

# ‘Cheaper than therapy’

Waterloo actor Jennifer Cornish is used to working solo but, with the audience as supporting cast, she’s never really alone

BY CORAL ANDREWS

**M**yra Hennessy is an unlikely heroine. A profane, street-smart 48-year-old “wine connoisseur,” she relies on her razor-sharp wits while aggressively begging on the streets of Dublin.

But when Waterloo actor Jennifer Cornish embodies Myra, theatre magic takes over. The audience is captivated from the opening moments with Myra/Cornish sleeping on a lonely park bench; by the end of “Myra’s Story,” there is empathy and understanding. That in itself would be an accomplishment. But along the way, Cornish also brings a host of other characters to life – all with Dublin accents and all providing varying dashes of pathos and dark humour.

Cornish has exclusive Canadian rights to “Myra’s Story,” by Irish playwright Brian Foster. She debuted it at the London Fringe Festival in





**TOP:** Jennifer Cornish in 'Shirley Valentine' at Fergus Grand Theatre in 2016.

**BOTTOM:** Jennifer Cornish, alongside Lisa MacNeil and Trevor Smith Diggins in 2014's 'Dine Her,' a zombie comedy apocalypse musical at Waterloo's Harmony Lunch.  
PHOTOGRAPHY • RECORD STAFF

**FACING PAGE:** Jennifer Cornish in 'Myra's Story' in London in 2013.  
PHOTOGRAPHY • BRIAN Z. KELLY

2013, where it won "outstanding production," and has presented it in several Ontario cities as well as locally.

However, her performance zoomed to a new level last fall when she won the "best tragedy" award at New York City's United Solo Festival, the world's largest solo theatre festival. This globally acclaimed festival is held in the showbiz epicentre of 42nd Street, Theatre Row, with many Hollywood stars, including Olympia Dukakis, Robin Williams and Kevin Spacey, having ties to it.

Myra is but one of Cornish's stage personas. Among her more recent roles was another one-actor show – "Shirley Valentine." She alternated performances with Jennifer Barson for 4th Wall Productions' run at Fergus Grand Theatre in 2016, both under the direction of Trevor Smith Diggins.

Smith Diggins says he has great respect for Cornish as an actor. She is dedicated to her craft, digging deep to find the truth in her characters, he says.

"Everything I have ever seen her in – she had convinced me," he says.

"Directing her in Shirley Valentine was a wonderful experience because she will not settle for anything less than the truth," Smith Diggins says. "We were always negotiating the emotional touchpoints of the character and where the story was going and that keeps the director focused as well."

One-person plays are a particular kind of challenge, but Cornish points out she is not alone on stage. The audience is the supporting cast.

"We never tell stories alone," says Cornish. "You cannot tell a story in a vacuum. I use the word 'witness' a lot. We want to be seen. It is the foundation of human desire. Our greatest hope and our greatest fear is that we will truly be seen for who we are."

"I think that is part of the power of theatre in general but solo theatre in particular – one person standing up alone. One of my



fave theatre lines is from Rosalind Russell, the famous theatre actress, who said 'Acting is standing up naked and turning around very slowly.'

"And I have had few experiences being psychologically naked as doing a solo show," Cornish adds.

Cornish's parents, John and Joan, met in Montreal through a church youth group that was also involved in "little theatre." So acting came naturally to their daughter who, at age four or five, began presenting her own plays in the backyard with her friends; she was star and director.

Still, Cornish remembers "surprising the heck" out of her parents with her first performance at a Girl Scout/Brownie banquet. "I was six years old and I arranged to stand up on stage in front of an entire roomful of people and recite an A.A. Milne poem. And that is where it all started," recalls Cornish

with a smile.

Cornish, with siblings Matt and Mandy, took ballet, tap and jazz through Anne Suetta Dance School in Waterloo, where the family had moved in 1973 from Vancouver. Suetta also took the kids to the Kiwanis Music Festival in Stratford, which had performing arts and other theatre disciplines. "My mother coached me and my siblings, and I competed every year till I was about 16," Cornish says.

In fact, her mother also coached all the neighbourhood youths in their living room. Her favourite teaching resource was Viola Spolin, an American theatre academic who also invented Theatre Games. Joan Cornish read hundreds of one-act plays, and directed the kids at local schools in addition to ferrying vanloads of young thespians to Stratford Kiwanis for competition.

"It was a huge part of my growing up,"

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says Cornish. “We were always memorizing something to perform. I have an embedded memory of standing at the top of the stairs reciting while my mother sat at the bottom of the stairs directing me: ‘I can’t un-der-stand you if you don’t en-un-ci-ate!’”

At 16, Cornish was accepted into the (now defunct) Toronto High School for the Performing Arts. Graduates include Keanu Reeves, who attended a year before Cornish, as well as comedian Richard Ryder (NBC’s “Last Comic Standing,” “This Week on OUTtv”) and noted film/television voice actor Cree Summer (“Inspector Gadget,” Marvel’s animated “Guardians of the Galaxy”).

In Grade 13, Cornish performed in the Sears Drama Festival, held at Bluevale Collegiate in Waterloo. Adjudicators/ acting coaches David Switzer and Theresa Sears saw Cornish and recommended her to an agent in Toronto. Film and television roles

followed, including horror series “Friday The 13th,” the detective series “Adderly” and a CBC/CBLT drama called “A Family Matter.”

Cornish also did a season of summer-stock at the Thousand Islands Playhouse where she played Gwendolyn in the Oscar Wilde comedy classic “The Importance of Being Earnest.”

To further hone her comedic and improvisational skills she studied Master Class with Second City’s Bruce Hunter in addition to taking classes with Bruce McCulloch from “Kids in the Hall,” whom she met while playing Theatresports at Toronto’s Harbourfront.

She attended many workshops, and met many a mentor.

“Ultimately, doing it is the best training,” she says. “The rest of my training has been the old-fashioned way – at The School of Hard Knocks,” she notes with a

hearty laugh.

In addition to acting, Cornish has done various jobs over the years, including time as a waitress, restaurant manager, floral designer/ florist, and interior painter. She has worked with horses and is also a bookkeeper – her current day-job.

In 2006, Cornish was lured back to the stage to play Martha in a Kitchener-Waterloo Little Theatre production of Edward Albee’s classic drama “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?”

Many roles followed. As well as last summer’s performance of “Shirley Valentine” in Fergus, her bio includes Debra in “Kimberly Akimbo” (Lost & Found Theatre, 2015); Liz in “Dine Her” (a 2014 zombie comedy apocalypse musical at Waterloo’s Harmony Lunch); Edith in “Pearl Gidley” (a 2011 production of local playwright Gary Kirkham’s play); Mrs. Lintott in “History

Boys” (2011); and Mona in a 2009 production of Kirkham’s “Queen Milli of Galt,” to name but a few.

There were movie roles as well, including “Dead Rush” (2016) and “Suddenly Super” (2013).

In 2010, Cornish founded her own production company, PrACTical TheAC-Trics, where she coaches aspiring adult and youth actors. And, in 2011, she received the Waterloo Region Arts Award for Performing Arts.

“I would never ever had gone looking for a solo show,” she exclaims.

The story behind “Myra” begins with online employment-oriented social network LinkedIn. Cornish was up late one night updating her unusual resumé.

Feeling “artistically low,” she decided to add Acting Coach to her profile.

“There was a message – a notification – the

only one I had ever received on LinkedIn saying that (Cornish’s pal) Kathleen Sheehy, Lost and Found Theatre’s artistic director/ actress, had replied to a message in the Independent Theatre Artists’ group.

“I did not know there were groups on LinkedIn,” Cornish says. “The message she replied to said ‘Irish playwright seeks actress over the age of 40 to take box office success/one woman Irish show to a wider audience.’”

“I clicked on it and I read a description of the play,” Cornish says. “It required a Dublin accent and 12 different characters like Big Bridie, Jimmy The Tadpole and Tina The Tap. It said the ‘challenge requires a fantastic actress to pull this off.’ Not that I am fantastic, but I liked the challenge of it,” she adds with a laugh. “I thought, I have to read that.”

“Myra’s Story” is adapted from Derry playwright Brian Foster’s 2001 one-woman

show “Maire: A Woman of Derry.” It is about a feisty wine-swilling homeless woman whose life path leads her to the streets of Derry and a living hell of endless drink. Actress Carmel McCafferty, who played the role for 12 years, broke box-office records at Derry’s Millennium Forum Theatre.

At the suggestion of Scottish producer Robert C. Kelly, who had seen “Maire,” Foster re-set the story in Dublin making the message of homelessness and alcoholism more universal through a born and bred Dubliner. Two years later, Foster began a global search for his Myra. He was looking for someone special – not just someone to act Myra, but someone who could mentally and physically become her for each performance.

“When ‘Myra’s Story’ found me, I could not say no,” Cornish says.

On the Myra website, Foster is quoted

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as saying he was “delighted” by Cornish’s talent and drive: “A rare find indeed.” He granted her exclusive Canadian production rights to the show in 2013.

**I**t took two years for “Myra’s Story” to become a reality. Cornish had director/ good friend Darlene Spencer in mind to direct the show.

Spencer, a graduate of the Univeristy of Waterloo drama program, has a master’s degree in theatre performance from York University and has taught at both alma maters.

There were many meetings to discuss Spencer’s involvement in the project, in addition to Cornish’s learning curve, the creative team and the time they would need to produce the piece.

At the time, Spencer was artistic director at Toronto’s Randolph Academy for the Performing Arts.

“Darlene did ‘Myra’ as an act of love and belief in this project, this script, and in me in particular,” recalls Cornish. “We were doing it on her holidays. It took a year to block the play because Darlene could only give me a week at a time,” she adds.

The show officially opened in June 2013 at London Fringe Festival where it won “outstanding production.” In July 2013, “Myra’s Story” garnered the “critics’ choice award” at the Hamilton Fringe Festival.

The play was also part of Impact 13, a biennial theatre festival hosted by Kitchener’s MT Space. Cornish performed the show for four nights in the courtyard of the historic Waterloo County Jail and Governor’s House on Queen Street. “That was a very special treat,” she says.

Cornish, who has taken “Myra” across the province, says her success is due to Foster’s words and Spencer’s vision.

**I**n 2014, Cornish went to Ireland, visiting Dublin City Centre where she walked down Grafton Street to experi-

ence the world of Myra and those who “sleep rough” firsthand.

“It was life-changing,” Cornish muses. “Myra-changing, really,” she adds, with a wee hint of Myra’s brogue.

Cornish also saw actress Carmel McCafferty’s final performance as Maire in the original version of the play and spent an evening chatting with playwright Brian Foster.

Then she walked the streets of Derry – a.k.a. Londonderry, Northern Ireland – where she also gained a much better perspective of Myra Hennessy through names and places.

“Brian Foster is a Derryman,” Cornish says. “Not too many people know this but, according to Brian, the only non-fiction part of this play is the Bloody Sunday monologue. That was Brian’s story. He was there. He was about 10 years old and he lost his best friend (19-year-old Willie Nash) that day,” Cornish says.

Bloody Sunday refers to that terrible day on Jan. 30, 1972, when 13 unarmed protesters were shot dead and 17 others were wounded by British soldiers during a peaceful march against the internment of suspected Irish nationalists. The march was organized by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association.

In a chilling re-enactment of Bloody Sunday, the “Myra” play includes the role of Tommy McLaughlin. He recalls that fateful day he went to join his best friend for the peace march, the horrific events, and how it changed him for good.

“I went to the Bloody Sunday museum and now I have a greater sense of that,” notes Cornish. “To go to Dublin and see all of the places – it all landed so hugely for me.”

Over the years, Cornish has continued to deepen her portrayal of Myra, while perfecting her Dublin accents. Other characters in the play’s 12-role rollercoaster of hilarity and heartbreak include Myra’s alcoholic father, Sean Hennessy, and his

never-ending struggle to tame The Beast.

Cornish credits the theatre community and for helping her every step of the way in her fundraising efforts. The play has also partnered with many community outreach associations and social services that deal with homelessness and addiction throughout Waterloo Region.

She says “Myra’s Story” is special because it straddles issues of homelessness and alcohol addiction. When asked if it is theatre for social change or theatre with a mission, Cornish says no.

“I think the play stands on its own theatrically. And if it does that to such an extent that it can offer people a way into a greater compassion for homelessness and alcoholism, that’s a sidebar – it is not the intent of the play.”

**C**ornish will never forget her experience performing “Myra’s Story” at Theatre Row in New York City.

“It was unnerving, wonderful, easy, hard and freaky, simple and normal – everything!” she exclaims.

“And when the team won for Best Tragedy we were so honoured,” she adds.

Her next project, “Boy Beatle,” was written by good friend Richard Sheridan Willis. It’s a prequel to his monodrama “Strolling Player,” with Cornish playing all of the women from mother and ex-wife to female chorus.

Cornish says every character she plays stays with her.

She loves the opportunity and “profound luck” she has had to grow within these roles, whether dramatic or comedic.

“I have a special affection for the characters I have played who are gregarious and brassy because I can incorporate them into my world a little more strongly,” she says.

“I like characters that teach me I can be courageous and outgoing because I tend to be – believe it or not – a little . . . quiet,” she says with a laugh. “And this is much cheaper than therapy!” 



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