was stage fright. In 2011, during a dress rehearsal for Brian Friel’s play *Molly Sweeney*, at the Gate Theatre in Dublin, he was afflicted with a sudden, overwhelming anxiety that he would forget the lines he knew well. “I felt that I couldn’t continue. But I did continue somehow.” It’s a monologue play with “a lot of learning in it”. “I remember being on stage at the start of that dress rehearsal, in my position stage left, and I wanted so much to leave, to be allowed to leave, to be anywhere else.” He knew his lines but “just couldn’t believe that I knew them, that they would all be there waiting for me when I needed them”.

This feeling continued for a year and a half, “until the constant terror of thinking I’m going to forget a line caused me to quit altogether”.

The startling thing about Hanly talking about this is that he’s doing so from a stage. Thirteen years later, here he is writing, and performing in, a play about it all. Hanly is managing it with crutches of sorts: a script in hand, or reading autocue. There are two other actors and sophisticated stage tech. This taster, a work in progress of about a third of the script, was presented this month by its producers, Rough Magic and Kilkenny Arts Festival. The finished show will premiere at next year’s Kilkenny festival, then go to Dublin Theatre Festival and, with luck, tour. (It all relies on funding.)

What Are You Afraid Of? is a very polished work in progress, fragments of an episodic script in a slick production full of theatrical flourishes and fun with spotlights and voiceovers and video. It’s intriguing, self-reflective, very moving, dark, but also very funny. You get the sense that the

finished production will be something special.

The day afterwards, Hanly says that when he started writing he liked the idea of “using the subject of my stage fright not only to put me up on stage again but to allow me to get my writing onstage. Writing being the saviour for me. And an act of revenge. Revenge sounds a bit melodramatic – not a very positive emotion. But yes – with tongue in cheek, perhaps – I’m getting my own back on the stage fright. Finding a positive out of a negative.”

His initial idea was to begin within the audience, with the stage manager’s voice giving preshow calls that were also audible to the audience. He’s “like a frightened Pavlov’s dog, responding but not wanting to, saying, ‘No, no, I’m not in this,’ but she insists and I have to get onstage. There’s this kind of imperative of ‘the show must go on!’ within me. So I start speaking.” As it gradually took shape, other characters emerged: the stage manager’s critical voice, Hanly’s great-grandfather, various therapists he looks to for help.

The work in progress played to a warm and very appreciative festival audience of more than 400 in a sold-out Watergate Theatre. There’s an excitement and an exhilaration. “It had been years and years since I’d had a reaction,” he says. It’s the actor’s own story, but it’s really about anxiety and vulnerability and fear, giving it wider purchase. It takes Hanly about an hour afterwards to get off the stage, out of the Watergate and across the road to Cleere’s Bar to meet his colleagues. “It was

a pleasure to be so delayed, people just coming up, audience, family, theatre people.”

Before the performance he had walked outside around the theatre with the show’s (real) stage manager, Emily Waters. “I felt fine. I felt that frisson, those nerves you have. I felt: This is something of value, and lots of this works; maybe all of it works. And: don’t fuck up.”

After he stopped performing Hanly started writing, including screenplays, getting Screen Ireland development funding for one, though it wasn’t made. But his experience was in theatre, so that’s where he turned. Rough Magic did a family-and-friends reading a year ago, and he performed a snippet at the company’s 40th-birthday celebrations in February. He loved the rehearsals, collaborating with the creative team, building towards this Kilkenny presentation. “It was really, really fulfilling.”

His anxiety is fear not of being onstage but of forgetting. He has done readings and radio plays, and he performed in *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry*, a verbatim drama that Parker directed on the Abbey’s Peacock stage, for which everyone used scripts. “None of these things challenged me in any way that upset me,” he says later. “It’s not being in front of an audience per se. When I’m holding the script, or reading from the autocue, I’m fine. I’m absolutely fine. It’s this thing of, you don’t know these words, these words you’ve learned and you’ve known for the last month. You know what? You

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Peter Hanly with Cathy White in *Improbable Frequency* at Dublin Theatre Festival 2004. Below: with Sophie Marceau in *Braveheart*. Photographs: Rough Magic; Moviestore/Shutterstock

❖ don't know them. You can't get through it. It's this irrational voice in the head, the anxiety around that."

He is not over it. "Even if I was offered some lovely regular acting job, with only 30 lines, 50 lines, I know I could learn that, but I know I'd be absolutely miserable and anxious. That's why I had to back out of all that."

The losses include identity. "Acting is a vocation, more than a job. And who are you, then, when you're not an actor, when you lose it? You hang too much of your own self, your own being, on the acting hook, maybe."

Suddenly unable to act, Hanly lost his income too. "I was proud of being able to earn a living exclusively from acting for about 30 years, and when that source of income stopped it was very difficult in lots of ways. My pride, self-esteem, and literally not having money in my pocket. What does that mean to you, when you're not earning and you're not contributing as much to the family coffers? With no hope in sight of being able to. And years and years passing. I'm so grateful to my wife, Jen, for taking the reins and pivoting workwise, adapting and taking other jobs to keep us going and pay the mortgage. She gave me permission, as it were, to stop."

Jennifer O'Dea is an actor, too; she also works in corporate role-play and executive coaching. They have a 21-year-old daughter and 18-year-old son. "Thankfully, I've had great support at home. And now things are moving a little. There's hope."

Hanly is pleased people feel *What Are You Afraid Of?* works beyond an examination of performance nerves. "One person said it chimed about grief and loss.

Sometimes, if you go for the specific, your own experience, and you're honest with it, it has a universality and resonates."

Actors who've seen it had "great empathy"; it also "frightened the shit out of some people. They're saying to me, 'Yeah, this is very familiar territory, unfortunately.' Different degrees of being affected by performance anxiety." Often "it's older actors, who've been at it a long time and this visits them. It's not the 25-year-old who's nervous going on. This questions something you know how to do. You've done it 1,000 times, but it undermines it."

He mentions Simone Biles Rising, the recent Netflix documentary; the gymnast had a similar experience at the Tokyo Olympics, in 2021, suddenly no longer able, mid-routine, to picture herself finishing it, "like an actor's self-doubt creeping in. It's nothing to do with anything physical or, in my case, actual memory problems. It's phobic, it's irrational."

Next up for Hanly is revising his script and pondering its resolution. There are no easy endings.

This show aside, will he act again, perhaps using in-ear technology or autocue? "That's up to [theatre] employers and whether they'd want to do that. I don't think I'd be happy in-ear. I can do other readings, radio plays. The way I envisage my future is not that this play will get me back onstage again. Anyone who sees the full play will realise I'm not in a position at the moment to get back doing regular productions at all, unfortunately. But I do hope to be a playwright."

He has written other scripts; there is interest from theatres. He has applied for Arts Council project funding. "I hope I'd

have a future as a playwright."

"Most of my friends are actors. I don't want to be slagging off actors! They're my people, my community, or they have been. The show features darker moments from inside my brain over the last 12 years. For example, the scenes with therapists, though they may be comic – I hope they are – actually, that's me going to a therapist and it not working. But I'm not saying therapists are all crap." He smiles.

As an actor he was nuanced, showed vulnerability. There's vulnerability in Peter Hanly the person too. *Did you not miss me?* "People actually have said, 'We miss you. We'd love you back.' At which point I probably well up and shed a tear. It's wonderful, moving, to hear those things. But, nevertheless, that doesn't stop me at other stages, when I'm sitting at home on my own and I'm trying to be positive, perhaps failing sometimes, when I feel, well, 'Does my absence make any difference? Did my presence as an actor make any difference?' It's the negative stuff, I suppose, I'm representing in this piece, the darker, the self-destructive, as a way to ... Well, better out than in. And I suppose as a way to connect with people, making it more universal, this self-esteem thing, the destructive voices. This sense of loss, and then grief for the loss."

One section that he wrote, took out, put back is "where I'm critical of myself as a parent". His own parents had Alzheimer's, another source of memory anxiety. Parenting is "something I beat myself up over, that there were times I could have been better". He was unsure about using it, "because it is kind of raw. It's a bit revealing, but at the same time it's very commonplace. It's a difficult task being a parent. And maybe fathers, men, don't always talk to each other as much as women do about difficult feelings. I hope this would be a bit of a reaching-out to people in the audience, maybe some fathers in the audience, who might be beating themselves up, and encouraging them not to, that we're all in this together. And actually we're all doing our best most of the time."

From early on, after Hanly froze, the writer Gerry Stembridge was an informal mentor, for which he is grateful. "When I started telling people, 'I'm not working as an actor any more – I have this problem,' he really sympathised, and put his time where his mouth was," Hanly says. Stembridge asked to read his work, and continues to give feedback. "I don't think there'd be any writing without Gerry Stembridge. And there'd be no *What Are You Afraid Of?* if it wasn't for Rough Magic. Huge gratitude to Lynne. As soon as I mentioned it she was all eyes and all ears and great encouragement. Then Olga Barry and Kilkenny" – the arts festival and its director – "stepped in really early and said, 'Yes, we'd love to do this with you.'"

Performing for a huge, responsive audience after such a gap "felt kind of extraordinary. It felt like I was just landed, placed gently and kindly into this environment of great appreciation and empathy and celebration from that audience. It was wonderful." What about the Kilkenny festival run of the finished work, in the summer of 2025? "I hope we can sell out again." ●



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