

THE LAUGHS GO ON, GO ON, GO ON

As Pauline McLynn and Ardal O'Hanlon reunite on a new show, they speak to *Róisín Healy* about finding humour in tragedy and the enduring appeal of *Father Ted*



Is there an iconic Dougal and Mrs Doyle moment? Well, if you type their names into YouTube, the first result is a clip where Mrs Doyle is giving Dougal a bath, scrubbing under his arms like a child.

I don't know what that says about fans of the show and their hopes for the priest and his housekeeper, but I imagine those viewers were happy at the news that Ardal O'Hanlon and Pauline McLynn are to reunite on screen. This time they play husband and wife – no word yet on any bathtub scenes.

They star as the parents of a recovering addict, played by Sheridan Smith, in a new Sky series, *Rosie Molloy Gives Up Everything*. And I'll save you a Google search; there's just a few years between O'Hanlon and McLynn, and, yes, they are old enough, just about, to have a daughter Sheridan's age.

Whether their pairing was a calculated production ploy or divine

inspiration, McLynn explains that neither of them saw it coming.

"It was a pleasant surprise. It has been so long – we haven't been on the television together since *Father Ted*, which is over 24 years ago. So for that reason Ardal O'Hanlon was just the last name I was expecting, ever," she says.

It's clear from the moment they appear on screen together that this chemistry works.

"I think it's inspired casting, in the sense that because we know each other so well, and because we go way back, we were able I think to make for a very convincing couple," O'Hanlon says. "The slagging is there, the bickering is there. You know, I feel I can say anything to Pauline, I could say more to her than I could my own wife."

While the show follows the train wreck Rosie and the carnage she leaves in her wake, McLynn and O'Hanlon's characters are given some of the best lines in the show. They're richly drawn

characters and straight away you're intrigued by the Northern Irish couple.

Having had more than their fair share of loss and sorrow, they're decidedly nonjudgmental of their daughter's antics. In fact they may not be the best influence, O'Hanlon says, which makes for refreshing viewing.

"Comedy is often underestimated, I think, or seen as the poor cousin of drama. You see that with stand-up as well. It might be considered a slightly inferior art form by some. This show doesn't judge, but it is coming from a place of truth and honesty," he says.

"I would also stress the point that I don't think this show in any way trivialises those very difficult issues that an awful lot of people suffer from, and their families as well because of that behaviour," he adds.

In the first episode they break the news to Rosie that Conall [played by O'Hanlon] has received a devastating diagnosis, that Win [McLynn] puts

down to "the fags, the boozing, and the daily pound of bacon". Through gallows humour the family reckon with real-life issues such as grief, addiction and illness.

O'Hanlon points out that some of the most successful comedies of today blur the lines between comedy and drama.

"You see it in something like *Derry Girls*, the last episode particularly, which I was lucky enough to have a small cameo in. That dealt with the agreement and the legacy of the Troubles, and it told that little bit of the history of the recent politics of Northern Ireland, and presented that to a mainstream British audience," O'Hanlon says.

"You know, they learnt more about Northern Ireland in an hour of comedy than they did watching the news 20 years ago. That to me reinforces the point that sometimes comedy is the best vehicle for dealing with these kinds of things."

It has been a busy year for both of them. We recently saw McLynn play the local busybody in the Graham Norton series *Holding*, set in West Cork.

"It was so great to be making something in Ireland. It had such a brilliant cast, and of course the director Kathy Burke is such an icon. She is so admired, the last thing you'd want to be is a disappointment to her, so you worked extra hard," McLynn says.

"It was wonderful to play a larger-than-life woman who thought she knew everything. She wanted to drag that town up by the bootstraps." O'Hanlon meanwhile published his second novel, *Brouhaha*, in March, 25 years after his first. He returned to stand-up, doing festivals in Ireland and the UK, as well as a US tour.

"It was just joyful to do stand-up again and enjoy it, possibly in a way that I never enjoyed it in the past. I think that's a consequence of the pandemic," O'Hanlon says.

Father figures Ardal O'Hanlon and Pauline McLynn with Sherdian Smith, above and above left. Below: with Dermot Morgan and Frank Kelly in *Father Ted*

“It’s the thing I probably hear the most: ‘Cup of tea, Father?’”



"After that now I just want to embrace everything 100 per cent. That is why I did *Taskmaster*, which came out in March. It's the kind of show I would not have done three years ago, because I'd be shy. I wouldn't want to be myself, not that I was precious, but more out of self-preservation.

"I was never the panel show guy, I never wanted to be that guy. Looking back now I regret that, because doing *Taskmaster* was the best fun I have ever had in my life."

McLynn steps in with a question of her own.

"Would you say, maybe it is the thing with getting older, that you get a

bit more relaxed with yourself? I certainly do."

"You get over yourself. You're not so worried about what people think, and that's definitely an ageing thing," O'Hanlon says. "You get a bit more sure of your place in the world. You don't feel that you have to prove yourself all the time."

McLynn nods. "I think it's something we Irish are very bad at, we can't seem to stop giving ourselves a hard time. And the other very Irish thing is that great fear of coming across as having notions about yourself. The Irish are good for keeping ourselves grounded," she says.

O'Hanlon laughs. "That's why I called my stand-up show *The Showing Off Must Go On*. It is that very reason; you love your show, you love your work, you love what you do, but you're conflicted, because it is showing off. And I mean, there is nothing worse than being a big show-off," he says.

"I haven't even told my parents I do stand-up. If they knew, they'd be very disappointed."

Jokes aside, there is no denying that this pair have a talent and warmth that audiences adore. That's all part of the magic of *Father Ted*.

"Each year a younger generation of kids come to it and once they see it they love it and they're hanging on to it for decades to come," McLynn says.

"What I love about it is that it is name-checked all the time. Whenever there is a protest, you see people with the signs 'Careful now' and 'Down with this sort of thing,'" O'Hanlon says.

Both find it lovely that they encounter fans wherever they go.

"While obviously Pauline is offered tea constantly, it's also the thing I probably hear the most, 'Cup of tea, Father?'" O'Hanlon says.

"We both feel the same, it doesn't matter how often we hear it. I have absolutely nothing but fondness for it [*Father Ted*] and that time we all spent together."

And when they're channel-hopping at home, and inevitably come across an episode, do they watch it?

O'Hanlon looks a bit sheepish. "I'm always struck by my own unprofessionalism. I always seem to be laughing in the background at whatever Dermot, Frank or Pauline are doing. Look out for it," O'Hanlon says.

McLynn reveals that his laughter was contagious.

"I have to say, it was the only show I've ever done actually where laughs were taken out. Because the live audience could see everything that was going on, and just as the action was about to happen, they'd see your man laughing."

Who could blame him? 🍵

Rosie Molloy Gives Up Everything is on Sky Comedy and *Now from December 7*

Living

Close Encounters Kathryn Thomas

A kind of *awakening*

The TV presenter knows that women have to 'find their own thing' when it comes to exercise and she feels the power when they do, she tells *Róisín Healy*

Kathryn Thomas seems to have life figured out. She balances her demanding role as an RTE presenter with her wellness retreat business, Pure Results, while raising her two little girls Ellie and Grace with her husband, Padraig McLoughlin. She seems to have boundless energy and a natural love of exercise, which is certainly elusive to many of us.

But the real secret is that Thomas has people figured out. She takes an interest in others and it shows, particularly in the few days I spent with her at the recent Pure Results Hike Yoga Swim retreat at the Armada Hotel in Clare. Thomas believes that bringing people together helps to unlock their potential.

"I'm fascinated by groups, by groups of women together and I think there is such power in it," she says. "Something special happens when women spend five or seven days together, outside of their immediate circle and who they know. There is a freedom that comes with that, a kind of awakening.

"I see it a lot when we're hiking. You step in and out of conversations, get comfortable, and people open up. I have had so many conversations with women, whether that is about trying to have a family, the difficulties of being a parent, or the struggle to juggle when you're a full-time working mother. Or it could be conversations around body positivity, or where we're going to be with social media in ten years' time. I have had the most

inspiring conversations on hikes like that over the years, so I see the power in it."

But she knows that it takes a lot for women to go on a retreat such as this, to walk into an exercise class, or even to lace up their trainers to go for a run.

"There is something about the way that we are programmed as women, that there are a lot of women whose first thought is 'I don't want to be the slowest', or 'I don't want to hold anybody up', or 'I don't want to be the oldest'," Thomas says.

"Look, sometimes it is myself included, but it never ceases to blow my mind that so many of us feel that way so often. That is why I want to get the message out there to people, that it's OK if certain types of exercise aren't your thing, you just have to find your thing."

While she still loves an intense exercise class, her own relationship with fitness has evolved over time.

"My attitude to fitness hasn't changed, but I am a mother of two, I'm in my forties, and I know I'm probably not able to squat or bench press what I did before."

It's why she wanted to create a different type of Pure Results experience. Instead of the usual bootcamp week with HIIT classes and boxercise sessions, this getaway at Spanish Point is about connecting with nature and a slower pace of life.

"I was at the hotel with Padraig and the girls and it inspired it all. The sea is right on your doorstep for a morning swim, and John Burke has created this hotel where wellness isn't just a word that is



The television presenter Kathryn Thomas runs a hike, swim, yoga retreat for women at the Armada Hotel on the Clare coast, far right

“I know that I am someone who has to take my own medicine

bandied about, it's really put into action." Thomas's own love of the outdoors has only grown since her *No Frontiers* days.

"I was very fortunate to work in a job where I was always hiking, kayaking or doing yoga. I was always outside since I started on that show when I was 21. The older I got, the more it became my way of life."

Thomas knows all too well how important it is to get time away from the demands of family and work life. She had to cut short her time at the recent Armada Hotel retreat when duty called.

"I was looking forward to swimming every day and all the hikes and yoga classes. I was really planning on switching off too. But just as happens to all moms and dads, the compass shifted dramatically," she says.

"I got a phone call to say that my second child, Grace, had had an accident. She had fallen, broken her

two front teeth, and Padraig had taken her to Crumlin Hospital. I literally legged it back to Dublin. She is grand now, she had to get two little caps on her teeth, and must go back next month for an x-ray.

"But I know that I am someone who has to take my own medicine that I dish out, and take a break, particularly now since Grace has come along. I have to put myself first and recharge the batteries. So I've already had that conversation with my husband, that I need to take a day or two for myself after that and of course he said '100 per cent'. He has a motorbike trip planned somewhere, he needs time out too.

"I see it with my clients all the time, it's so important to step out of work, close down all those neurotransmitters that are open in your brain and to just sit in stillness and do something that gets you away from it all."



THE PURE RESULTS EXPERIENCE

Hands up if you feel like being constantly on the go is starting to take its toll? This is certainly how I felt as I dashed into the Armada Hotel, late to the Pure Results welcome session.

Everyone in the room had their own motivations for being there, from the active spirits taking time for themselves to those who wanted a gentle introduction to movement. The focus was very much about feeling better, and going by the energy in the room, making the choice to go on the retreat was a significant first step on their journey to calm.

One woman wanted to embrace fitness and wellbeing more as she approached retirement. Another was determined to take more time for herself away from her stressful job. One

was keen to travel solo and take on new challenges.

In the luxe surroundings of the newly refurbished restaurant space, rather than the food you might expect on a bootcamp-style retreat, we were treated to a choice of rich, hearty foods, from featherblade with piles of creamy mash and hake with grilled vegetables and dauphinoise potatoes. It reflected the nature of this retreat: this was a weekend of filling up our reservoirs, of savouring the simple pleasures.

The programme of yoga classes Helen Plass lead us through were relaxed and gentle, yet really had an effect on the body. In the mornings, we slowly stretched to wake up our bodies, during the day we worked on releasing pent-up tension and easing tired muscles from our hikes, and in the evening, she guided us through poses and meditations to encourage a restful sleep.

But this isn't a rigid regime, or too stuffy and serious — the atmosphere is unlike any other exercise class or wellness retreat I have attended. It's more relaxed and laid-back, and that's down to Thomas and Plass's refreshing

approach, putting people at ease and having the craic, too.

We got to know Spanish Point with a guided walk, as well as a hike of the Cliffs of Moher, which should be on anyone's itinerary when visiting this part of Clare. The sea swims each morning with June Curtin of Snamhái Sasta were not just invigorating but life-affirming. Curtin is a mental health advocate, having found solace in sea swimming every day at Spanish Point after her husband died. Braving the cold water together as a group, the endorphin rush and sense of accomplishment after, was the high point for most on the retreat. There's the power of the sea, and braving the cold water with a group of women by your side.

Unlike bootcamps where you push yourself through with the promise of endorphins at the end, or wellness escapes that take themselves too seriously, this is a retreat to enjoy every second of, as well as that glow you feel afterwards.

Róisín Healy was a guest of Pure Results. The next Pure Results Hike Yoga Swim all-inclusive retreat at the Armada Hotel is on May 21-26, 2023. Twin room €1,299pp; single room €1,699pp; pureresults.ie

Living

Close Encounters
Chris O'Dowd

'I never thought I would end up doing comedies'

Chris O'Dowd may be a world-famous film star with A-list friends and a home in sunny California, but Ireland continues to entice him back, he tells *Róisín Healy*

Even a household name such as Chris O'Dowd still finds it surreal that he rubs shoulders with A-listers. He recalls one such meeting when he was starring in *Of Mice and Men* on Broadway.

"It's mad, the people who come to Broadway plays. I remember Lady Gaga was coming, we held off the show for a couple of minutes because she got stuck in traffic. Somebody said she'll probably sneak in the back," O'Dowd says.

"But we looked out from behind the curtain, and she was wearing what looked like a womb. She looked amazing, but the idea that she was going to sneak in the back was so funny.

"And she gave me a Mars bar. I remember she said, 'I meant to get you a gift but I forgot, have this as you used up so much energy.'"

As the conversation moves from absurd industry moments like this to his long list of hit films and TV shows, O'Dowd looks almost as if he might pinch himself at any moment. As if only in a dream world could one of the world's biggest pop stars, dressed as a uterus, slip into a theatre unnoticed, and a former goalie for Roscommon's minor team could become a bona fide star.

"Broadway was great craic and it was really special to be a part of," he says. "Like it wasn't really that long before that that I wasn't really making a living from it, so then to see my head up there [on billboards] was quite odd."

He should be used to seeing his name in lights by now, from finding success with *The IT Crowd* and playing the love interest

in *Bridesmaids* to TV roles in Lena Dunham's *Girls* and Nick Hornby's *State of the Union*. But this isn't something he envisioned while studying at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art.

"I definitely never thought I would end up doing comedies because I went to a Shakespearean drama school where we did a lot of Renaissance dancing. It was all people taking themselves very f***ing seriously. At that time I was working on a building site. I would get up at 5.30am and work on the site for a few hours before I had to take off the muddy boots and go to a salsa class, because I had to. It was an odd sensation."

He is quick to play down his part in creating fan-favourite characters. "It's mostly because I have been blessed with amazing writers – the best comedy writers that ever lived. *The IT Crowd* was amazing, then you know, Judd Apatow and Kristen Wiig, these are top-notch people, so the lines are memorable. I think the fact that I'm the one doing them is probably less so, because whoever would have been doing them would be great. I feel lucky."

He suggests it might be something about the humanity of his characters that makes them so endearing. "Roy [in *The IT Crowd*] was a mess. He wasn't pretending to be the most perfect person in the world. The cop fella in *Bridesmaids*



Above: Chris O'Dowd. Left: with his wife, Dawn O'Porter. Far right: at the LA premiere of *Slumberland* with the director Francis Lawrence and co-stars Marlow Barkley, Jason Momoa, India de Beaufort and Kyle Chandler

was a bit nicer, I suppose, but they're all flawed characters. So I think people see themselves in those characters. I think that's why people aren't too pissed off with me."

Not many actors manage to successfully translate success in the UK to a move to Hollywood, but O'Dowd did just that. After *Bridesmaids*, he went on to have roles in comedy films such as *This Is 40* and *Friends with Kids*. But he decided to return home and try his hand behind the camera, making a show inspired by his childhood in Boyle, Co Roscommon.

"I wouldn't have been able to make *Moone Boy* without *Bridesmaids*. I remember at the time it was like, I could stay here and do loads of those movies –

and there was loads of them coming – and I just thought, that's going to get old for everybody. But it did feel like a good time to leverage whatever popularity I had to try and get my own show off the ground."

It's ten years since the first episode of *Moone Boy* aired, and while he now lives in LA with his wife, the writer Dawn O'Porter, and their two young sons, Art and Valentine, Ireland is still a big part of their lives.

"The kids are obsessed with Ireland. Art is in the *Moone Boy* phase, where he is reading the books – he's too young for the TV show – and he is wearing the hat to school every day," O'Dowd says.

"Which is adorable, but first of all, it's 30C. And then it's very hard when my

Irish friends are coming over and I am like, 'I didn't put the fecking hat on him!' But it is very sweet."

O'Dowd returns home two or three times a year. Active on Twitter, he often shares GAA updates from his home club Boyle. And spending time in Ireland is only growing more important to him as time goes by. He jokes that when the pandemic happened, he considered getting a boat home.

We're meeting at Cabu by the Lakes, in Cavan, for a day of birdwatching as part of his campaign with Redbreast Irish Whiskey for Robin Redbreast Day.

"I do try to keep up with local stuff, and obviously I still have family here. I brought Mum and Dad here with me to



"I think people see themselves in the flawed characters that I play

Cavan," he says. "Staying connected to home is something I've been thinking about a lot lately, because I have definitely felt an increase in that... nationalism is the wrong word, but sense of place.

"I think being so far away has been a factor in that. I wonder if it is a natural thing that happens in middle age, or having kids. It's hard to explain what the world is, without explaining who you are first."

O'Dowd is naturally funny, cracking one-liners at every opportunity, but he becomes earnest as we discuss his career ambitions and dramatic work.

"Increasingly, the actors that I look to and admire are actors that can do the four quadrants of acting, which is comedy, drama, high status and low status. I look at people who can believably play those characters, such as Olivia Colman or John C Reilly. That's the only way. I want to make sure that I'm always punching one of those somewhere."

His performances in films such as *Calvary* opposite Brendan Gleeson, and his excellent portrayal of The Sunday Times journalist David Walsh, the man who outed Lance Armstrong's doping, in *The Program*, earned critical acclaim.

And so it is hard to pinpoint a throughline in his work, apart from a lean towards more family-friendly roles since fatherhood. He voices a character in *My Father's Dragon* by the Oscar-nominated studio Cartoon Saloon, and stars opposite Jason Momoa in the fantasy adventure *Slumberland*, both out now.

"Having two young kids it's really nice to work on films that are so warm. It's a very different vibe. I love being able to work with Cartoon Saloon because it is a company I admire so much," he says.

O'Dowd describes doing a recent panel event with Nora Twomey, the creative director of Cartoon Saloon. "I'm always so impressed by the company they keep. Nora and I were on the panel with a huge animator called Glen Keane, who did a lot with Disney and he created the beast in *Beauty and the Beast*. People see him as one of their heroes, and yet all he was doing was waxing lyrical about Nora. It was cool to watch that happen. I felt very proud."

Has O'Dowd considered writing again, or doing another project in Ireland?

"I can't speak too much on it but I am hoping to shoot something in the northwest next year. We're going through the motions of trying to get it off the ground. It's set very much in this sort of scenario, around woods and lakes.

"Hopefully, if that takes off, I'll do a lot more writing. It's been mad, I always thought I would end up doing a lot more writing, but then the acting thing just seemed to be happening and I was pulled along with it."

For every like and share of the Robin Redbreast Day video, Redbreast will donate 25c to BirdLife International to fund its conservation work. Alternatively purchase a 12-year-old Birdfeeder Bottle for €71 to trigger a donation to its Project Wingman partnership with BirdLife International; redbreastwhiskey.com

