

Morgan, Dermot

by Lawrence William White

Morgan, Dermot (1952–98), comedian, was born 31 March 1952 in a nursing home at 7 Herbert Place, Dublin, third child and elder son among two sons and two daughters of Donnchadh Morgan (d. 1974, suddenly in his early 50s), a civil servant, native of Thurles, Co. Tipperary, and Hildegard Mary ('Holly') Morgan (née Stokes) (d. 1991), from Dún Laoghaire, Co. Dublin. Reared in the family home, Knocknagow, a bungalow on Wilson Road, Mount Merrion, Co. Dublin, he received primary education at St Lawrence's national school, Kilmacud, and secondary education under the Christian Brothers at Oatlands College, Stillorgan; resenting the authoritarian discipline, enforced with corporal punishment, he would describe the latter experience as 'good paramilitary training', and himself as 'a severely lapsed catholic' (*Times*). He graduated from UCD with a BA in English and philosophy (1974), and qualified as a secondary-level teacher with an H.Dip.Ed. He taught English at Stillorgan Senior College, worked in the superintendent's office of the RDS, and, after retraining in a conversion course as a primary-level teacher, taught for several years at an exclusive private school, St Michael's College, Ailesbury Road.

Morgan's comedic gifts were apparent during his undergraduate years at UCD, where his spontaneous outbursts of humour in lecture theatres included the delivery of mock lectures, often to unwitting freshers. He performed at shows on the Belfield campus, writing and acting in comic sketches, and fronting a mock country-and-western band, Big Gom and the Imbeciles, a parody of contemporary Irish chart-toppers Big Tom and the Mainliners. He was briefly front man and bass guitarist in a conventional rock band, Johnny and the Gents. Pursuing aspirations to write and perform, parallel to his teaching career he doggedly secured work as a stand-up comedian, playing a diversity of venues in an era prior to the emergence in Ireland of clubs specialising in comedy. Modelling his act on the manically outlandish style of Scottish comedian Billy Connolly, and the BBC television series *Monty Python's flying circus*, Morgan pioneered alternative, absurdist, 'outlaw' comedy in Ireland. He submitted freelance scripts to RTÉ radio and television programmes; his comic letters written in various eccentric personae were read on air by broadcaster Mike Murphy on his morning radio programme.

Morgan became known nationally by regular appearances over four seasons (1979–83) on Murphy's television variety show, *The live Mike*. Specialising in lampoons of contemporary Irish celebrities and character types, he boldly satirised such holy cows as the GAA and the catholic church. His recurring characters included a pretentious, namedropping businessman with exaggerated southside Dublin accent, and an uncouth countryman who waved a hurley menacingly while ranting about media bias against rural values. Most celebrated was the character of Father

Trendy, which Morgan had been developing since his university days: an unctuously ingratiating, overly eager young catholic priest, striving desperately to 'relate' to youth by being 'cool', 'relevant', and 'with it', whose chats to the camera comprised spiritual messages based on ludicrous demotic metaphors. He published a book based on the character, *Trendy sermons* (1982). He developed and filmed sketches for a projected comedy series under his own name, which ultimately was trimmed by RTÉ to a single one-hour 'Dermot Morgan special', broadcast in June 1983. Regarded suspiciously by many RTÉ executives as undisciplined and excessively provocative, thereafter Morgan experienced a stormy relationship with the station, which at the time virtually monopolised broadcasting in Ireland.

Having abandoned his teaching career, for several years Morgan endured straitened personal finances as he scraped together various types of employment. He performed live comedy gigs, wrote satirical newspaper columns, and worked intermittently in minor capacities for RTÉ: reviewing the weekly newspapers on an afternoon television show, presenting a game show (*Jackpot* (1986)), and supplying comic elements for the first two seasons of *Kenny live* (1988–90). He recorded a successful comic novelty song, 'Thank you very much, Mister Eastwood' (1985), mocking the practice of the contemporaneous, Irish-born world featherweight boxing champion Barry McGuigan of bestowing lavish and fawning thanks upon his manager, Barney Eastwood, during post-bout interviews. The single was the Christmas number one in Ireland, and was awarded a gold disc. Morgan recorded more singles ('A country and western taoiseach' (1992), marked the ascendancy to office of former dancehall impresario Albert Reynolds), and released an album, *Special moments* (1987).

Morgan secured a forum for biting topical satire with a weekly, half-hour RTÉ morning radio programme, *Scrap Saturday* (1990–92). As writer, director, and performer, he teamed with co-writer Gerry Stembridge and actors Pauline McLynn and Owen Roe on short, snappy sketches that lampooned current affairs, and targeted the country's political, religious, media, and business establishment. The format allowed full scope to his flair for mimicry; especially celebrated were the wicked impersonations of the then governing taoiseach, Charles J. Haughey (1925–2006) (played by Morgan), and the government press secretary, P. J. Mara (played by Roe). Haughey was portrayed as a scheming, devious, imperious megalomaniac, and Mara as his slavish, grovelling, flattering toady. A popular and critical success, *Scrap Saturday* generated considerable discussion and controversy among a large and faithful audience. In 1991 the programme won a Jacob's broadcasting award, and Morgan was named Ireland's national entertainer of the year. When, in the 1992 general election year, RTÉ abruptly cancelled a third season, contending that the programme had 'run out of steam', an outraged Morgan accused the station of 'a shameless act of broadcasting cowardice and political subservience' at variance with the station's 'much-professed public service remit' (*Jr. Times*, 2 Mar. 1998).

Buoyed by the popularity of *Scrap Saturday*, Morgan pursued his stand-up career with much greater success than previously, exploiting the proliferating circuit of comedy clubs. Besides numerous once-off gigs, he toured Ireland with three themed shows: 'Jobs for the boys' (1993), focusing on political chicanery and corruption; the 'Black humour tour' (1995), sponsored by Guinness; and 'Dermot Morgan addresses the nation' (1997), based on the premise of his being installed as dictator by a military coup. As government-appointed tribunals investigating alleged political corruption examined some of the choice targets of his satire, he claimed that he was finding it 'harder and harder to outstrip reality' (*Times*).

Morgan achieved international fame playing the title character in a madcap situation comedy, *Father Ted*, on British television's Channel 4, as one of three misfit Irish catholic priests consigned for varied misdeeds to a bleak, backwater parish on the fictional Craggy Island. Written by Irish humorists Graham Linehan and Arthur Matthews for Hat Trick production company, the programme comprised twenty-four half-hour episodes broadcast over three seasons (1995–6, 1998), and a seventy-minute Christmas 1996 special. While interior studio scenes were shot in London, exteriors were shot on the Burren of Co. Clare. One of British television's most successful comedies of the 1990s, *Father Ted* was screened in ten countries (but not the USA, where the content was deemed potentially too offensive to religious and ethnic sensibilities), and spawned an enthusiastic cult following of 'Ted heads'. The humour arose from the wildly improbable plots, absurd dialogue and context, and bizarrely unpriestlike antics of the three principals. Morgan's character, calamity-ridden parish priest Fr Ted Crilly, routinely hatched dubious schemes – justified by byzantine twists of moral relativism – designed to better a clerical rival, extricate himself from sticky situations, or secure riches and fame. Fr Ted shared Craggy Island's parochial house with a dimwitted curate, an alcoholic retired priest, and a fruity, overly attentive housekeeper. Morgan was honoured as top television comedy actor in the British Comedy Awards (1996) (which also honoured the programme as best new television comedy (1995), and twice as best Channel 4 comedy (1996–7)), and posthumously for best comedy performance (1999) by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) (which twice honoured the programme as best comedy (1996, 1999)).

Morgan and his German-born wife Susanne (whom he met during her first visit to Ireland in 1977) had two sons; the couple were separated for some years before divorcing in the mid 1990s. From 1987 he lived with his partner, Fiona Clarke, with whom he had one son. During filming of *Father Ted*, they resided in St Margaret's, Richmond, Surrey. Less than two days after completing the last scenes of the programme's third series, Morgan suffered a massive heart attack, collapsed while hosting a dinner party in his home on the night of 28 February 1998, and was pronounced dead at West Middlesex Hospital, Isleworth. After funeral masses in Twickenham and Mount Merrion (attended by President Mary McAleese and numerous other dignitaries), his remains were cremated, and the ashes interred

at Deansgrange cemetery. A stylised bronze memorial chair has been erected in Merrion Square park, Dublin.

Acclaimed as the foremost Irish humorist of the last quarter of the twentieth century, Morgan was a scathing satirist, possessing an inventive, mercurial mind, a witty debunker of hypocrisy, pomposity, and cant. Charged with a perpetual, restless, nervous energy, he was always 'on' in a performer's sense, incapable of slowing down to relax; such traits, along with the pressures of the freelance system of short-term contract work, probably contributed to his sudden and premature death. An inveterate mischief maker, he was privately entertaining, constantly breaking into impressions and adlibbed comic flights. His repeated capacity to rebound from career setbacks with fresh ideas and projects attested to his ambition and emotional resilience. In early 1998 he had signalled his intention to abandon *Father Ted* after the third series, fearful of becoming typecast, and desirous to develop his own writing projects. He was working on a novel, on scripts for a television drama series and two television sitcoms, and had completed a film script based on the boycott imposed by Archbishop John Charles McQuaid (qv) on the 1955 international soccer match between Ireland and communist Yugoslavia. He was an avid aficionado of soccer, both as spectator and amateur player. He was a strong supporter of the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, for which he gave benefit performances.

GRO (birth cert.); *Guardian*, *Independent* (London), *Times*, 2 Mar. 1998; *Ir. Times*, 2–7 Mar. 1998; Don, Bobby, and Ben Morgan, *Our father: a tribute to Dermot Morgan* (1998); BAFTA and British Comedy Awards, Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com/Sections/Awards (accessed 21 May 2007)