

REVIEW

INTERVIEW

Cathy comes home



Cathy Belton.
Photo: David Conachy

For someone who once left acting because of the insecurity of the profession, Cathy Belton has enjoyed a remarkably high profile and consistent career, writes **Emily Hourican**

I'd hate to go back to the young insecure actress I was when I started off. I couldn't do it. I'm a much more secure woman than I was when I was in my 20s."

So says Cathy Belton as we discuss the kinds of parts she is being asked to play now — including in Mark O'Rowe's *The Approach*. "I'm in awe of these young, brilliant actresses coming out of college now — the insecurities you have at that age, the insecurity of being young."

Does she feel she is, at this stage, the finished product? "No. We might as well give up if that's the case, but the energy you put into being so many things. I feel I have much more energy now to go, 'this is it lads, I want to keep growing and learning, but this is it, and sorry, I can't be..." she shrugs at the idea of all the things she can't be, doesn't, now, want to be.

"I think parts get more interesting for women as they get older. I do. But that's my own personal opinion. I feel more challenged as I get older and I'm not playing the young ingenue. I think the age I am now, I feel — and maybe I'm just lucky — I'm getting parts that I'm enjoying playing and that are meaty, something that has surprised me."

As well as *The Approach*, Cathy has spent three years now as steely matriarch Patricia Hennessy in TV3's *Red Rock*. She played another steely, rather monstrous woman — Sister Claire in the film *Philomena*, with Judi Dench and Steve Coogan — and will shortly appear on the BBC in *The Woman In White*, adapted from the Wilkie Collins novel. Anyone who watched Alison Spittle's very charming and funny series *Nowhere Fast* on RTE2 recently will recognise Cathy as Alison's glamorous, tactless but ultimately devoted mother, Caroline.

On stage, she has appeared in a remarkable gamut of work, from the classics of O'Casey, Synge and Shakespeare, through to contemporary, in a career that has spanned decades. And yet "every time I do it, I get more scared", she says, "even though I've been doing it for so many years. I started rehearsals for this one going 'oh God, what if I f*ck it up...?'"

There may be more-than-usual justification for that apprehension, given that Mark O'Rowe essentially wrote *The Approach* for her and co-stars Aisling O'Sullivan and Derbhle Crotty.

"We've been waiting to do this for a good while. Mark O'Rowe wrote it for the three of us, and the writing is beautiful: Three women, three

journeys, three conversations. It's about how people communicate — and how they survive or fail if they don't communicate enough. We workshopped it two years ago and did a read-through with Mark, then he went away and did another draft. It took time to get us all together, so it was very exciting going in."

Exciting, and slightly terrifying. "Mark is a genius, and the loveliest man in the business. And the two girls, Derbhle and Aisling, are legends, and friends. There's a wonderful chemistry. He wrote it for us — the greatest gift you can give. So you don't want to f*ck it up. You don't want to f*ck it up for Mark, or for Aisling or Derbhle."

Add in the fact that this is a Landmark production, and 14 years ago Cathy played Kyra in David Hare's *Skylight*, Landmark's first ever production. "On the first day of rehearsal I had this wave of emotion — where have those years gone?" she says.

So clearly the stakes are high. Is it a kind of performance anxiety that grips her?

"I wouldn't call it performance anxiety for me," she says, "because I couldn't do anything else — I tried and couldn't stay away. It's the adrenalin. Knowing 'this is really good, now make it the best it can be...'"

The 'trying to stay away' happened early in Cathy's career, when she decided to become a national school teacher instead of acting, daunted by the insecurity of the profession.

"I was very young. I did drama and English in Trinity, and I remember the day after I graduated, mum and dad drove me down to Limerick, to the Island Theatre Company, in the Belltable, and that was my first part, a play by Walter Macken called *Home is the Hero*. I had a great summer, I did *The Tempest*, *Hamlet*, and then it started to stop, and I thought 'I don't know if I'm cut out for this insecurity, for the strength you need to bang doors down...'"

And so she turned to Plan B.

"I always wanted to be a national school teacher. I think that's a performance in itself! My first teacher was Maire Geoghegan-Quinn" (as a child, Cathy was also directed in *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* by Presidential First Lady Sabina Higgins). "She was amazing. I still have this memory of her standing at the top of the class, saying 'I am somebody who can't walk, how do you communicate with me how to walk?' I was five."

Cathy got a job in the CAO office for a few months, prior to teaching, and ignored all her agent's efforts to coax her back with talk of an audition for this or that part, until eventually, one day "Mike Diskin, who ran the Town Hall Theatre in Galway, he was doing a production of *Eclipse*, and he came down to the CAO office, to my desk and said 'what are you doing?' I was going 'oh God, oh God...' but I did it. And when we were on tour I did an audition for *Glenroe*, and I got the part, I was Lucy Reilly, the vet, and that was for two years; it's almost like I was

given *Glenroe* because it was security." That's how she took it anyway — "I took it as a sign, and I was so happy. You can't run away from it."

By which she means, I think, not only that you shouldn't run away from something that calls you, but that actually, you physically can't — it will find you, and persuade you back.

Her parents, she says, were equally supportive about the two possibilities; one, the safe and secure teaching route, and the other, the notorious uncertainty of acting.

"They only wanted their kids ever to be happy. They were amazing people. About acting they said 'if that's the route you want to go we'll support you, but it's tough'. The compromise we came to was Drama and English in Trinity, because then I had the English degree to fall back on. They were very supportive when I said I wanted to become a teacher, and when I went back, they were 100pc behind me."

Cathy grew up in Galway, "in the middle of the arts", with a younger sister, Orina, now a lecturer in pharmacology in UCD.

"We killed each other as kids, but we're best friends now," she says. "We're lucky. There was only the two of us and we were always given our own space and not made to be like the other, and I think that's why we're so close. We are so different, yet similar. Orina is an amazing musician... she got the name; she should be in showbiz!"

Her parents, Cathy says, "were normal. Mum was an amazing housewife and mother, dad worked in a pharmacy. But they loved the arts — they went to Druid productions, dad adored films, he went to the cinema twice a week, he shot home movies. He passed that on, unbeknownst, and then was surprised when I said I wanted to become an actress!"

Cathy's father died 10 years ago, but her mother is "my rock. She'll come to everything I do, he did too. He had cancer for years, and battled and battled. I think [that was] harder for him, but easier — not that it's easier — but we had such a journey, saying goodbye to him. I think a sudden death, I think you never get over that. I think you never get over it anyway, but you get used to the loss. Until something knocks you completely off your feet..." There's a stillness for a moment, recognition of the sadness that is still clearly there, before she says "my mum is amazing. She's a great woman, we adore her, and we adored my father. My sister has two boys, and my mum will still get in — we call it the granny-mobile — and come up for the weekend. Christmas wasn't easy, dad's anniversary is New Year's day, but I think my sister's kids keep her going, we keep her going."

And now, Cathy's mother has a wedding to look forward to. This summer, Cathy will marry her fiancé, Brian.

"I can't wait!" she says, with completely disarming enthusiasm. "I've never been happier. I can't imagine my life without Brian. He's a great man, an intelligent, beautiful man. And I think declaring our love in front of people is important to us both."

'Brian doesn't panic. I love that. I think it's so sexy, to be that calm'

Brian is "not in the business"; he's a solicitor, and the two were introduced by friends four years ago. Matchmaking friends, I ask?

"Yes, they were, and they did a very good job. He was totally unaware, I was asked would I meet this guy, and I remember the first time I saw him — the absolute clarity in his face, and going 'wow, who are you?' Then we met again at a friend's wedding and he asked me out on a date, and it was just right. He's a beautiful man. I knew it was right, weirdly enough. Maybe this is a thing about getting older — your radar is much more polished, you see through all the bullshit."

Brian, the way Cathy describes him, provides much-needed balance in her life: "He works so hard, then he finishes and he has a life outside that. He has sports, football, he's very good at living life. That's kind of good for me. Brian doesn't panic. I love that. I just think it's so sexy. It's a very manly thing, to be that calm. High-maintenance men," she says with a laugh, "I couldn't do it. I don't have the energy."

And, he gets what she does. "He gets this business. I'm lucky in that he

loves the arts, he has a great appreciation but he's not submerged in it. He has a great sensitivity. I'm surprised how much he understands it actually."

Are you surprised that you're surprised? "That's a very good question? I think that maybe I underestimated people outside my business, I presumed they wouldn't understand it."

Because of Cathy's profession, her career, her obvious intelligence, I ask, inevitably, what she thinks of the recent earthquakes within her industry, about #metoo and the many odious revelations of women within the business about the ways they have been treated. It's the first time I see her hesitate.

"I don't want to get into it," she says, adding politely, "Is that OK? There's been so much talk about it, and I haven't clarified it in my mind, so all I will say to you is, I think abuse of power in any workplace is an appalling thing, and it's about dignity and respect, of everybody you work with."

She adds a little more: "It's getting back to the play, *The Approach* — we're all in this boat of life. We've got to look after each other, because people fall off. I know you've got to look after yourself, first and foremost, but you have to throw lifebelts too. I don't mean to be controversial about it, but I think it's important to clarify what I think about things in general. I've heard so many people throwing out soundbites and I think that can be almost more damaging to the process."

This much she will say: "Better out than in — these wounds are open, let them bleed, then we've got to start putting it back together in a much more transparent way." And does she think we can? "I do."

What's next for Cathy? Well, *Red Rock* is back on TV3 tomorrow ("Twenty three episodes. Then, what we've been told is, it's on a hiatus and it's up to TV3 to make the decision for 2019. I think they'd be crazy not to keep it going.") and there is talk of a second series of *Nowhere Fast*. ("I love Alison, she's a beautiful person and I think it deserves it, so I hope for her sake there is.") And Cathy would love to do a film, "a big, juicy film", she says.

So is she over the insecurity that once sent her into the CAO office?

"I think I'd be lying if I said, 'yeah, we'll see what happens, whatever, all Zen...'", she laughs. "No, I'm not. But I have learned to enjoy the moment more instead of thinking about the next gig — this is the nature of our business and the reason I came back is because I finally understood that."

"Now, I trust more. I think the more work you do, leads to more work, but it's a tough business and the only thing that's changed is, I can go, 'OK, this is where I'm at now', do as good a job as I can, and enjoy it."

CATHY'S ROLE-CALL



- Busy, glamorous, proactive, Caroline in *Nowhere Fast* is bemused by her exacting, troubled daughter but determined to do her best. An Irish mother with attitude.
- As Patricia Hennessy in *Red Rock*, Cathy plays Irish TV's most steely-eyed matriarch; woe-betide anyone, garda or rival, who threatens her children.
- Sister Claire in *Philomena* is all vicious machination hidden behind a calm voice and cups of tea. With oh-so-much regret, she explains that all adoption records were destroyed in a fire. A lie, of course.
- Lucy Reilly, the vet in *Glenroe*, was the part that weaned Cathy back into acting.
- *A Little Chaos*, directed by Alan Rickman, with Kate Winslet, tells of the construction of the Gardens of Versailles. Cathy plays Louise.

Landmark Productions presents the world premiere of *The Approach*, written and directed by Mark O'Rowe, from February 1-24 at the Project Arts Centre, Dublin, and from February 27-March 3 at The Everyman, Cork