

Interview

Singing to the *world*

Irish mezzo-soprano **Paula Murríhy** returns home in May to perform a gala concert in the Gaiety. She talks to Janice Butler about her path from Kerry to some of the biggest stages, life on the road with her family and those *Timothée Chalamet* opera comments

Irish mezzo-soprano Paula Murríhy enjoys a busy career working at the highest level in both Europe and the US. The Kerry native is hugely respected in the world of opera and when we speak, she's in Brussels rehearsing for a new show based on the mythological story of Medusa. "It's a world premiere. I play Medusa's sister and it has been a really interesting process because it's an original piece and I've gotten to know the composer over the last few months and that's very rare in opera. He's writing with our voices in mind, which is completely unique and a brilliant experience," she explains of the new production.

"My amazing friend and colleague Claudia Boyle is playing Medusa, so it's a real celebration that two of the main roles have been cast with Irish women," she adds.

Previously a member of Oper Frankfurt's ensemble, Paula has appeared on the world's major stages, including Covent Garden, the Metropolitan Opera, Opéra national de Paris, the Bolshoi Theatre, Gran Teatre del Liceu, Opernhaus Zürich and the Salzburg Festival. So how does a girl from Tralee end up being one of

the biggest names on the global opera stage?

"I grew up in an incredibly supportive and musical family, but not opera or classical music," she says.

"My mum loved traditional music. Radio Kerry would be on most days. And my Uncle PJ Murríhy, a singer and songwriter, has written ballads for the likes of Daniel O'Donnell and Foster and Allen. So that was the kind of music that was on at home.

"When I was seven, I auditioned and got into the National Folk Theatre of Ireland. So, I knew from a young age that I must have had a nice voice because I was getting solos. Then from the age of 14, I really got into classical music and I did my exams in classical singing from then until 17."

She toyed with the idea of becoming a schoolteacher but at the last minute, changed her CAO form to study music performance in Dublin, much to the surprise of her parents.

"The idea that their eldest daughter would go off and choose music as a profession, at the time, was a bit of a shock for them," she laughs.

Paula's travels began after her initial studies in

Dublin, when she went to North America for further study at the New England Conservatory. Subsequently, Paula participated in the Britten-Pears Young Artist Programme, San Francisco Opera's Merola Program and was an apprentice at Santa Fe Opera. Her big break came when she became a member of the Ensemble at Frankfurt Opera, where she remained until deciding to become a freelance singer.

The life of an opera singer means Paula and her family are on the road a lot of the time. While her base is in Ireland, the family (her husband and two daughters) travel together when she's working and she explains it has given her daughters a taste for travel and music.

"I feel very lucky that we can do it together, and while there can be challenges, the positives definitely outweigh the negatives. We take it day by day, but for now it's working for us and they're very adaptable and outgoing little girls, so they seem to love it. They love sitting in on rehearsals and meeting all the cast and crew. It's an incredible world to be around. They get to see so many different cities and experience different cultures and languages, so it's a full life for them."

Opera hit the headlines recently when Oscar-nominated actor *Timothée Chalamet* faced significant backlash for commenting that "no one cares" about ballet and opera, calling them "dying art forms" while discussing his desire to avoid working on projects that require fighting to keep niche industries alive. I'm interested to hear what Paula thought of these comments.

"It was such a careless mention. But what was nice to see was how the arts world rallied around, and I thought that was one of the more positive things to come out of it. People say silly things all the time but the opera world really came together in their response and that was very heartening. I'm not going to pretend that opera is for everyone, because it's not, but what we do, we take it so seriously and put so much work into it, not just the performers but the background stuff too, so you just don't want someone to dismiss it," she responds.

She'll be back home this month to perform at a special gala concert with Mexican tenor Rolando Villazón. She credits The Irish National Opera for bringing high quality performances to Irish audiences. "You can't overstate what it is to Irish singers. They are operating on the highest level and the opportunities it has given Irish singers and to be able to come home and work at this incredibly high level, feels very rewarding," she says.

Anyone coming along to the Gaiety in May is in for a treat, she says. "People can expect a great night's entertainment with some favourites that people will definitely recognise and some more unusual numbers. It's going to be a fun night. It's a really unique opportunity to see these songs performed in a venue like the Gaiety."

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A Gala Concert,
Thursday, May 28,
gaietytheatre.ie

