

‘It was a war zone... there were burnt-out cars and petrol bombs. It was incredibly fun to shoot’

When ‘Love/Hate’ first aired 10 years ago this week, the response was lukewarm — but over the course of five seasons, the gritty gangland drama changed the Irish television landscape and launched the careers of a host of A-listers in waiting. Here, some of the cast and crew look back at the making of an Irish cultural phenomenon.

Words by *Shilpa Ganatra*

On an unusually mild Sunday evening at the start of October 2010, households across Ireland began to assemble for the start of *Love/Hate*, a four-parter that RTE was billing as a high-stakes gangland crime series. Expanding its stable of drama shows — *The Clinic* hadn’t long ended, and *Raw* was in full flow — the biggest draw was the homecoming of Aidan Gillen, whose international presence was on a high after a remarkable performance in the then-cult American drama series *The Wire*. Also getting top billing was Robert Sheehan, the heart-throb actor who was making waves in Channel 4’s *Misfits* in the UK. But over the course of the five years, as Gillen and Sheehan bowed out and the motley crew of criminals and their complicit families took centre stage, after major drug deals, cold-blooded murders, cat-and-mouse games with the gardai, and the odd — and always controversial — animal killing, the gritty series grew to become larger than the sum of its ever-darker parts. The first series drew a respectable average of half a million viewers each episode, yet by the time it ended its five-season run in 2014, it had an audience of 1.15 million viewers, and a cultural impact that lives on.

“In the realm of entertainment, it galvanised the whole country — it felt like the drama version of the World Cup,” recalls Sheehan, 10 years after he first appeared on our screens as baby-faced criminal Darren Treacy.

“It reflected an Ireland where people were terrified of, and fascinated by, the media covering the ganglands of places like Limerick and Dublin that *Love/Hate* was based on. It fed into that aspect of Irish culture of putting stories to ideas — that’s what the Irish do best, we’re one of the world’s greatest storytellers.”

At the time, the Celtic Tiger was long gone and a recession had come to the fore. Underlying criminal activity and violence between drug gangs seemed to be escalating. In hindsight, it was exactly the right time to conjure up the stories behind the headlines that captured our imaginations: it was a golden era for drama series, with shows like *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* reimagining the depth of narrative on television, but, more importantly, television production had arrived at a sweet spot where resources had shifted from the film to the small screen, but streaming services had yet to flood the market.

The television landscape here was ripe for a homegrown crime drama, and when it was pitched to RTE by the creative duo of Stuart Carolan (the creator and writer) and David Caffrey (the director), who’d met working on *Raw*, they agreed to a four-part first series with the potential for a second.

“I don’t think anyone had seen anything like it before,” recalls Ruth Negga, who played Rosie for a few years before going on to Hollywood and earning an Oscar nomination for historical race drama *Loving*. “There had been youth-orientated dramas before, but this level of grittiness was new to the Irish screen. It did it without being patronising, one tone, or a version of the streets from someone

who hadn’t bothered to investigate it properly.”

Initially, the show centred around menacing kingpin John Boy (Aidan Gillen) and the tension within his Dublin-based gang, which included Stumpy (Peter Campion), Nidge (Tom Vaughan-Lawlor), Elmo (Laurence Kinlan) and John Boy’s brother Hughie (Brian Gleeson). When Darren’s brother was shot the day he was released from prison, it set off a hunt for revenge, all while the demands of their personal lives — enter Aoibhinn McGinnity as Nidge’s demanding wife Trish, and Ruth Bradley as Darren’s sister and Tommy’s lover — fall into the mix.

This holistic view of gangland life was first seeded by Carolan’s mother, who was an A&E nurse in St James’s Hospital.

“She often dealt with the young men from gangs who came in having been shot. She found it distressing and a terrible waste of young lives,” Carolan said in an interview with Irish Film and TV Network at the time. The writer’s curiosity led him to the Facebook and Bebo pages of dead gangland members, where he saw that outside of their criminal activities, they led lives like everybody else’s, busy with friends, family, shopping centres, creches.

“The characters had been gestating in his head for years,” director Caffrey tells me. “The show was green-lit in July [2009], and we began filming in January [2010] — that speed is a testament to how fully formed the characters were in Stuart’s mind.”

The first series was designed to test Ireland’s appetite for grittiness. “There was a nervousness about it being as hard-edged as we’d originally intended,” Caffrey admits.

Perhaps because of that, the initial reviews were, at best, mixed. Sheehan agrees. “It got accused in the press of being original but not a lot happening. I think that was true. I think that was a fair criticism of the first series.”

Laurence Kinlan, who played Elmo, is similarly unsure of series one. “Watching it back, I don’t know how well the first one holds up; it seems a bit dated. I’m nearly amazed we got commissioned to do a second one. But it just got better from there.”

There were certainly strong glimmers of promise. Rather than using popular international shows as a template, the Irishness of it all — the familiar lexicon, the almost-identifiable locations, the recognisable characters — brought the audience into the fold straight away, and some scenes, like Rosie coming to terms with her miscarriage after being assaulted by Stumpy, were simply outstanding.

“I remember reading that scene in the script, and I found it so moving, so touching,” says Negga. “When we shot it, it was one still shot, and I could feel everyone on the set lean in. It was a powerful moment.”

It’s a testament to the abilities of the cast and crew that the second season upped the game noticeably. “That’s when the show really kicked into gear for me,” says Sheehan. “That’s when Stuart took the absorbing characters and the tone, and essentially gave them something to do... The second series was a massive hit. I remember. It went on to another level after that.”

“Then in the third series, the IRA were involved. Jesus →



→ Christ, it was a war zone, there were burnt-out cars and petrol bombs. It was incredibly fun to shoot. By the middle of the third series, we were all welcomed into the hearts of the Irish people, especially in Dublin. It was such a gorgeous thing, we were given real encouragement."

Love/Hate quickly earned a reputation for willfully killing off main characters, adding to the show's relentless twisting and turning. Despite the star factor, Brian Gleeson's character Hughie unceremoniously shot himself just four episodes in. Linda (Denise McCormick) died by suicide after life-changing injuries as a result of John Boy's attack on her and Fran's home, a moving performance that earned McCormick an IFTA. John Boy's own death at the hands of Darren was another must-see moment.

During the show's transmission and even now, as the cast and crew look back on it all, ask what the secret of its success is, and writer Stuart Carolan is at the centre. The reports are glowing.

"His writing was tight and unique and not derivative," says Negga, while Kinlan tells me his "were some of the best scripts I've ever read".

While an eventful, character-driven script is the backbone of any revered television show, *Love/Hate* benefited from a cast that oozed world-class talent in even the most fleeting of roles. Negga, who appeared in the first two series of the show, speaks of "the *Love/Hate* alumni — everyone's popped up at some point". It helped that alongside choice big names, Carolan and Caffrey insisted on recruiting new faces, which really set them apart from the rest.

'ALL OUR BEST TALENT ON ONE SHOW'

"Usually, I'm asked to bring in established actors, so that was like a gift to me," recalls casting director Maureen Hughes. *Love/Hate* coincided with a time that comes about once every seven years, when it hit an incredible scene of talent and a lot of people were on the cusp of a break. Robert Sheehan was on a major break, Ruth Negga was about to break internationally and it was our one chance of getting her before she went starwards, and Tom Vaughan-Lawlor was just waiting for something to allow him to shine. Then you had Aidan Gillen wrap his arms around it and lead it.

"It was a prime example of all our best talent on one show. Things like *Normal People* have gone on to replace it, but for a time, *Love/Hate* was the best of what we were as an acting community."

For many, like Charlie Murphy, who played Nidge's niece Siobhan, it was their breakthrough performance in what would go on to be a long and fruitful career. The Wexford actor has since worked (again with David Caffrey) on BBC2 show *Peaky Blinders*, as well as playing Ann on BBC1 drama *Happy Valley*. She's most recently landed a role Stateside in Showtime's big-budget sci-fi series *Halo*.

"It was a job in which I learned my craft over five years," she recalls. "It's something that I can reference because it was my first experience with different departments and storylines, so there's always something to go back to."

Murphy impressed enough that "even though she was supposed to be a plotline in a scene in series one, Stuart kept writing for her until she was practically the protagonist by the end", Hughes tells me.

Sheehan, too, felt the show was a big learning experience. "I was 21, and at the stage of my career when I thought it was completely normal to feel in over my head. I remember the first day of shooting — the first 'king day' — was a scene between me and Ruth where we were identifying the body of our brother who'd just been murdered. I remember feeling hit in the stomach by her emotion: as an actress, she was dedicated the whole of herself to what needed to be done."

Once the show aired, casting agent Hughes says that it was an easy sell, as actors knew it was the show to be on.

"The only person I would have liked to get but couldn't was Jessie Buckley," Hughes recalls. "She was in London at that point and on the rise. It never got to that point, but there was a mad idea that we would devote one season to women who run a similar business and get caught up in Tom Vaughan-Lawlor's business. Jessie would have been phenomenal for that."

Still, keep an eagle eye out during the show's run and you'll spot some recognisable faces even among the smaller parts, such as Helen Behan, who was nominated for the Best Supporting Actress BAFTA earlier this year and Louisa Harland, now best known as Orla in *Derry Girls*. Another prominent break-out star was young Dublin actor Barry Keoghan, who made an immediate impression as Wayne 'the cat killer' in the fourth series. The now 27-year-old has since appeared in Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk*,



There was a mad idea that we would devote one season to women who run a similar business and get caught up in Tom Vaughan-Lawlor's business. Jessie Buckley would have been phenomenal for that

starred alongside Angelina Jolie in Marvel movie *The Eternals* and has been announced as a part of the cast for the much-hyped forthcoming *Batman* movie.

Keoghan was introduced to Hughes through Peter Coonan, who played loose cannon Fran on the show.

"I was working in the place called The Factory in Ringsend at the time, which I helped set up as a school for actors," recalls Hughes. "Barry walked into my office one day, and said he'd met Peter Coonan, who he said to look for me and I'd give him a good start. I remember thinking, 'he looks 12, what is he doing in my office?'"

"But I got him in to these sessions where we would shoot scenes for films, which Jack Reynor and Seana Kerslake were part of. Barry said he had no money, and I told him he didn't need money, it was free, and it's where he found his legs I think. He's a phenomenal talent."

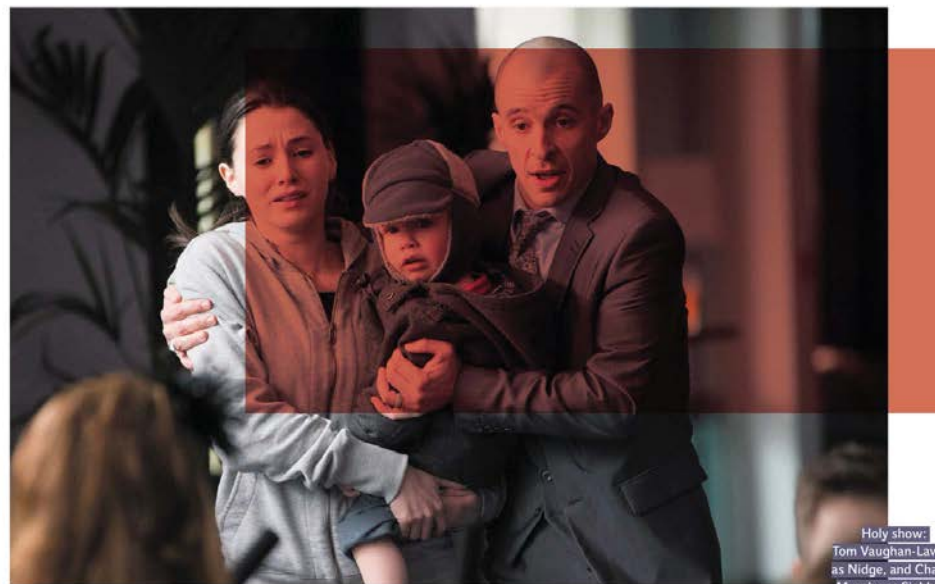
For many of the stars who have gone on to Hollywood, *Love/Hate* remains their defining role in Ireland. Indeed, the only downside to receiving such a high-profile break is that the main cast often had to work hard to shake off their old characters and step into the new.

Kinlan, who most recently starred alongside Anna Friel in British crime drama *Marella*, agrees this was the case for many of the show's young stars.

"The general consensus is that if you're on TV every week playing a character — in a soap, for example — others don't necessarily want to cast you because you're so associated with one character. I didn't think that a drama that ran for six episodes a year would be enough for that to happen, but *Love/Hate* became such a success that it was all anyone ever talked about for five years, and I do think few actors struggled with work afterwards. It had a negative as well as a positive effect."

Still, the strong and stellar cast brought their troubled characters to life, humanising the stories behind the gritty crimes. Much of the action centred around the gang's business of drugs and prostitution, and its threats from both outsiders and insiders. Inevitably, a turn of events would lead to a series of retaliations, leaving the audience guessing about the whens, wheres and hows.

Not only did it work as high drama, but its authenticity was clear. "Obviously, Stuart Carolan has got really well clued in to how the whole dynamic of organised crime works in Ireland," crime correspondent Paul Williams told this news-



Holy show: Tom Vaughan-Lawlor as Nidge, and Charlie Murphy as Siobhan, pictured in series four

paper at the time. "The characterisation, the people... I can recognise them, I've seen them before and he understands what makes them tick."

Indisputably, Vaughan-Lawlor shone as Nidge journeyed from an eager right-hand man to a ruthless gang boss. His portrayal was so convincing that it's difficult not to be surprised at his well-to-do accent and gentleness in real life. "I can remember a youngish kid around 13 or 14 got to meet him," recalls director Caffrey. "When Tom started being Tom and speaking with an English twang, I'd never seen a face drop so quickly."

Early on in the programme's life, the love affair between Rosie and Darren captured the public's attention.

"Working with Ruth was fab, it was always just a complete holiday," says Sheehan, light-heartedly. "I fancied the ass off Ruth, and that certainly didn't hurt when we were filming. It was easy to be in love with Ruth. Thankfully we got on and were comfortable with each other, because we had a lot of cuddling to do." Their sex scene was one of more tender ones of the daring show.



There was always the potential of being killed off, so you never knew how long you were going to stick around... It was something you wanted to stay a part of especially because the crew stayed relatively constant. We really did become a family

FEMALE CHARACTERS

"I remember I watched it with my mother in the living room at home," he recalls. "Afterwards, I was talking to Anthony Byrne, who directed part of the second series, and he said that he did the age-old trick of shooting the reunion love scene overlaid, anticipating that RTÉ would say 'we need to cut that down, that's too much for the people of Ireland and it will diminish their decency'. But RTÉ looked at it and said, 'nah, that's grand'. Broadcasters are often worried they're going to cause controversy of the wrong kind, but one of the keys to *Love/Hate*'s success was that RTÉ were fully behind it."

In broad terms, the portrayal of its female characters was perhaps one of the show's few shortcomings. Few episodes would pass the Bechdel Test (for which two female characters should talk to each other about something other than a man), and the lack of independent female storylines and the over-reliance on women as victims suggested that it didn't veer far from the male dominance of its subject matter.

That said, Murphy is quick to point out that there were strong female narratives. "Lizzie, Nadine, Debbie and my character Siobhan had strong story arcs and went through

a lot. Obviously there are boys and guns, and more so than women, but it definitely did represent women."

And according to her co-star McGinnity, the female characters played a vital role in offering a more holistic view of these off-stereotyped. "The men have more of a part to play because of the topic of the show, but Stuart was brilliant because he showed how they were affected through the wife, or the sister. You see how it was tearing people apart, and how they had to put on a brave face and cope. That's the real impact of this crazy and dangerous way of living," she says.

Playing a character in Nidge's gang came with its own concerns. "There was always the potential of being killed off, so you never knew how long you were going to stick around," says Kinlan. "I think Stuart tried to get rid of Elmo two or three years before the show finished, but I convinced him of a different route that the character could take, and he kept me on, which I was grateful for. It was something you wanted to stay a part of. Especially because the crew also stayed relatively constant across its years, we really did become a family."

By the time the show moved to its fourth series, it was pulling in an average of 835,000 viewers an episode. Its Sunday night episode became Monday morning's water cooler moment in offices around the country. References to the fizzy orange that an affected Tommy (Killian Scott) requested became a country-wide in-joke, and dropping 'coola boola' into conversation was less of an affirmation than a signal that separated those who were following the show and those that weren't. Meanwhile, some of the darker scenes — such as Siobhan's rape, and Wayne's cat-killing scene — became national talking points.

The series was always dogged by accusations of glorifying drugs and violence, with copycat acts often held up as proof of this. The Animal Rights Action Network claimed the various animal killings in *Love/Hate* to sparking a rise in animal torture. Then, in 2014, a prisoner in Mountjoy stabbed a fellow inmate in the eye, recalling a scene in *Love/Hate*. "They all think they are Nidge or Fran," a source told the *Irish Mirror*. "Some idiots watch the show and they then try to copy what happens. It is art imitating life, imitating art."

But Sheehan doesn't believe the fault lies with the series. "I don't know if I fully agree with the idea that people take



→ their lead from drama or art," he says. "I think *Love/Hate* sparked aggression in people who already had aggression in their bones."

A VIBRANT ATMOSPHERE

The budget for the show was modest compared to US standards, but a tight production team helped squeeze as much out of it as possible. "Obviously TV is very fast paced, but my God did we pull out the pages so fast," recalls Charlie Murphy. "We were just putting so much in the plan so quickly. David was tenacious, and he was a perfect captain for that kind of pace. He was brilliant and fun, and I loved the energy he brought to it."

An example of Caffrey's tenacity came early on, when car scenes were being shot. So that he wouldn't have to wait until the car returned to check the footage and decide if they needed another take, he would travel curled up in the boot of the car, and check the footage as it was filmed.

But on the whole, the set was relaxed. Negga recalls a fun atmosphere. "There was a lot of laughing. I knew lots of people, so I spent time catching up with them. From my experience, filming in Ireland... it's not casual, but there's a vibrant atmosphere."

As the show's popularity grew, filming on location in the mean streets of Dublin (such was the commitment to authenticity) began to draw scores of onlookers, and eventually the production had to plan around their unintended audience so that shock moments wouldn't be revealed.

The finale of series three saw *Lizzie* (Caioilfhionn Dunne) kill Darren, which marked Sheehan's departure from the show; at that point, he was on borrowed time.

"I had been optioned for two series so when that finished, Stuart cleverly gave myself an out, and a potential back in," explains Sheehan. "But during the second series he said, 'I assume we've lost you to the wind anyway, have we?' I said not necessarily if he has more story, because it was really taking off. It turned out that the third series is Darren's most interesting, because it's where he loses the warmth that he had at the start. I was so glad that I went back, because it was such a piece of television history, it was such an honour."

"Afterwards, for the next series, we did a tiny day's filming where I'm a corpse and laid out on a mortician's slab. So we decided to manipulate the press by making sure they saw me arrive on set. It made the front page of the *Herald*, I think: 'Darren's back!' It was so funny."

The media attention the show received had not really been seen before: every day saw new stories, leaks and rumours emerging, and bookies began taking odds on who would be killed each episode to harness extra publicity.

"It was almost as if the papers stopped reporting on the real stuff and just reported on the fictional stuff," says director Caffrey. "Every little possible story that could be gleaned was reported."

At the same time, the cast became household names in Ireland, and then further afield after *Love/Hate* was shown across Europe, Australia, India, South Korea, Israel, Brazil and streamed on Hulu, Netflix and Amazon in the US. Kinlan recalls that he couldn't escape the calls of 'Elmo' — even in San Francisco. "It made its way everywhere. I've been in the business since I was 14 years of age and I've done lots of jobs, but that reached new heights in terms of being recognised. It was insane," he says.



Coola Boola: Peter Coonan (centre) as loose canon Fran; Barry Keoghlan, pictured below with Caioilfhionn Dunne, as the infamous 'Cat killer' Wayne

THE GRAND FINALE

Sadly, all good things must come to an end, and after the higher-stakes drama in the fifth season, the decision was made to bow out.

"At the start, we approached it like we were doing a four-hour independent film. Then Stuart wrote a second series and it organically grew, but it felt like it came to a natural end with the death of Nidge," says Caffrey. "We discussed what might happen in a sixth series, but decided that five was the end of it."

In order to maximise the shock of Nidge's murder, they thought it was best not to reveal that it was the last series in advance "so ending the show after five years together was like saying goodbye to our classmates, though we never got to have our Debs". In fact, the precautions went much further. Caffrey shot two alternate versions of the grand finale so that no one but a handful of people knew how it would end: in one of them Nidge's killer Patrick (John Connors) is killed instead, and in the other, Nidge runs away and escapes.

Filming for the series ended in Spain in May 2014, with select cast members like Vaughan-Lawlor and Kinlan in attendance.

"I remember walking back to my hotel room at the end of the final day of shooting and crying," recalls Kinlan. "It had been such a journey for us all. But I knew it was the right time, and that it should finish on a high."

The cast and crew still keep in touch, and often work together. The network the show created within the industry is undoubtedly a gift that keeps giving.

The recipient of a total of 19 IFTA wins and a further 20 nominations, and the most-streamed show on RTÉ Player until *Normal People* came along earlier this year, its commercial and critical success has often led to questions over another series, or perhaps a film. But neither are planned, for the moment.

"Because Stuart and I have worked closely together afterwards, we briefly have conversations imagining what would we do, whether a film or anything else," says Caffrey. "But it's clear Stuart very much is a person that wants to do justice, and unless he had strong vision for something, he wouldn't want to tarnish *Love/Hate's* legacy." And what a legacy that is. Its 28 episodes remain a defining slice of culture and the show raised the bar for Irish television, as well as helping to launch numerous careers. In the kingpin's corner of the sky, John Boy and Nidge would be proud.

'Love/Hate' series 1 to 5 is available on RTÉ Player. Series 3 returns to RTÉ2 on October 14



Interview



‘Saoirse’s fabulous for advice... we go on great adventures’

Co Down actor Eileen O’Higgins is about to hit our screens in RTE’s macabre new drama *Dead Still*. The *Brooklyn* star tells **Shilpa Ganatra** about her close bond with best friend Saoirse Ronan, being typecast because of her accent and the challenges of filming during a pandemic

In East Dulwich in London — amidst artful florists, craft-beer pubs and around the corner from a striking mural from Irish street artist Conor Harrington — is Eileen O’Higgins’ favourite neighbourhood cafe. She first came across it as a newcomer to the area, when she was shopping for Christmas presents for her family in Co Down. Midway through, she stopped on the street to consult her list “and the owner Alex came out and asked me if I needed help”, she explains over a socially distant cappuccino in said cafe. “I showed him my list and he gave me suggestions and directed me to the other shops in the area. I was so grateful, I’ve been coming here ever since.” O’Higgins seems to have that effect: for her doe eyes, fragile skin and demure colours (forest green coat, black dress, tights and shoes), she’s very approachable. Later, as we stroll through a nearby autumnal park, a toddler waddles up to her and stares. She smiles and greets the kid warmly before he runs back to his mother. You’d never guess her quiet celebrity, with a career that’s seen her appear in the IFTA-winning *Brooklyn*, landed her a role in upcoming Northern Irish thriller *Here Before*, and taken her all the way to the Golden Globes red carpet, although that was on the arm of her best friend Saoirse Ronan. London has been her home now for around a decade, and the turmoil the city finds itself in feels like a world away when she describes how enamoured she still is by it. “I like the people, and the mentality, and how cosmopolitan it is,” she says. She talks of the simple pleasure of being able to walk to the cinema, a small miracle of urban living. It helps that she’s recently back, after a stint filming Netflix’s Sherlock Holmes spin-off *The Irregulars* in Liverpool that was interrupted by an unexpected four-month lockdown back in her native Co Down. “At the start we were told filming was paused for two weeks, and rather than have them book me transport back to London, I asked to go home instead,” she says. “My family live near the beach and mountains; they were all there. Because I’ve been away so much and I have a huge family, I feel guilty about not seeing them so I was glad I spent four months there. But to say I travelled home with very little is an understatement.” In a glimmer of normality between the two coronavirus waves, our afternoon together is the first real-life interview

PHOTO: GERRY McMANUS

for either of us in a long time, and it's for good reason. Just in time for Halloween, the Co Down actor is one of the three leads in RTE's *Dead Still*, a macabre comedy drama piece set in Victorian Dublin.

With death as its core theme, it's a fitting one for a production in Ireland, where "grief is in the public domain", notes O'Higgins. "It wasn't until I was here in England that I realised people aren't used to that. This story is actually so Irish."

As Nancy (oddly, the same name as her character in *Brooklyn*), she's the headstrong niece of Brock Blennerhasset (played by the always-delightful Michael Smiley), a cantankerous memorial photographer who takes pictures of mourning families with the recently deceased — who are placed upright as if still alive, eyes practically wedged open. She brings in new assistant Conall Molloy (Kerr Logan, also known for *London Irish* and *Strike*) to this strange set up, and together they uncover nefarious goings-on with an oscillating mix of intrigue, humour and amusing character clashes.

"Nancy comes to Dublin from living in the Irish countryside with a repressed family, and she was itching to get out of there," O'Higgins says of her character. "It's refreshing to play a character that has her own engine. She's not there to serve any of these other characters. And she has a strong moral compass: if she thinks that somebody hasn't behaved appropriately, she'll tell them."

Amidst the ever-evolving plot, it's a particular joy to see Dublin recreated for the Victorian era. Shooting took place in the outskirts, mostly in south Dublin, although Glasnevin Cemetery is in there, as is the Gravediggers pub, and various mansion houses suited to the era.

"One of them looked as if nobody had touched it in years," recalls O'Higgins. "The layers of dust were thick, and in the entrance hall, there was a huge head of an elk that they pulled out of a bog somewhere in the west of Ireland. The owner of the house said one of the rooms was haunted, and we were absolutely not to go into it...and we didn't."

Given her previous roles in *Mary Queen of Scots* and a BBC adaptation of *Emma*, it seems to be standard for O'Higgins to transform into her character via a range of corsets. The only saving grace with *Dead Still* was that she "moulds into them at this stage".

"The *Mary Queen of Scots* corsets were the hardest to wear by a mile," she says. "Any one other than that has been pretty mild. They were made out of denim so they were heavy and big. We weren't allowed to sit down in them so we felt more like giant toilet roll holders."

Conversing with O'Higgins is an entertaining way to while away an afternoon. Full of nervous energy, she merrily digresses down unexpected paths (this is how it transpires she and English comedian Tim Key both gave readings at a mutual friend's wedding. "Never follow a comedian when public speaking", she now advises). And she talks about listening to audiobooks and watching *Selling Sunset* with an equal level of passion.

O'Higgins is less comfortable talking about personal topics, simply describing herself as "happily single" when discussing relationships, and limiting Brexit chat to a general comment about the effect it might have on the North. When talking about her friendship with Ronan, her co-star on *Brooklyn* and later, on *Mary Queen of Scots*, she chooses her words carefully, though their close friendship is no secret. Ronan brought O'Higgins as her guest to the Golden Globes when she won Best Actress for *Lady Bird*, even giving her a shout-out in the acceptance speech.

"When we met [on the set of *Brooklyn*, in 2014], it felt like we were instantly on the same wavelength," says O'Higgins. "Like when something happens that's not necessarily funny but you think it is, and you look around and see who else thought it was funny, she was always looking around too."

"She's very witty, she's very funny, she's incredibly kind. When we meet up now, because we're both Irish, people presume we met at school. Only in Ireland would people see us as the girl from the North and the girl with the strong Dublin-via-Carlow accent."

Given they share the same industry, do they find themselves talking shop?

"We talk about absolutely everything, but work is certainly not the dominant conversation topic," she says. "Family, mutual friends, adventures, and what we're having for dinner will be higher up. Actually, food would be very high on the list. She's fabulous for advice, if you're worried about anything or decisions about anything. And we go on great adventures, we're definitely doers."

Growing up as one of six children to an electrician and counsellor, O'Higgins' move to acting wasn't an obvious



PHOTO: GERRY MCNAMUS



one. "My family thought I'd lost my marbles," she says. She fell into it when her secondary school announced that a drama school were visiting Belfast to recruit students. "I was super shy, but I also knew that when I acted, I did well at it."

So she plucked up the courage to ask her parents, and the next year, she found herself at the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama in Cardiff, grappling with both living away from home and working out this new direction in her life.

"I was the only Irish person there," she says. "There was one person from Scotland, but most were from London. They couldn't understand how it was so small, and I couldn't understand how it was so big, especially because I came from a close family where we were all sheltered. I think it took me longer to get rid of my impostor syndrome because I felt I'd been plucked from obscurity."

Yet her path since she graduated has been the stuff of many acting students' dreams. She signed up with an agent who secured her an audition for *Emma*, starring Romola Garai (*Suffragette*, *The Hour*) in the title role, as well as *End*, the biopic starring Helena Bonham Carter. She bagged both parts, and they were her calling cards thereafter, both for theatre productions and, eventually, for the key part of Nancy in *Brooklyn*.

When O'Higgins first moved to London, she went through the rite of passage of taking random jobs to survive: she helped out at a speedboat company for a while, worked in a film museum where she and other drama school graduates helped to take pictures of tourists on a *Star Wars* set (the irony being that one of her colleagues landed a role in *Star Wars*, though she declines to reveal who). She lasted only one shift in a pub, "because I actually like getting up and getting out early in the morning, so I couldn't understand why these people wouldn't go home".

The pay cheque for *Brooklyn* went straight on rent, and in many senses, that was when she began to feel more comfortable in her chosen path. "I found my feet at that point," she reflects. "I guess the more you work, the more you learn. I've been fortunate enough to be on set with so many great actors, and I sit there like a sponge, hoping by some form of osmosis it will suddenly infiltrate how I approach something. Some actors are chameleons, they can really transform themselves. I've worked with Saoirse twice now, and she's just incredible to watch — she just oozes truth. When she's in character, you're not seeing good acting, you just believe it is."

And 11 years in, has she found her approach to acting? "I just obsess about it. From the moment of auditioning, I think of what my interpretation of the role is."

That outlook is aided in part by a time when she helped out with auditions for the mother in a theatre production. Well-known actors came through the door for the part, all reimagining the character in their own way. "One played it exactly how I had it in my head, and one actress played it colder but still loving, and she changed the dynamic — it was so different and unexpected. She actually ended up getting the part."

"It's why I'm totally fine about not getting a part if I've given it my best shot. I can park it and move on."

At this more mature stage of her career, she's found herself up for wider roles than previously.

"When I started it a few years ago, I opened my mouth



Dark material: O'Higgins as Nancy Vickers in RTE's *Dead Still* with co-stars Kerr Logan and Michael Smiley

Below: Eileen with friend Saoirse Ronan



A few years ago, I opened my mouth and immediately I was downstairs, being the maid or the country bumpkin that came in. I think that has something to do with my Irish accent, too

and immediately I was downstairs, being the maid or the country bumpkin that came in. I think that has something to do with my Irish accent, too," she says. "More recently, the characters I've played are much more interesting. And I've worked with more female directors than male directors, which is really lovely to see."

"It feels like there's more room for newer voices in the world, and I'm getting that even from the things I'm watching on TV, like [Michaela Coo's] photo-realistic drama *I May Destroy You*. I was like, 'This is brilliant. I've never seen this depicted, why have I never seen it depicted?'"

In any case, the stars are very much aligning in O'Higgins' favour. *Dead Still* marks a major step for her, in that it's a lead role in a major co-production between Irish, British and Canadian production companies. A volley of high-profile roles follow: next up is *Nowhere Special*, a film starring James Norton (*Happy Valley*, *McMafia*) about a terminally ill single father trying to find a new family for his son. Then there's *Here Before*, the thriller in which O'Higgins stars alongside Andrea Riseborough (*Birdman*, *Mandy*) before *The Irregulars* — about the young street gang who help Sherlock Holmes solve crimes — gets a look-in.

Since returning to work, she's got a taste of what filming in "these strange times" looks like, and it's safe enough even for amorous scenes, she assures.

"I was really actually impressed at the effort that went into keep everybody safe," she says. "All the actors self-isolated in order to work, and were all in a testing programme, so yes, masks came off and the actors were able to get close."

"And everyone was separated on set — we were put in different zones, we were bubbled together, and there was a one-way system on set," she explains. "And we had hot water sinks brought in so we could physically wash your hands. They had given it serious thought, and were executing it to precision."

While filming may have tentatively resumed, the knock-on effect in the industry is still to come: the loss in advertising revenue for traditional broadcasters is likely to have a catastrophic effect on future productions, never mind the fears that we'll run out of new TV at some point in 2021 due to fewer completed projects this year (get ready to watch reams of new, hastily created animation, that's my prediction). O'Higgins, too, feels that for actors, "it's going to get worse before it gets better — already with theatres closed, there's an awful lot more people for fewer productions".

But with that happy-go-lucky demeanour of hers, she's only feeling positive about the future, not only because she has a ream of appearances ready to go.

"Unpredictability is part of an actor's everyday life — I've never started the year knowing how I'm going to end the year," she says. "At the start, that was scary. But once you get used to it, you like it. Because it means anything could happen."

Dead Still starts tomorrow night at 9.30pm on RTE One

'Sensitivity is a superpower'

Irish actor Denise Gough on her character choices, her slow rise through tough times, and why she avoids social media, writes Shilpa Ganatra

As an actor who spent lockdown filming under strict conditions, Denise Gough has become an expert in taking Covid-19 tests, aided by a natural advantage. "I was told by a medic that I had a very nice uvula, which is the thing that dangles down at the back of your throat," she says. "She told me I had a fantastic uvula. But then I found out she was telling everybody that, too. Never trust Covid testers, they're just nice to everyone."

As it was, Gough caught coronavirus in between shoots at Christmas, while visiting family in Dublin, which caused her to hunker down for a few weeks extra. Three months after, she's prone to bouts of tiredness and aching joints, but isn't quite sure if she has long Covid, "or if it's the same as everyone else being up and down, because we're not living in a very natural way at the moment".

Gough has now returned to her home in Hackney, east London, in a flat which she has to herself. "I'm good on my own," she says on a Zoom call, looking around her abode. "I'm fine with having my space but I just want some life back. I don't think anyone at this point is having a great time in lockdown."

It's difficult not to nosey around her background. Over lockdown, she moved to a new flat in the area, and its livingroom is of hotel standard with high ceilings, well-placed statement lamps and dark-painted walls that happen to complement her baby pink cosy jumper and wash of blonde hair; altogether it's an eye-catching aesthetic. But it's temporary – she's looking for a place to buy in west London to be nearer to film and TV studios, and the theatre district of London.

Though theatre – her first love, with two Olivier Awards to show for it – still has its collective lights off, life has returned to normal for her in one respect at least. She's back on the on-screen acting trail, currently

filming the Star Wars spin-off *Andor*, having just released the film *Monday*, a rom-com set in Greece in which "I'm so naked", she says.

"When I read the script initially I instantly thought I couldn't do it because I don't get nude, I don't do sex scenes. Then I watched *Suntan* by the director Argyris Papadimitropoulos, in which the actress Elli Tringou is naked for pretty much the whole film, and it looks stunning.

"The film was empowering to do and I never for one second felt that I was being used in any way. Whereas a lot of work here, farther west, it becomes a bit shady. It's always the woman has to do the orgasm, or have her boobs to camera."

"Plus it was important for me as an Irish woman to get over whatever stuff I had about showing my body," she adds. "When I'm 80 I will look back on that film and think, 'My God, I was gorgeous'."

Her next major release is *Too Close*. A tense psychological drama series in which she stars opposite Emily Watson (*Chernobyl*, *Angela's Ashes*), it plays on the entwined relationship between the investigator and the investigated, as seen in *Silence of the Lambs* and more recently, *Killing Eve*. Watson plays Dr Emma Robertson, the forensic psychologist, while Gough plays Connie Mortensen, a troubled mother who's accused of a crime she claims she can't remember. But a series of flashbacks brings the viewers ever closer to the truth, while also showcasing Gough's immense talents.

Mentally complex characters seem to be a forte of Gough's; both of those Oliviers were for her searingly convincing portrayal of addicts, first in the National Theatre's *People, Places and Things*, then in the two-part play *Angels in America*.

"I've always played these big, complex, brilliant women because the writing for stage is so fantastic, but until you're established in TV, a lot of the time you're playing women on the periphery," she explains.

"It's only in recent times that we get more of a chance to play the parts that usually go to the boys. So of course I'm going to want to do that. But equally, if I was to be offered a brilliant role, a really well-written smart comic role, I'd throw myself at that too."

It's not difficult to imagine. In her past work, from stage to film (in *Colette*, she was the transsexual partner of Kiera Knightley's title character), to the lead in television like Conor McPherson's Paula, it's evident she can shape-shift as the role demands. And in person, there's a relaxed, jokey vibe to her that balances a fierce intelligence, which makes it all the more of a shame that she's not on social media.

That decision was for self-protection. "I can't deal with social media. I'm a highly sensitive person," she says. "I wish I was able to use social media in the way that it can be for good, but I just know what I'm like. I come from a culture that doesn't value sensitivity as important, but in my industry, it's a superpower."

"If a critic writes bad things about me, it's part of my job. Social media is terrifying because it's personal. It's people I don't know, in my energy field, saying horrible things to me, and you can become addicted to finding more horrible things. I watched Caroline Flack's documentary the other night, and poor Caroline. I think that cruelty is killing people. Then they make it a #bekind thing, which blows my mind too, because even that hashtag is consumable. We've already

“Social media is terrifying ... It's people I don't know, in my energy field, saying horrible things to me, and you can become addicted to finding more horrible things

moved on to the next thing."

Growing up in Ennis, Co Clare, Gough's father was an electrician and her mother had her hands full with 11 children, another of whom became an actress too; Denise's younger sister Kelly can be seen in *The Fall*, *Casualty*, and most recently *Marcella*.

Gough describes herself as a "troubled teenager" and just before she was 16, she and her boyfriend ran away to London. I ask about that decision, and she explains that "I didn't really make a decision. I ran away from home, that is what happened," she says. "Like so many teenagers, I had a lot of stuff [going on]. I went where I went to get what I needed to get through it. I'm not going to go into the ins and outs of all that stuff, but what I will say is yeah, they were difficult times."

At the time, did it fracture her relationship with her family?

"Of course. It wasn't easy for any of us but there we are, that's my story. I can't change that now."

Upon arriving to London, the relationship lasted another six weeks. She tried living with a family member "but that didn't work so I met someone from Dublin, and we lived together in what became a squat for a few years."

In previous interviews, she's discussed shaving her hair, then having dreadlocks – "anything to detract from being looked at like a pretty girl". She's alluded to drink and drugs, and finding herself in dangerous situations like "hanging out on Coldharbour Lane at three in the morning".

"Now I see kids of that age and I think, 'My God, what an amazing little teenager I was that I managed to stay alive through all of that'," she tells me.

A major turning point, she says, was meeting an improv teacher who recognised her talent. He paved the way for a scholarship to the Academy of Live Recorded Arts, which paid for her fees and rent.

After graduating, her ascendance into



■ Irish actor Denise Gough: 'I came into this industry with no connections, with no money. There's a much easier way in for a lot of people.'

PHOTOGRAPH: TRISTAN FEWINGS/GETTY IMAGES FOR BFI

the acting world didn't come easy. Despite noteworthy parts in Jimmy's Hall, the Ken Loach film, and a Lyric Hammersmith production of *Desire Under the Elms*, carving out a living from acting proved to be difficult, which was troubling with no financial backing except her own graft.

Her fortunes changed in 2015 with a breakthrough performance in *People, Places and Things*, Duncan Macmillan's acclaimed play that gave Gough her first West End performance the following year, aged 36. The momentum continued with *Angels in America*, which not only ran at the National Theatre (earning her that Olivier ahead of Nicole Kidman), but also on Broadway in New York (where she was nominated for a Tony Award). From there, the TV and film roles came flooding in, which she accepted because of that goal to become a homeowner, "and nobody's going to buy a house on theatre wages".

"I'm grateful to Britain because I'm an immigrant here but I'm a white, English-speaking immigrant, so I was given everything. Now I work really hard to repay it," she says, alluding to the anti-immigrant sentiment that's risen in the UK proven by, and spurred on by, Brexit. "If you invest in an immigrant, they'll do pretty well. It's what it looks like through history, right? Immigrants leave behind their life to build a better one for themselves."

Always outspoken on the issue of diversity, I dig further into her motivation. "Unless we're all succeeding, we're not succeeding," she says. "When black women were organising in America to get women the vote, their motto was 'lifting as we climb'. That has such power, the idea that as you rise, you bring people up with you."

"I came into this industry with no connections, with no money. There's a much easier way in for a lot of people, and that's also valid, but if the industry becomes completely saturated by people who are well connected and wealthy, then we lose most of the stories because it's not like that for most of the population."

Bridgerton, which cast different ethnicities in a period piece, is proof that diversity can be added to the mix with the right backing. "You can just do it," says Gough. "We can all sit around and talk about it and come up with all these groups, but just f**king do it. Don't apologise for it and people will get used to it. I want to move into producing, and that's part of my manifesto."

Given what Denise Gough has already achieved reliant on no one but herself, woe betide anyone who stands in her way.

Too Close comes to Virgin Media One in May, and is available now in Northern Ireland on the ITV Hub