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## Regardless of budget, you always feel you could do with a bit more

Neasa Hardiman, who cut her teeth as one of *Fair City*'s youngest directors, has become one of TV's go-to directors during its modern golden age, writes *Tanya Sweeney*

Still, working with budgets that wallet-busting must be a bit of a thrill.

**T**hey may not immediately know her name, but even the most casual of TV viewers will likely be familiar with Neasa Hardiman's output. In fact, the director is so prolific that it would be a hard task to avoid her imprint all over the small screen: you'll find her on the credits of *Happy Valley* (for which she won a Bafta in 2017), *Jessica Jones*, *Scott & Bailey*, *Holby City* and *Casualty*. Her stock is at an all-time high, on both sides of the Atlantic. Before our interview, there's a meeting with a huge US network to take place first. She casually mentions that due to scheduling conflicts, she's had to turn down directing gigs on some of television's biggest shows. With a cineaste's approach and a genuine love for storytelling, Hardiman has gone from cutting her teeth as one of *Fair City*'s youngest directors to becoming one of TV's go-to directors during its modern golden age.

"Once you get [project budgets] of over \$3m per hour of screen storytelling, the amount of female directors involved drops to 4 per cent," she notes. "That's where I

live, in that 4 per cent. The DGA [Directors' Guild of America] has realised that there are several women directors in the business, it's just that they're making low budget films."

Given her success, Hardiman is likely to get asked about being a woman in film a lot. Still, she is loathe to make any distinction between the energy of a TV series helmed by a male or female director.

"I'm just really cautious on generalising about these things," she shrugs. "I think that's part of the problem. I don't believe there's a huge difference in terms of sensibility and proclivity [between men and women]. I hear people say, 'wow, you really think like a man', and I always think, 'no, that's not right'. I would say, statistically, that if you are a woman directing a production that has a budget of \$3m per hour storytelling, chances are you're better at your job than most of the men, because the odds are so stacked against you to get to that level. You have to be really that bloody good."

"Well, regardless of how big your budget, you tune it out quite quickly, and you always feel like you could do with a bit more," she laughs. "Your ambition always exceeds what you have. But it's really fun working on shows in the US — if there's a helicopter in the scene, someone often goes, 'yeah, it would be great if we had two helicopters', and then you get a film helicopter, and you think, 'wow, we can actually do something great here'. We have the muscle to do it."

Working with huge budgets often means working with big-name actors: among those with whom she has previously collaborated include Krysten Ritter (*Jessica Jones*), Christina Ricci (*Z: The Beginning Of Everything*, a biopic about Zelda Fitzgerald), Connie Nielsen (on Neasa's own project *Sea Fever*. More on that later).

Yet Hardiman is such a consummate professional that she won't even play ball when I attempt to wrench from her stories of demanding Hollywood types. If anything, Hardiman proves herself a true actor's director, thriving on collaboration and eliciting the right performance from her cast.

"Do you know what I think? And this is maybe controver-

sial," she starts. "Actors do a really difficult job. And young, beautiful female actors have sometimes been asked to do some things in the past, maybe not so much now. But there was that expectation that they could take certain roles and behave in certain ways that maybe weren't that great in the past."

"What I think is, it's very difficult to open yourself up as an actor and be vulnerable, which is exactly what's required for the job. And if you're on a set with, let's be fair, mostly blokes, and your job is to be vulnerable, and a director shouts cut or someone breaks your concentration, it doesn't surprise me that it can throw actors off their game. Just because they're not the ones hauling equipment around doesn't mean they're not working hard."

Coming from an art school background (she has a Double First from NCAD), Hardiman got a scholarship to study film in the Universität der Künste in Berlin. She then





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returned to Ireland, where she worked in RTE, initially making documentaries.

She soon jumped at the opportunity to work on *Fair City* in 1998, and found that working with actors was her métier.

"The alchemy of finding someone true and authentic, you can't beat it," Hardiman enthuses. "Capturing it is like catching a butterfly in a jar."

In the US, Hardiman is represented by the mega-agency CAA [Creative Artists Agency], home also to Jennifer Aniston, Cate Blanchett, George Clooney, Johnny Depp and Penelope Cruz. Which must make for interesting meetings at the office, I venture. As ever, Hardiman keeps any salacious Hollywood tales she might have accrued close to her chest.

"To be honest, it's a bit like your job as a journalist, where you're just meeting people all the time," she says. "People are always probably asking you, 'what's it like to meet that famous actor?', but it's a question of 'I just want to do a job here', and you have to tune out the other stuff. That said, my agents at CAA have been incredibly helpful. They're business people. They are embedded in the business and understand the nuances and politics of LA. I've done the rounds of Hollywood meetings — in fact, I got commissioned to do a project with Dreamworks — but the thing is, the people in LA are really clever. You can't do these jobs unless you're really educated about film. They're really clued up. They're looking to make money, but make money out of excellence.

"Being a director can be a lonely job," she adds. "You're carrying the weight of everyone's expectations and everyone's investment — you pretty much carry that alone, on your shoulders. It's a huge responsibility, so to have someone like those agents in your corner, to think about what's good for you, is actually terrific."

In terms of Hollywood, Irish filmmakers hit a notable purple patch a couple of years ago: in 2016, Lenny Abrahamson's *Room* and John Crowley's *Brooklyn* both made the Best Picture list at the Oscars, while Michael Fassbender, Saoirse Ronan and Ruth Negga have enjoyed acting nominations in recent years. It has made being Irish and working in Hollywood "kind of thrilling".

"I think [their successes] are really valuable for all of us," Hardiman says. "If someone of Lenny's calibre makes terrific films that gain international attention, it can only be good for all of us."

"I live in Dublin and once upon a time if you were working in the TV industry, you did have to move over there. But it's such a globalised industry. Audiences want to see different experiences."

Speaking of which, Hardiman is about to deliver something rather beyond the ordinary for her feature debut as a writer-director. A beguiling mashup of sci-fi, thriller and drama, *Sea Fever* stars Dougray Scott, Connie Nielsen and newcomer Hermione Corfield (Nielsen replaced Toni Collette, who had to bow out of the project for scheduling reasons).

The film sees a shy marine biology student isolated from her trawler crew as they struggle to overcome a deadly parasite in their water supply.

"It's in that sweet spot I love, the intersection between a propulsive, exciting, thrilling story, but also has a really powerful metaphor and has something interesting to say. It has a real dreamlike element that really lifts the whole thing. But essentially, the work of storytelling is to give us a story grounded in emotional truth."

The project, now in post-production, has been a while in the making. The script for *Sea Fever* was shortlisted for the AMPAS Nicholl Fellowship in Screenwriting 2015. It was then selected at the Frontières Film Festival as one of 12 showcase projects, as well as at the Les Arcs Film Festival

as one of nine showcase projects, and won a prize at the London Film Awards. Hardiman's breakneck schedule also slowed things down.

"I don't think there's a filmmaker alive that has had a project that they think is brilliant, but that they've struggled to finance," admits Hardiman. "Screen Ireland have been brilliant — the American filmmakers I work with can't believe there's a public body that finances the work of filmmakers. We're so lucky to have it."

And now, Hardiman hopes that her myriad successes on both sides of the Atlantic will help inspire a new generation of filmmakers. She joins a panel of luminaries who will judge a new short film competition launched by Virgin Media Ireland. Filmmakers are hoping to land the prize of a €35,000 production budget, and the support of a production crew to get a short film made. The winning entry will also be shown at the Virgin Media Dublin International Film Festival and on Virgin Media television next year.

Hardiman acknowledges that the newest generation of filmmakers don't need to be encumbered with specialist film education or technology, but as ever, the storytelling is still very much the thing.

"New filmmakers have an access to technology that's unprecedented, and everyone is so conversant with screen technology. It really is extraordinary. But what really has changed is the way in which people view drama. There's been the most incredible resurgence. It's the thing that everyone understands, wants and needs. The ground is moving right under our feet. We're in the middle of a huge revolution, and that doesn't happen all that often. How thrilling is it to be living through that?"



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PICTURE: JULIEN BEHAL



Screen queen:  
(clockwise from main)  
Neasa Hardiman in  
Dublin; pictured far  
left at the launch of  
Screen Ireland's 2019  
programme; stills from  
her upcoming film  
Sea Fever