

TV Geek

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Tougher, grittier, sexier,

Red Rock returns

Television's most malevolent
matriarch Cathy Belton
reveals her softer side

34 PAGES OF IRELAND'S BEST TV LISTINGS

We have a friendship that's solid as a Rock

On screen they are the matriarchs of feuding clans, but in real life Cathy Belton and Denise McCormack are firm friends

TV3's hit crime show Red Rock is poised to make a dramatic return to our screens tomorrow.

The Garda drama, which launched in 2015, was Ireland's most successful television export thanks to deals with Amazon Prime and the BBC, where its well-written, gritty storylines attracted an audience of more than a million viewers. Fans of the show will be delighted that the Red Rock cops are back on the beat and back on our screens.

Cathy Belton reprises her role as crime family matriarch Patricia Hennessy, a character she is criminally crazy about playing.

And while Denise McCormack may have traded Dublin for Walford in EastEnders, she also returns to Red Rock for its comeback.

'I am really looking forward to it,' says Cathy, who adds that taking on the part of Patricia has been her 'most thrilling role to date.'

'There are a couple of really exciting episodes. Obviously we shot them a while ago but I am really looking forward to seeing the audience reaction.'

A seasoned actor, Cathy learned her trade in her hometown of Galway where, at the age of 15, Sabina Higgins, wife of President Michael D, was among her first champions.

'I still see Sabina, they have come to an awful lot of my shows. I still keep in contact with herself and our President. They lived in Renmore, where I grew up, and they were very much the pulse of the parish. Sabina helped out in the Renmore pantomime. She was wonderful. She was studying to be an actress herself and she was terrific. What a wonderful thing as a 15-year-old, to be directed by her,' she recalls.

'And Michael is doing an amazing job. He's an incredible man. I am so proud and he hasn't put a foot wrong. They're a great combination. They are wonderful ambassadors for the country and the arts.'

While a desire to perform was running through her veins, a moment of reflection caused Cathy to step away from the arts for a brief period. She got a job in the Company Registrations Office but was tempted back to theatre, a decision she has never regretted.

'I took a few months off before I decided I was going to give this everything,' she recalls. 'I think it's always good to take that divine pause before you realise "OK, this is for me".'

'And it is for me. I think it was great not to run into it and to see if I was the right personality. As an actor you need to be vulnerable and you need to be strong – to be strong and courageous. But I have been so lucky; it's been wondrous and I feel so privileged to be part of Irish film and theatre.'

A stalwart of the Irish arts scene, the softly spoken actress has a history of deftly



Class act: Red Rock's Cathy Belton has been acting since she was a teenager portraying more gentle female roles, so when the chance came to play a malevolent mother, she relished the opportunity to showcase another side to her talents.

'It was so great to play such a strong matriarchal woman, this lioness. And it was great to play something different for me. I always

think it's a great gauge in an actor if they feel like they are going to be challenged.

'So when I read Patricia Hennessy, I thought this was an extremely well-written, well-rounded character, deeply flawed, with needs and wants, and it was really interesting to play her – and it still is.'

'I think what we will see in these episodes is Patricia on a downward spiral and what she will do to keep family and business together. I don't think I would take the same decisions Patricia has taken. I think I'm a nicer person.'

Giving a taste of what is to come in Red Rock, she says that Patricia makes a deal with a corrupt politician.

'All is looking great with herself and Johnno, (Sergeant John O'Riordan played by Paul Hickey) who I really think is so good for her. But she gets involved with the other side, a corrupt politician. It was thrilling to play.' And while Patricia has proven to be a deeply flawed character, Cathy says that the public reaction to her has been one of admiration.

'People seem to like her. I think they love

her feistiness and her b***s. It's her strength they admire.'

Cathy credits the entire Red Rock team for making the show such a success, from the writers to production.

'I think the writing foremost was incredible. I remember when I read the first few scripts three years ago. That's the thing that sets Red Rock apart. The writing is so good and the characters are so refined and developed. And that all started at the core with creator Peter McKenna, whose rule has been constant and has continued throughout all of the series.'

'This year we had Paul Walker, who is an extraordinary writer.

'If you don't have the writing, it's very hard to build on something. It was shot really innovatively and it has a great cast, so it has the best ingredients and people just really stuck with it.'

A huge fan of drama and strong female leads – Sarah Lancashire is a particular favourite – she says 'bring it on' to the suggestion we need more strong women on screen. Cathy also says that the #MeToo movement has been instrumental in opening wounds in the entertainment industry and that the time for healing has to follow.



Clan queen: Denise McCormack, second from left, as Bridget Kiely with her Red Rock family, Paul Roe as Vincent, Stephen Cromwell as Keith and India Mullen as Katie

RED ROCK STAR TAKES A NEW APPROACH TO THE STAGE

Cathy Belton's forthcoming stage appearance is in the highly anticipated new play by Mark O'Rowe, one of the country's foremost playwrights.



The Approach is written and directed by O'Rowe in another collaboration with award-winning Landmark Productions, with whom he also produced the massive hit *Howie The Rookie*, starring Tom Vaughan Lawlor.

Cathy (pictured) is joined by Derbhle Crotty and Aisling O'Sullivan in this three-woman play, which has been described as 'an emotional depthcharge of a play' both a psychological puzzle and a quietly devastating tragedy. The conversations between the three women explore the inner lives of Anna, Cora and Denise as they try to make sense of the world. But what will they reveal, and what are they trying to hide?

■ The Approach is being staged at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin from February 1-24. The production then moves to *The Everyman In Cork* from February 27 to March 3.

'Dignity and respect are vital in every workplace. I think we are going through a transition and wounds have been opened and I think that it's really important that they are healed. I think transition is always painful, but I am very excited about what's to come after this,' says Cathy.

This is a sentiment echoed by her co-star Denise McCormack, who says that the movement was a 'long time coming'.

'It's great that women are coming forward. I think it's been a long time coming. There are grey areas as well, of course, and I think there has to be care about it too; it's people's lives and careers. I think the movement is great and I applaud all of the women for standing up. And I look forward to a time when it's not an issue. I think there has to be trust and care between everyone going forward.'

Denise, who plays Bridget Kiely in *Red Rock*, is currently causing havoc on Albert Square, where she landed a role alongside Patrick Bergin in the UK's most popular soap opera. The move to Albert Square is testament to her acting credentials and is sure to open up new opportunities for the talented actress.

'I'm in for a while longer,' says Denise, but adds that she cannot reveal anything about her future *EastEnders* storylines.

She is commuting between Dublin and the UK as she films for the BBC soap and during her downtime in Ireland she was glued to *Dancing With Stars*, where her friend Deirdre O'Kane is taking to the dance floor. Denise was a finalist on the show last year and says she advised Deirdre to say yes to the dancing dress.

'I watched it last night. Deirdre was great, she did a really great job - she can definitely dance. I thought the girls in general were great. Erin (McGregor) was brilliant; she is going to go from strength to strength. They were all really strong for the first dance.'

Since she hung up her dance shoes last year, Denise hasn't been tempted to tango.

'I've not done any dancing. I probably will one day if I get the chance again.'

And while she says the show was a tough journey, it was one she recalls with fondness.

'It was one of those



Screen sparkler: Denise and partner Ryan McShane on *Dancing With the Stars*

experiences that I will never forget. That's why I advised Deirdre to go for it. She asked me how it was. I said 'you're eating well, you're getting healthy. But on the other side you're physically and emotionally drained. But when you look back, you do only see the good side.'

Denise is delighted that *Red Rock* is making a return and says that there are lots of dramatic twists in store for the new season.

While Denise is on *EastEnders* and Cathy is back on stage, they still keep in contact.

'It is a very tight group of people. We are all on our Whats

App and we go to see each other's shows,' says Denise.

'It's a great gift to come out of something like that and have these friends.'

However, schedule clashes may keep them from attending the upcoming IFTAs.

Cathy is back treading the boards in a play that was written especially with her in mind.

It's a gift to come out of a show like that with such great friends'

'I am doing a new Mark O'Rowe play called *The Approach*. Mark wrote *The Approach* especially for me and Aisling O'Sullivan and Derbhle Crotty.

Even though he wrote this two years ago, we are all finally available for it now. So I won't be at the IFTAs.'

Cathy also says that as long as there are good roles, she will be on stage and screen.

'I would love to just keep working and playing juicy, well-made, well-written, fabulous female roles.'

'I think it's the nature of what I do. I adore both stage and screen equally passionately, as long as it's the right part and well-written and there is a story to be told.'

And for budding actors musing over a career in the arts, Cathy's advice is to just give it your all.

'Just keep the heart and follow your bliss and do the best you can in any situation. If it's a tiny audition, a tiny workshop, anything, be the best you can. You can never work hard enough.'

■ *Red Rock* returns to TV3 on Monday, 9pm.

By Niamh Walsh

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