

WINTER

The driven Miss Camille

Camille O'Sullivan on music,
motherhood and finding love
with Aidan Gillen



BARRY EGAN
INTERVIEWS
ALAN SHATTER
WHO REVEALS A
DEVASTATING,
SECRET HE'S KEPT
TO HIMSELF FOR
OVER 50 YEARS



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I met Aidan on a volcanic mountain in Iceland

Camille O'Sullivan tells **Barry Egan** about death by domesticity, motherhood, her boyfriend Aidan Gillen, and how she is unravelling all the time

I FIND only freedom in the realms of eccentricity," Camille O'Sullivan's hero David Bowie once said. Eccentricity and Camille are, of course, well known to each other. When she first moved to Dublin from her home in Cork after qualifying as an architect in the early 1990s, her domestic arrangements were a direct window into her soul. "I had no table, no plates, a fork and a spoon," she says. "I thought the whole thing of buying stuff was almost like being married. And when I got my first table I cried because I thought: 'That's it. I'm attached to a place! My mum used to be distraught. You live like a gypsy!'"

"I'm a bit better now," Camille says, adding that she has plates and a table at her home in Portobello, "but I'm still a little bit the same. You don't think of the normal things. You think, 'How many are going to get this song, this show or this production done?'"

Camille's complex eccentricity also manifests itself when she builds giant gingerbread houses and other wondrous creations at home for her young daughter: "I made her a great Ferris wheel the other night. I will spend days on something. I got the Ferris wheel motorised. It is that size," she says showing me a video on her phone of the child playing with her Ferris wheel which was twice her size. "I want to make a much bigger one for her. I have even started drawing the diagrams. She had her little friend lying on the Ferris wheel this morning. 'Oh, it's falling,' she said. 'She is definitely my daughter. Her friend had to fall off the Ferris wheel!'" Camille hoots. "Aidan," she says of her other half, actor Aidan Gillen, "was laughing because he was going away to do work and he went up to the living room to see it. He was like: 'How did I miss that? It's *massive!*'"

Camille O'Sullivan is a massive enigma wrapped in a riddle, trapped inside the body of an enormously charismatic woman — "a kind of schizoprenic" half-French, half-Irish, Protestant born in London and brought up in Passage West in Co Cork by Denis, an Irish racing driver who grew up in England, and Marie-Rose, a French artist from Bordeaux. Adding to her allure is that Camille possesses a particular penchant for black humour and blacker melancholy; and can on occasion belt out dark post-modern cabaret numbers onstage like some obsessed but gorgeous goddess from the Weimar Republic. "I'm sorting my life out onstage,"



Camille O'Sullivan plays the role of Marie in *Woyzeck in Winter*

she laughs. Camille says that the lyric "There's a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in" from Leonard Cohen's song *Anthem* resonates with her on many levels. She thinks that's because she "likes sharing the part of me that is unravelling and f***ed up. I think people are connected to the part of them that isn't perfect, that is human, that is vulnerable, that is fragile — and fierce, and all those things," Camille says, as ever, the words coming out of her in near-neurotic torrents.

You can see why she was cast to play Constance Markievicz in RTE's *Rebellion* series in 2016 or why Yoko Ono chose Camille to perform *Double Fantasy* live at Meltdown, at the Royal Festival Hall, in London in 2013, alongside Patti Smith. Camille first realised she was like that in her teens when she "started getting shy about things. So I unravelled pretty much from my teen years. I'm not saying that I don't enjoy life to the fullest. I have a great laugh."

Then, one day she concluded that the primary thing that "makes you interesting onstage as a performer is the side of you that reveals fragility. I don't mean just soft-light, definitely. Not torment. There's joyfulness, too."

Yet, she is more drawn to the dark side. "If you look at all the greats: Rachmaninov, Tchaikovsky, Hitchcock, Tom Waits, Bowie, Brecht, Beckett or Shakespeare...it all ends badly," she explains of the attraction of the less cheery side of life and artistic expression. "We all know there is

going to be strife and murder. And through that there is some cathartic thing what is it to be alive and be human," she adds, "and when somebody makes out that their life is Botoxed to within an inch and is perfect, you feel a bit that you want to collapse on the street and cry. And you think, 'How come I have this issue? Why do I have this side of me that has sadness?' Sadness is an OK thing. Look at Leonard Cohen. People go to Shakespeare to feel alive. It holds a mirror up."

I am curious about when, precisely, Camille's life is "f***ed-up" and "unravelling"?

"Now," she laughs. "I'm unravelling onstage all the time. I think I live more properly onstage than I do in my own life."

Further to her ongoing unravelling, Camille is performing in *Woyzeck in Winter*, one of the highlights of the Dublin Theatre Festival, with Stephen Brennan, Peter Coonan, Barry McGovern, Rosaleen Linehan among others at the Gaitey. "It's an old Buchner tale and Conall Morrison, the director, came up with the idea of mixing Schubert's *Winterreise* with *Woyzeck*. It is basically about the pressures that

are put on by society until they unravel. I unravel in this hurricane situation."

"So," she smiles, "it follows well that I am suited to the part?"

Be that as it may, Camille is a positively devoted and in-the-moment mother to her four-year-old daughter with her ex, Mike Scott of The Waterboys. She came yesterday to watch her mother in rehearsals for *Woyzeck in Winter*. Fascinated by it all, the child wanted to step up onto the stage. At which point Camille thought: "Ohmygod, don't do this."

"I don't usually bring her to my shows but she said, 'Mama, I want a little microphone! Last week, she wanted to be a doctor. Now she wants to be a singer? I was like, what have I done?'"

Camille and Mike Scott sometimes put on little shows for their daughter. "It is very natural for us as a little co-parenting unit that Mike and I have great fun with our daughter," she says. "We do little songs for her and she sings them back to us. She has only recently starting taking out a little guitar and a drum thing and she will sing along to it. It is all about death. And then on Monday they die she sings... And I thought, 'Ohmygod!'"

Camille adds that her daughter did say recently when they were at the beach, "This is the sea?" It wasn't lost on the four-year-old child that one of her dad's most celebrated compositions is *This Is The Sea* by his band The Waterboys.

"And then she said when we were at the sea that day — 'I'm a Watergip!'"

"She was at her creche recently and everybody was performing their show and she didn't say a word," Camille continues. "I was laughing, looking at her, thinking, 'We're singers and our own child is looking at her feet.'"

Camille can remember being in school in Cork "and being quite shy." "Some people talk more to cover their shyness. I know plenty of actors and singers who are like that, and others who adore being onstage."

Would she like her daughter to follow in the musical footsteps of her parents?

"She can be whatever she wants to be as long as she is happy and puts her heart into it."

Camille mentions that she had a recent conversation with Mike where it was discussed that they might write some music together. "Growing up I loved his music. It is brilliant still to hear him sing, especially when you know somebody is the father of your child. You talk to them and then they

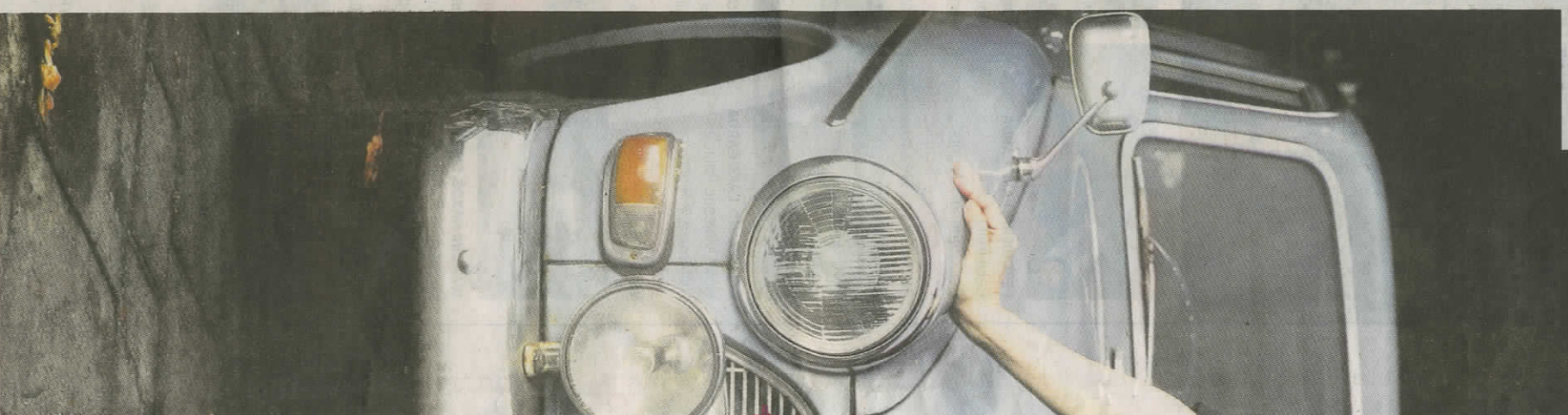


Mike Scott and Camille O'Sullivan



Aidan Gillen

sing. He has an incredible voice. It is quite *wild!*" says Camille, who has an untamed voice on stage herself, before adding that Mike "would be very supportive of me. It is great that I turn to someone who is so good in the business". Camille says that Aidan was at the recent U2 concert in Dublin when he heard the opening of *The Whole Of The Moon* by The Waterboys — which came on before U2's arrival onstage. "And Aidan said that all he could think of was my daughter going. 'Isn't that lovely?' So





Musician Camille O'Sullivan says her partner Aidan Gillen gives her great advice on her performances. Photo: David Conachy

that is a great thing to be able to pass on. She doesn't know any different. She thinks everybody is a singer at the moment. But she wants to be a doctor. I pray! Be my manager! Sort me out!"

Does Aidan ever give her advice? "He does, he does. He is very supportive."

On the few occasions I have met him, he seems slyer than Camille.

"He is! He is!" she laughs.

"How do we even talk to each other?" she laughs again.

"He'd be very honest, not in a brutal way, but he does say it as he sees it. He is quite clear. When I was in Edinburgh he came for the first night of *Where Are We Now?* Of course I feel freaked out performing in front of him. Luckily, he was nervous seeing me in shows too, because, I suppose, you want the other person to be good at what they do. Anyway, he loved it. I usually tell him, don't come to the show."

"It is a bit like parents," Camille says before returning to the question

of whether Aidan gives her advice. "With him, he's great. He sat down and went through all my notes with me. This would work better... Why don't you do this? So, we are both good that way. I don't really go too near what he does, because I think he is very clear in his mind."

Camille is "clear in my mind but I like the advice. I like to discuss things. I need to talk about it."

Talking to Camille O'Sullivan is a surreal experience in itself. It is like conversing with a woman who appears to be channeling the ghost — and the intensity — of the aforementioned Mr David Bowie, along with the equally intense spirits of Samuel Beckett, Lou Reed and perhaps Lady Macbeth. Camille simply doesn't do conventional chit-chat very well, and nor would we want her to. She has too much of an interesting mind for that.

"You think you're on one journey but as you get older, whatever you wanted or think you should be..." she begins at one point in our 90-minute conversation. "Then you lay yourself open to things that happen. I never thought that I would meet someone," she says, "or how I would get on."

"Like with Aidan, I met him once on a boat on an Icelandic blooming mountain. The volcano had exploded and we all had to get boats, instead of flying," she laughs. "But, I think what was nice is that I hadn't a TV so I had never seen him in his films. I knew he was an actor, but I didn't know his work. So it was only later that I said, 'Start stalking me now — now that I see what you can do!'"

This is presumably a reference to the scheming Machiavellian Petyr "Littlefinger" Baelish character in *Game Of Thrones* that Aidan played until recently when he met his gruesome end at the hands of the Stark sisters.

"If you have had something massive happen and your heart is broken — Mike and the 20 or so before him!" she roars with laughter — "you just kind of go: 'I can't pretend any more. I can't pretend about anything any more. This is what you get. So this is what I look like most days. And this is me mostly without make-up. And this is me falling apart. And this is me whatever!'"

"It was really liberating, because you think, yes, there is great sides to you which is fun but maybe all the previous relationships didn't work because I was probably trying to do something I wasn't. Also, I didn't really think I would meet anyone else because, to be honest, when you have a little person, all you can think about is her. She is everything to me, I think also when you have a child everything goes. I don't include her in social media to protect her but also to let myself know that I am also a person in my own right. I love being a mum but that is not everything I am about. I think it is very important in a relationship to let them do their thing, you do your thing and your child does her thing. I see things through her eyes and don't think about myself all the time. That is a real blessing, especially as a performer..."

It is night-on exhausting just to listen to Camille reel off the projects (upcoming shows in London, New York, Dublin — the Olympia on November 17 — plus a live album of Jacques Brel songs out next week, *Woyzeck in Winter* at the Gaiety next month, *Lucerne* at the Gate next March) she is involved in on

a seemingly endless basis. Camille never appears to switch off or indeed chill out.

"I actually did," she laughs. "I went to Brighton recently and ate ice creams and went on funfairs. Aidan thinks my daughter has been on more Ferris wheels and carousels than most people in their lifetime." Camille also took her daughter bungee jumping in Edinburgh. "Then we got the train to Brighton at 6am and went to a water park in Brighton. Aidan was laughing because the water was freezing and there's me and my daughter trying to swim in the thing! It was a lovely break for me. My daughter remembers all these things."

Unsurprisingly, Camille has carried forth this from her own childhood. "I remember myself as a child in France, smiling and beaming on this little carousel in Bordeaux where my mum was."

'If you have something massive happen, and your heart is broken, you go, I can't pretend anymore, I can't pretend about anything anymore'

She can remember when she was "really tiny" playing in the kitchen in Kent with spoons and "messing" with her sister Victoria on a "pink and yellow" bed. She also remembers the "joyful moments" of travelling to France to my "petite grandmother with the red hair and she plating my hair while I was having hot chocolate. It was a very different type of eating experience in that house where food was everything." Camille recalls her cousin Didier crying once because he had missed his lunch.

"And he was in his 20s."

Lunch is very important in France! My dad felt so bad and he brought him go-carring. I also remember as children the table went out around the corner into the hallway. The French thing was very strong"

Is it still strong now? What is a lunch experience like for Camille now? "It is a disaster. My daughter has an au pair while I'm working. Mike is away with his wife in New York with their baby. But I cook her fish pie, shepherd's pie, chicken, mash potatoes and peas made into little faces. And pizzal! I would be pretty practical, fool!" This despite Camille when she was a young child in Co Cork seeing Dorothy in *The Wizard Of Oz* on the telly, and telling herself: "I want to be in *there*." Somehow you doubt Camille O'Sullivan has revised her opinion much since.

Landmark Productions and Galway International Arts Festival's smash-hit, *Woyzeck in Winter* will play the Gaiety Theatre as part of the 60th Anniversary Dublin Theatre Festival (3-8 Oct) www.dublintheatrefestival.com

Camille O'Sullivan plays *The Olympia Theatre* on Friday November 17 with her acclaimed new show *The Carry Dream*. Tickets from €29 via Ticketmaster.ie