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Irish Independent

Saturday 30 September 2017

# WEEKEND

*Top 25  
New York*  
The unmissable  
Big Apple  
experiences



Third age  
*technology*  
Life-changing  
gadgets for  
the over 50s

IN FULL  
COLOUR  
Tear up the  
rulebook for using  
hues in the home

## *The meat* STAGG

PETER COONAN on fatherhood  
and forging a theatre career

POSH  
SLICE  
Gourmet pizza  
recipes from  
Ballymaloe

this weekend at a glance...



**YOUR 7-DAY TV GUIDE STARTS ON PAGE 45**

**FEATURES**

- 10 GANGLAND STYLE**  
Peter Coonan on life after *Love/Hate*
- 14 SENIOR SCHOOL**  
This week: science class and top tech
- 18 JOHN BISHOP**  
The funnyman on how Ireland made his career

**STYLE & HOME**

- 20 RUTH GRIFFIN**  
Beautiful brands born at the kitchen table
- 23 DAREN KENNEDY**  
Why plaid checks all the boxes
- 24 FASHION**  
Our top A/W picks from the Jervis Centre
- 26 NO-NONSENSE COLOUR GUIDE**  
How to use the right hues in your home
- 28 LAURENCE LEWELYN-BOWEN**  
The *Changing Rooms* star on his new Irish show

**TRAVEL**

- 38 NEW YORK BUCKET LIST**  
What not to miss in the Big Apple

**WEEKEND extra food**

- 32 A LITTLE SLICE OF HEAVEN**  
Ballymaloe Cookery School's pizza picks
- 35 INDY POWER**  
Awesome apple and rhubarb crumble
- 36 WINE LIST**  
Why barrel-flavouring is big business

**WEEKEND**

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**Cover photograph** by Kip Carroll. Peter Coonan wears: Jumper, €205, Kenzo; jeans, €430, Jacob Cohen; trainers, €110, Nike; all Brown Thomas

write a short story in six words

**WINNER**

**Ticket in my hand.**

**Train gone.**

*Carmel Blackeoir,  
Co Westmeath*

I haven't seen

my car since.

*Adam Cychan,  
Co Galway*

Married for land.

Paid highest price!

*Bid Kirwan,  
Co Waterford*

One rumour

changed her life forever.

*Orlaith Keane,  
Co Galway*

Two brothers,

going their separate ways.

*Abigail Ellis Hallman,  
Co Tipperary*



Legend has it that in a smoky bar in the 1920s, Ernest Hemingway's colleagues bet him he couldn't write a complete story in six words. To cut a long story short, he did, and he believed the resulting short story to be his best work. What he wrote was ...

**'For sale: baby shoes, never worn.'**

If you would like to test your literary mettle, take the Hemingway challenge and send us your six-word story. Each week we will publish the five best entries and award a prize to the best one. The only rule is the story must be six words. No more, no less.

**HOW TO ENTER**  
 Email your entry with your name, address and phone number to [weekendmag@independent.ie](mailto:weekendmag@independent.ie) or mail it on a postcard to **Weekend Magazine Short Story Competition, Irish Independent, 27-32 Talbot Street, Dublin 1**  
 The five best entries will be published in the Weekend Magazine, with a €30 O'Brien Press voucher going to the winning story.

**O'BRIEN**



# FRAN

*with a plan*



Going from low-life screen psycho to high-brow stage star, Peter Coonan has had to work hard to avoid being typecast after his celebrated stint in *Love/Hate*. Here, the gentle, soft-spoken actor opens up to **JOHN MEAGHER** about overcoming his insecurities, how being a father has helped drive his creativity, and life after Fran...

It is easy to miss Peter Coonan. The image of Fran from *Love/Hate* is so indelibly imprinted in my mind that I almost don't notice the smiling figure, bedecked in knee-length shorts and T-shirt messing on his phone in the back of the coffee shop-cum-pub that we've arranged to meet in.

Coonan's portrayal of *Love/Hate*'s most psychotic thug was so convincing that you might expect the man himself to be a little bit fearsome, too. But he could hardly be more different to a character that helped make the gangland depiction one of RTE's most watched drama series.

Talk to this gentle, soft-spoken and kindly chap from Dublin's southside and it's impossible to imagine that he could portray with such ruthless precision the sort of violent enforcer that even the hard men feared. Who could forget the short work Fran made of his enemies, including that of the hapless, in-over-his-head dentist from season four, whom, in an excruciating scene, he smothered to death using a plastic shopping bag?

Coonan, 33, says he loved the part. "I've been looking back on a bit of *Love/Hate* recently," he says, "because I'm making a new showreel and I can see how both the character progressed and how the acting progressed. I definitely got more confident as it went on.

"I'm very proud of the work and where it went. Nobody had any idea it would go that far. I was so lucky to get the chance to develop that character and to work with amazing actors who are doing so well. Oh, and Stuart [Carolan]'s scripts were incredible."

By the time the final season rolled around in 2014, Coonan was a star, and he bagged an IFTA for best supporting actor that year. "It was a drama that really connected with a lot of people," he says. "I suppose it's what you'd call event TV, and there's less of that these days." After years in bit-parts, he had to get used to being public property. Today, he says he isn't approached in the street as often as before, but it still happens. The terrifying Fran and his colourful way with words (such as his trademark "coola boola?") won't be forgotten that easily.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Coonan sought out very different parts when the cameras stopped rolling on *Love/Hate*. "I could have gone down the road of doing low-budget Irish features with similar characters, and I remember Kim [O'Driscoll, his partner] saying, 'Would you not just take it?' But I'd real reservations and not just about type-casting... *Love/Hate* had such high production values and it had a marvellous cast and you might go into something else that wouldn't have any of that and you'd end up doing the same sort of part and it wouldn't look good.

"And, anyway, my default would have fallen into Fran — and that wouldn't be good enough. You have to be hard on yourself. So I threw myself into theatre as much as I could — the characters I was offered were very different. You play these



The likely lads: Mark Dunne as Ado, Tom Vaughan-Lawlor as Nidge, Peter Coonan as Fran and Laurence Kinlan as Elmo in *Love/Hate*

parts and you lose yourself in it and there's nowhere to hide."

His latest project is *Woyzeck in Winter*, a new play from Landmark Productions. A fusion of two unfinished 19th century plays featuring the music of Schubert, it has just enjoyed a short run in London's Barbican Theatre, and will show at the Dublin Theatre Festival next week. It was one of the highlights of this summer's Galway International Arts Festival, where it attracted an ecstatic review from *The Guardian*.

Coonan is passionate about the play. "It's about a man being pushed down by society, utterly mistreated," he says, "and it's got resonance in the world today. Look what's happening in Syria. And it resonates with the homeless situation in Ireland today too."

He says he doesn't read theatre reviews. "You've made a decision on how you're going to play it, but if they write something about you, it can affect before and it was a little bit negative about me and another actor — and the words stayed with me. The next time I was doing the show, it was in the back of my mind. The director took me aside and said, 'Forget it, it's just one person, you're doing a really good job,' and I did, but there was still one show where it had been in my mind and it affected my performance.

"When you're doing film, it's different. There's no reaction and you only get to see it a year-and-a-half later. Of course, you can have regrets and that can be quite tormenting at times, but you have to move on and be happy about the good work."

He loves the immediacy of theatre and that instant connection with an audience, and says he doesn't like to be away from the boards for long. It certainly seems to be a medium that brings out the best in him. He was acclaimed for his portrayal as a young Brendan Behan in *Borstal Boy* in the Gaiety, Dublin, in 2014 — his first big part to show there was far more to him than Fran.

And he's chosen his parts with care, especially in the film version of Colm Murphy's play, *The Guarantee*. Cooney played a number of roles, including that of disgraced ex-Anglo Irish Bank chief David Drumm. "It was the first time I embodied a real-life person," he says, "and I was nervous about it. I remember saying to Kim, 'I don't know if I'm the right man for this job.' She said, 'Get a good night's sleep.' I did and when I got up the next morning I really sensed I was able for this role."

He had studied economics in UCD — but failed to finish the degree, having devoted his energies into a low-budget feature film, *Between the Canals*. Yet, it was a grounding that helped him depict Drumm. "He's a villain, but not in the same sense of Fran — who's black and white. This guy was heavily into grey. You have to connect with him on the basis that the guy is a human, he's somebody's son, he's a father — there are people out there who love him."

Director Ian Power urged him not to worry to much about mastering Drumm's accent — "because that would be an imperfection" — but to try "to understand the man and why he's saying what he's saying."

Listening to the Anglo Tapes — originally released by the *Irish Independent* — was a key step in his preparation.

Coonan did some acting in school — the noted Gaelicist, Coláiste Eoin in Shillorgan — but his teen years were characterised more by sport. "I played Gaelic [football] and hurling and was better at the hurling," he says. "Maybe it's because the Gaelic lads were fitter than me and in hurling you could let the ball do the work. My father's from Kilkenny, so I suppose that's a reason why hurling is my first love." He must have been handy with hurley and sliotar because he played for local club Kilmacud Crokes, one of the big GAA nurseries in the capital.

His interest in the stage came from his mother, Betty, who was an amateur actress of note (his father, Martin, is a primary school principal in Sandymount). Watching her perform sparked a passion for acting in both Coonan and his older brother Michael, now a lawyer. Sadly, Betty passed away from cancer when Coonan was just 12.

It was at UCD when the acting bug really started to bite although he admits he indulged in the usual rite-of-passage stuff while at college and didn't apply himself to either his study or acting as well as he might. It's very different today and he's come to learn that all the best actors take their work exceptionally seriously. He's all too aware of what a fickle industry it can be and how being recognised in the street isn't a guarantee that he's going to get the juicy roles he covets.

Recently, he has appeared in *The Drummer and the Keeper*, a film about the unlikely and heartwarming friendship between two very different young men with mental health issues. "I loved the script," he says. "It's beautifully told and I think it's examining mental health and our attitude to it in a very intelligent way."

Coonan plays the part of a musician in a rock band, whose house-mate and fellow band member (Dermot Murphy) is suffering from bipolar disorder. "Growing up, I'd played a bit of guitar and a bit of violin and then the flute," he says, "but the film required me to play the bass so I listened to a lot of Thin Lizzy and Joy Division to try to get a sense of how special that instrument can be."

At the time of our meeting Coonan had yet to see the film. "I hope my 'playing' in the band scenes is convincing," he says, a little sheepishly.

*The Drummer and the Keeper* reunited Coonan with the director, Nick Kelly — former frontman of late 1980s/early '90s rock outfit the Fat Lady Sings. Coonan had starred in Kelly's short feature, *Shoe*, some years previously — and it was long-listed for an Academy Award.

"It was an amazing experience because I got to work with an actor as special as Pat Kinevane. I was very new to acting and watching Pat work was an education in itself. It was a special project because it's about a topic that's so prevalent in society [suicide]. Everyone in Ireland knows somebody who has taken their own life..." He's just started filming *Dark*.

**You** have to be HARD on yourself. So I threw myself into THEATRE as much as I could - the CHARACTERS I was offered were very different



➤ *Lies the Island*, a feature film based on the Kevin Barry short story collection of the same name. It's a lead role and he's clearly very excited about it. "The character is multi-faceted and multi-layered and I really want to do it justice, because I love Kevin's work. I'm nervous, though, and I think that's probably a good thing."

It's hard not to be struck by Coonan's honesty. In a trade where boundless self-confidence is the norm, it's refreshing to meet an actor who admits to doubts and fears.

"I've gone through barren stages in the last while," he says. "It can be frightening, especially when you've got two kids, including a 10-month old," he says of baby Katie and her three-year-old sister, Beth. Coonan first met their mum Kim, who runs DeVillie's restaurant in Dalkey, in 2013. The couple became engaged in 2015.

"And yet, you're very lucky to have time off to be able to spend with them," he continues. "But then, there are moments where it's not your choice to not work and that can spook you a bit."

Unlike many fellow *Love/Hate* alumni who are resident in the UK and carving out a career there, Coonan doesn't have the luxury of upping sticks if the mood takes him.

"I don't have the freedom to get up and go to London tomorrow to live for a year or two — to do some London stage, say, for any sustained time," he says. "But I'm lucky in that Kim is in an industry — the restaurant business — that's different to mine and she's very supportive of my career. She has said, 'If it comes to it that we have to move away for a time, all of us, then I'm happy to do it.'"

"But I truly don't think domesticity is the enemy of creativity. If anything, being a parent has focused me more. It gives me so much to work on and being a parent gives you a sensitivity, a vulnerability that you can draw from. You can think about your family, to imagine what it might have been in that situation your character



Peter wears, this page: Jacket, €1,395, Belstaff; T-shirt, €59, Ted Baker; jeans, €430, Jacob Cohen; trainers, €110, Nike, all Brown Thomas.  
Page 10: Jacket, €395, Patrick Sheary Menswear, 33 Clarendon Street, Dublin 2; T-shirt, €40, Barbour; Brown Thomas.  
Above, with fiancée Kim

finds themselves in, and I know that Tom Vaughan-Lawlor [his *Love/Hate* co-star] did that with Nidge — he went somewhere dark in his head."

He says he relishes parenting, and you believe him. "I count myself lucky to have my two girls. The three-year-old understands what her mummy does because the restaurant is a tangible thing... but me, I wonder what she thinks I do? I don't go off in the morning in a suit."

And, he quips, he can't show either of

his children the *Love/Hate* showreel any time soon. "That'll be for some stage in the distant future, but hopefully there'll be lots of other memorable characters between now and then." ❧

*'Woyzeck in Winter' runs at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, from October 3-8. It's a highlight of the Dublin Theatre Festival, which is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year. [dublinfoestival.com](http://dublinfoestival.com)*

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