

SPOTLIGHT

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THE PLAYER



Having scored major sitcom success with the painfully funny *Catastrophe*, **SHARON HORGAN** is playing the straight woman in *Game Night*, her first Hollywood comedy, but she's not turning her back on personal projects. Total Film meets the writer, performer and producer who's making her own rules.

WORDS HELEN WHITAKER

People sometimes expect you to have these fully formed, improvised and brilliant lines," Sharon Horgan laughs. "Or if a line isn't working they're like, 'What do you think?' and I say, 'I don't bloody know!'" *Total Film* is sitting with Horgan in the rooftop bar of Shoreditch House in London, and the writer/producer/actress is discussing the perils of improv on her first Hollywood studio movie, *Game Night*. "It takes me ages to write the scripts that I do. I'm not a spur of the moment, joke-off-the-top-of-my-head kind of person, so I think it's odd for people I end up working with when it's not my material."

Game Night, a Jason Bateman and Rachel McAdams-starring black comedy, centres on a weekly games night that goes horribly wrong when the planned murder mystery – complete with fake heavies and cops – spirals into a real kidnapping that the gamers, in pairs, must solve. Horgan plays Sarah, the foil to Billy Magnussen's bimbo-chasing dimwit Ryan, but despite her own comedy being

full of whip-smart, throwaway lines, she explains that she's not one to ad-lib, especially when she's in actress mode.

"John and Jon [*directors John Francis Daley and Jonathan Goldstein*] are writers as well," she says. Having hit her coffee limit for the day she's sippin a Kombucha, as the Friday afternoon crowd orders wine around us. "They throw lines at you, and you might embellish them a little – I'm pretty sure Jason [*Bateman*] improvises because he's one of those people who can do funny stuff automatically, as are Billy Magnussen and Lamorne [*Morris*] – but me, no."

Between *Catastrophe*, *Divorce* and *Motherland*, Horgan is writing (and in the case of *Catastrophe*, playing) some of the most interesting, funny and multi-layered characters on TV right now, so what drew her to a supporting role in someone else's project?

"I love Jason, I love Rachel, and I love John and Jon," she says. "And I've done lots of little indie films, but I haven't done a big studio film. With Billy, it was a fun odd-couple friendship, and I liked that ➡"



about it. I was 100 per cent the straight man in the dynamic, because of Billy's character. Most of the time I'm just reacting to what an idiot he is, and it was unusual doing that, something to get used to."

As fans of *Catastrophe*, John and Jon approached her about the role before she "put something on her iPhone" by way of an audition for Warner Bros. "Most of the time I don't have to audition but there's the odd thing, if it's a weird little thing or a drama or something. I'm a bit lazy as well, and I have to really love something, and definitely want to do it."

CATASTROPHIC

'Lazy' is not a word commonly associated with the 47-year-old Irish writer and comedian (she clarifies she'd only use the self-descriptor in relation to auditioning). When she arrives, she's been working on Season 4 of *Catastrophe* all day, having continued typing ideas into her phone during the journey from her home in Hackney right up until she arrived at the members' bar. Then once the interview wraps, she pulls out her laptop to carry on writing in the downstairs lounge. As she's back in the headspace of her *Catastrophe* alter-ego (also called Sharon), it's apt that over her denim shirt and artfully ripped jeans, she's wearing a faux-fur jacket pinched from her character's wardrobe.

While *Catastrophe* Season 4 takes shape, Season 2 of *Divorce*, the America-set dramedy she created, starring Sarah Jessica Parker and Thomas Haden Church, airs this month. During the filming of Season 1, Horgan spent five months going backwards and forwards to the US, and while the show gained critical acclaim (plus Emmy and Golden Globe nominations for Parker), its unflinching treatment of a couple emotionally torturing each other as their marriage reached its death throes was almost universally described as 'bleak'. In the opening episode of Season 2, Frances and Robert sign their divorce papers. This, combined with Horgan taking a step back and new showrunner, Jenny Bicks, taking over, dovetails neatly with the direction of the new season.

"It's all about a new beginning," says Horgan. "Where do you go having been married for that huge chunk of your life? What happens now? They



FAMILY FORTUNES
Sharon Horgan with *Catastrophe* co-star/co-writer Rob Delaney, and the late Carrie Fisher as mum-in-law Mia.

wanted to take it in a – not lighter, I wouldn't say – but they didn't want the same head-to-head awfulness. They wanted to see what would happen to both of them, having had this time jump, if they moved it on."

In response to 'bleak', "It is and it isn't," she says. "I know that couples, especially couples who've been together a long time, found it hard to watch together because the characters are saying things that are precisely in their heads. But I also felt there were a lot of good jokes in it, a lot of funny setups and ridiculousness."

Light and shade is the perfect summation of Horgan's work. Her characters are selfish, egotistical and

childish, but even their monstrous moments are punctuated with laughs. It's why they're so on the money.

And it's never better demonstrated than in Channel 4's *Catastrophe*, with its setup of a fling that leads to pregnancy, and what happens if two people who barely know each other decide to make a go of it. Three seasons in, Sharon and Rob (Rob Delaney) are dealing with the triple threats of long-term coupledness, children and ageing parents, with the season finale giving us the climax to recovering alcoholic Rob's relapse.

Having spent two months before Christmas coming up with ideas with co-writer Delaney, they're now connecting the dots, before filming starts in June. "We're trying to work out the bigger story to create genuine episodes, that's not just amazing funny stuff that Rob has coming out of his mouth," she says. With Carrie Fisher playing Rob's mum Mia in Seasons 1 to 3, they're also trying to navigate the acting legend's real-life passing.

PRINCESS POWER

"She was so good in it," says Horgan. "I was watching her again the other day and it was great to be reminded how wonderful her performance was. It was really bittersweet her getting nominated [Fisher was nominated posthumously for an Emmy for her performance] because I do think she would have loved that. With this series,

'Making sure there's an even representation benefits us enormously'



SHARON HORGAN



there's an even representation, and that we're not just being lazy, benefits us enormously. If you are that little bit braver you get something really interesting as a result. You may have to take a chance or convince more people but it's worth it."

DRESSING UP

With a raft of awards under her belt, she knows what she's talking about. But if anything, she's found the red-carpet events that are part and parcel of the industry to be more daunting over time. To her teenage daughter's fury, when they went to the *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* premiere in December, she made them skip the stormtrooper-lined red carpet and go in the back door. "It feels weird doing the red carpet at someone else's premiere," she says. But even at her own events, she's self-conscious. "Anything that involves glamour, or presenting what's supposed to be the best physical version of yourself always ends up being the worst version of yourself because you look uncomfortable, or don't fit in your dress properly, or have gone for a look that's not flattering." She laughs. "It never works out for me."

Experience has at least reinforced her professional confidence. "I started off as an actress and it took a long time to say that I was a writer. And then to have confidence in my abilities and not to think I'd just got lucky," she says. "I think that's partly through being a woman. We think, 'Maybe I haven't put the hours in, I haven't earned that, maybe I don't deserve that title yet.' It never felt quite like I could just enjoy the success that I've had with my projects, but that's left me a bit."

So far, she's covered singledom (*Pulling*), coupledness (*Catastrophe*), parenthood (*Motherland*) and break-ups (*Divorce*). Is there a gritty *Golden Girls*-style sitcom in her writing future?

"I don't really plan it like that," she says with a smile. "That was by accident. All I do know is that I'll always want to write female characters who are strong and interesting and funny. That's the thing that unites them all."

GAME NIGHT IS OUT ON 2 MARCH;
SEASON 2 OF DIVORCE IS
ON SKY ATLANTIC LATER
THIS YEAR.



GAME THEORY

Horgan as Sarah, with Billy Magnussen, in *Game Night* (above); Sarah Jessica Parker and Thomas Haden Church in the Horgan-created *Divorce* (top).

HIT THE FLOOR

Game Night's Jason Bateman and Rachel McAdams (below).

it's more about how the fuck do we tell that story? We want to make sure we pay tribute to her in the series. I think the last series did it inadvertently, just by her performance being so wonderful and the audience getting to know that character more, but how do we do that without Carrie. We're figuring it out at the moment."

Horgan was co-writing *Motherland*, about frazzled London mums (and one dad) dealing with playground politics, via Skype, during the seven weeks she was filming *Game Night* in Atlanta. Additionally, she's just sold *Shining Vale*, a comedy-horror about a woman having a breakdown who is convinced there's something sinister about her house, to Showtime in the US ("There's a lot of homage to psychological horrors like *The Shining* and *Rosemary's Baby*," says Horgan), and Merman, the production company she co-founded in 2014 with Clelia Mountford, has just inked a first-look deal with Amazon.

She also recently produced a series of comedy shorts for Sky using all-female directors and says championing female talent in the industry is something "hugely" important to her, and more than ever in this Time's Up world.

"It's a completely put your money where your mouth is moment," she says. "[Now I have a production company] everything we're making, we make sure there's as many women on the list as possible, especially directors-wise, because they're so underrepresented. When we're pitching to channels, we mention female directors even if they haven't got a huge amount of experience behind them because we can say, 'Well we have, and we'll get an experienced producer, we'll vouch for them.' Making sure

