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ALL ABOUT AOIBHINN

THE FORMER ROSE ON HER LIFE AND LOVES

The Bright stuff

Theoretical physicist, Sean Nós singer and former Rose of Tralee, Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin is not one to be pigeonholed. On the eve of her first solo TV series, the presenter opens up to Jessie Collins.

Photography by Barry McCall
Styling by Sarah Rickard





THIS PAGE: White silk shirt (€140) @ Reiss; red skinny jeans (€50) @ River Island; Blossom pendant (€750), charm ring, necklet (€1,800) and ring (€3,300) @ Boodles; stilet kitten heels (€380) by Miu Miu @ Brown Thomas

It is not often you get a request for chips at a photo shoot. Sushi, salads, herbal tea, yes. Greasy bags of vinegary potatoes, no. But then our cover star is not a typical subject. Full-time teacher (she arrives, having just finished work at St Mark's Community School in Tallaght), Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin is perhaps the first person we have shot that is not a full-time actress, singer, model or presenter. In fact, she is quite explicit that her first love is her day job. "Teaching is my career and my vocation. I don't think you can be a good teacher if you don't love it. Because you have to love your students in some way, you have to care how they get on. They don't have to be an honours class, you just want them to do as well as they can."

A love of numbers and alchemy is something she can always remember, but she didn't ever think it would lead to a career. "When I was five I wanted to be a

witch but I figured that may not be really possible so the next best thing was to be a scientist because at least they could make potions. So it's really funny that I ended up doing that. I always loved numbers and puzzles," she continues, "but I have to thank my career guidance teacher because we did our aptitude tests and I actually wanted to do communications and journalism, which I would have been terrible at. She sat me down and said you are good at this but you seem to be really good at maths. At that time I didn't even know you could do a degree course in it so I looked into it and theoretical physics seemed just brilliant, I loved talking about black holes and quantum physics."

love teaching maths. I am passionate about extending that to make other people enjoy [it]. So many people say they hate maths but it can be a really great experience and comes in to every single job you do and into your life – even calculating 30 per cent off in the sales. People should be able to problem solve, and shouldn't be frightened of something they haven't seen before, they should be able to say 'I have the tools for this'."

This combination of theoretical physics graduate and maths teacher seem at odds with entering a pageant and media life, but there are more similarities to the various hats she wears than people would imagine, she explains. "It's not as opposed as it seems because teaching is quite like performing, because you are kind of presenting all the time. But media work is just a different challenge. I got into it accidentally, and I am very lucky that I don't rely on it." But the contrast of being in the public eye and also being in a classroom is not one that you would think to sit easily together. "The students don't know me as someone who is on television, they know me as Miss O'Sullivan,

and I am their maths teacher and I will give them detention if they don't have their homework done!"


and I am their maths teacher and I will give them detention if they don't have their homework done! They are teenagers and have far more to be thinking about than me and my life." But could she imagine giving it all up for a life in the full limelight? "I could imagine doing it [working in the media] full time but there are far better people in the industry who have worked their way up and deserve to be in it more than I would be. I just popped into it, I didn't do all the making tea and photocopying and researching so I feel like a bit of a cheat and sometimes I think they will find me out!"

That seems unlikely, as this March sees her presenting her first solo show *An Cór*, a bi-lingual three part series that features six largely English-speaking choirs from all over the country as they learn, rehearse and perform popular Gaelic songs. The choirs

upbringing as sounding 'twee' now, and it does sound pretty idyllic; helping her uncles bring in the oats at the harvest, making hay houses with her brothers in the local farmer's fields. And the influence of growing up with all boys has left its mark, she is quick to point out that she is not a 'girly girl'. "We made pretty good tree houses back in the day, I will go out and mess about with the best of them." One of her favourite pastimes is fishing. "I am terrible at it, but it's just nice to sit on the lake and look at the mountains, it sounds so quaint! But it is lovely to do, especially in May when all the rhododendrons are in bloom and it's just all purple."

Her tom-boyishness stayed with her right until she left school and Mayo for UCD and three years of theoretical physics. "I was so not into fashion," she recalls, "I compete for the *An Cór* Trophy through a succession of 'choir-offs', the winner of each heat going through to the grand final with the chance to win €1,000 prize. Throughout the shows, you also get the background to the songs themselves. "We got to go all around the country," she explains, "just sitting in people's kitchens drinking tea, discussing the stories and where they learnt them and how far back they went in the generations of the families. It was lovely, visiting parts of the country I haven't been to before, such beautiful places, rural, not isolated but almost wild."

The chance to continue her commitment to the Irish language was something she also relished, a love of which was given to her from a very early age. Born in Mayo, the eldest of six and the only girl, her mother Máire, vice-principal of the Gaelscoil in Castlebar, and her father Art, a native Irish speaker from Corr na Móna, Galway and director of the Mayo Education Centre, raised their children in a bilingual household. She describes her



THIS PAGE: White lace dress
(€570) by Ewa Topan @ Harvey
Nichols; belt (€25) by Angelo
@ Costume; blue suede
peep-toes (€550) by Christian
Louboutin @ Harvey Nichols;
Roulette large cuff (€17,500)
@ Boodles.

"I was so not into fashion...
I was oblivious to it, I look back and
I am mortified. I had fire
engine red hair and my tongue
was pierced!"

was oblivious to it, I look back and I am mortified. I had fire engine red hair and my tongue was pierced." Despite this, one night over a bottle of wine with a friend she revealed that a secret ambition had always been to enter the Rose of Tralee. Though her friend had been sworn to secrecy, on the day of her final exam her father rang with a surprise. "He said: 'You have to be home on Tuesday because I have entered you into the Rose of Tralee competition'. I said not a chance because I am having a house party on Saturday. We had this big row, I was really cross."

Nevertheless, after finishing her exams (and gaining a first class honours degree) she showed up for the regional judging day. "I was so embarrassed, everyone was dressed up in high heels and I had just my little flats on. My mum was with me and said 'you have to wear my shoes!' so I squeezed into her heels that were two sizes too small for me and did the interview on stage, and then expected to go home and for it to all be over. But I went though to the regional finals. I thought this is the pinnacle of it now, I didn't expect to get through that but I did. We had the most gorgeous summer. I have three aunts on my dad's side and three on my mum's side and we all did the big shopping trips and got all the outfits so it was a lovely family occasion. And then we went down to Tralee and I thought it would also all end there, I even remember saying to one of the girls that I just couldn't wait to get in to my jeans."

But it didn't all end there, in fact it just began, with her winning the title and being catapulted in to the spotlight, opening up opportunities she had never dreamed of. "Everything just kicked off from that, anything that has happened in the media has just come from that. I am so grateful to the festival. I went all over the world that year, having dinner with ambassadors, American consuls. It was such a learning experience because you would land somewhere and be told in fifteen minutes you have to make a speech. It's great training."

From there she went on to do three series with the weekly topical show *The Panel* on RTÉ One and made guest appearances on many TG4 shows including *I bhFócus*, *Ardán*, *An Tuath Nua* and *Timpeall na Tíre*, presenting traditional Irish music show *The Reel Deal* in 2009 and co-hosting the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition Opening Ceremonies and Award Ceremonies for the last five years. All this adding to her already significant achievements in traditional music, winning various awards for Sean-Nós singing, playing the

AOIBHINN CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT



Coco Mademoiselle

Books

"I have just finished *Rebecca* by Daphne Du Maurier, and I actually think it is my new favourite book.

I eat books, I read and read. I need that, I get very upset if I don't have one. I am trying to get through the classics, I just read *Catcher and the Rye*, and I am going to try Jane Austen's stuff."



Elizabeth Arden 8-Hour Cream

"I always have this in the car and several lip balms on the go."



Hobbs



Rear Window

"Grace Kelly is just so beautiful in that movie, that green outfit, she is just gorgeous."

concertina, and touring America, Japan and Europe with the traditional group Rágus as their singer.

Music doesn't feature as much now, with a good deal of her spare time devoted to her main passion, maths and education. "I am the teachers' representative on a Government task force for the new maths syllabus and it's really nice having that voice and being so involved. Luckily I am teaching in a project school so as well as teaching students I am training teachers in the evenings. I really love it."

Aoibhinn says she does want a family at some stage, but the twenty-seven-year-old says she is in no rush. "I would like to have a house in the west of Ireland, and little people but we will see. That's too far ahead for me." The subject of family and home life leads us to the topic of a certain relationship with another TV presenter. This however, is not a something she is willing to discuss. She admits (just about) to currently being single, enjoying nights out (and in) with her friends, but as to her famous relationship with Ryan Tubridy she remains completely tight-lipped, preferring to say she finds the curiosity in her personal life baffling. "I don't think everybody is subjected to the same amount of curiosity. It's just a job, I am not in it for celebrity, I think it's important to keep private life private. I know the argument is 'well, it's public

if you are going to events, if you are going to awards ceremonies', but you are invited to them, and should you just not go to them because you are not willing to talk about your private life? The way I think about it is, if I am not going to ring up my second cousin and tell them about it, then they shouldn't have to read about it."

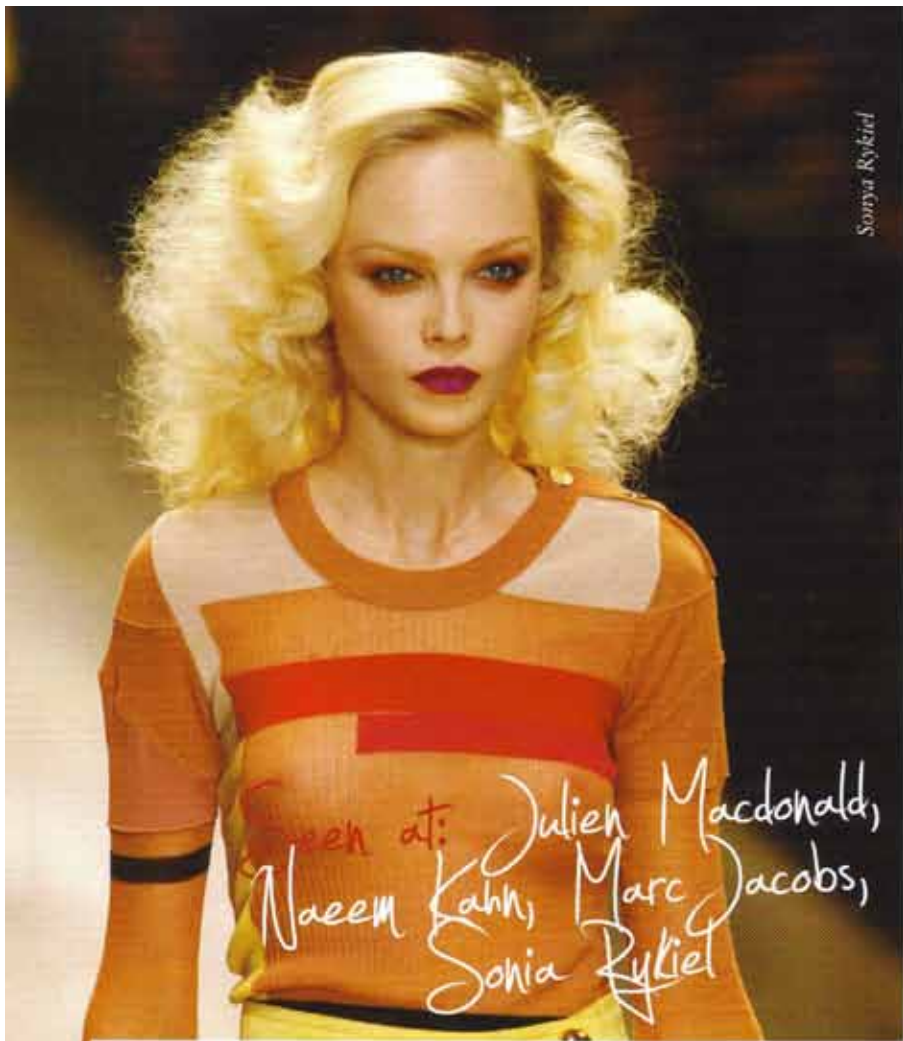
That doesn't stop people being interested however. For now, though, she seems content to focus on her work both in and out of the public eye, and is keen to see people feeling optimistic again about the future. "We need to get back to positivity, I think the new show has a role there now. We really need to get back to what actually means something, our culture is so important and we need to hone in on it and sell it again. It brings people together and we shouldn't ever forget that."

An Cór starts Monday 7 March at 8:30pm on RTÉ One.

THIS PAGE: Red dress (€1196/
approx. \$1,405) @ Bally.com

Photography by: Barry McColl
Styling by: Sarah Rickard
Hair production: Paul Canning
Hair by: Dylan Bradshaw
Makeup by: Paula Callan
O'Keefe of Brown Sugar

"It's just a job...I'm not in it for
the celebrity, I think
it's important to keep
private life private"



Seen at: Julien Macdonald,
Naeem Kahn, Marc Jacobs,
Sonia Rykiel

THE BIG STORY

The super-glam, 70s vibe wasn't restricted to makeup this season: hair was shiny, glossy and very, very big. At Marc Jacobs and Marc by Marc Jacobs, hair was heavily textured; a crimped effect was brushed through to create an airy, loose look with a matte texture. At Julien Macdonald, Giles and John Richmond it was pure Jerry Hall glam with hair big and wavy.

Create the look

- 1 SECTION THE HAIR** then soak each section in hairspray and curl it with large barrel tongs or rollers.
- 2 COMPLETE THE WHOLE HEAD** then brush through to release the curls. Use straighteners at the ends to create a modern twist on the look.
- 3 TO FINISH THE STYLE** and ensure the waves are defined, apply a few drops of smoothing serum on the hand then spread it lightly onto a hairbrush.
- 4 GENTLY RUN THE BRUSH** through hair to smooth down any flyaways and create that all-important shine.



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT Elvive Nutri-Gloss Serum (€9.99) by L'Oreal Paris; Catwalk Your Highness Thickening Gel Crème (€11.40) by TIGI; The O (€185, pack of medium rollers, €20.15) at Dylan Bradshaw