



Karen Egan: 'It's not about being brave, it's about getting through it.'

# ALL-SINGING ALL-DANCING SOUL-BARING

Singer, actor, composer and writer Karen Egan's deeply personal new show is a story of survival and gratitude

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**S**hortly after I watched a rough cut of *Warrior*, the new show by Karen Egan, British lexicographer Susie Dent popped up on my Twitter feed with her word of the day. That word was "sisu", the Finnish for "extraordinary determination and inner strength in the face of adversity".

Sisu is a fitting word to use when discussing Egan's new production. The singer, actor, composer and writer's new, largely autobiographical piece includes a comic parody of the play she was putting on in Finland early in 2015 when she was given the devastating news of her breast cancer. "A tiny bit of cancer," as Egan puts it in the show, deliberately downplaying the amount of sisu required for treatment that included a partial mastectomy. "I was also launching an album in Dublin at the time and my first reaction was, 'I don't have time for this.' I have to get back to Finland and perform my play. I was in complete shock and denial," she says.

The *Warrior* title is a nod to the language around cancer, with patients "winning" or "losing" their "battles" with the illness. "I'm really keen to stress that I in no way think I'm a warrior . . . the reality of the matter

for anyone who is diagnosed with any form of cancer is that they don't have a choice – you're diagnosed and that's that. I remember a friend saying, 'It's not about being brave, it's about getting through it.'"

The powerful and captivating show charts her gruelling journey through the medical system as a cancer patient called Katherine, a character based on Egan and played by her, but also – a risky device that works beautifully – by Ruth McGill and Rory Pierce. Developed over a number of years with musical director Cian Boylan, *Warrior* was originally written as a conventional theatre piece, and the ultimate plan is for a live tour next year. But over the pandemic, with live theatre initially cancelled and then, when restrictions lifted, the schedules of most venues already programmed with the backlog of cancelled shows, *Warrior* was adapted to be filmed.

The result is an all-singing, all-dancing, dark and intimate musical comedy. It brings to mind the American series *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, which took often bleak themes and explored them with humour and songs across a variety of musical genres. Watching *Warrior*, I was also reminded of Tara Flynn's stunning musical theatre production *Not a Funny Word*, which told the story of her abortion. "I do

use comedy in my work, it always plays an important role, but I don't think anybody would accuse me of treating the subject lightly," Egan, a former member of singing trio The Nualas, is keen to clarify. One of the non-cancer-related comedy highlights includes a rollicking musical tribute to Kimmage – rhymed in the song with massage – where Egan now lives.

The piece, which in parts has a surreal, almost dreamlike quality, was filmed in the Mermaid Arts Theatre in Bray, Co Wicklow when the first wave of the Omicron variant was raging. One of the original cast members, Susannah de Wrixon, contracted Covid and Egan thought, "That's it, I'll have to call it off." Ruth McGill, who had been involved with an early "work-in-progress" version of the show, was drafted in at the last minute. Egan says she was interested in exploring the patient experience – the Irish Patients' Association provided consultative expertise as the show was developed.

"Everybody knows somebody who has suffered from cancer; being a patient puts everything in perspective and gives one time to reflect. Exploring the personal has enabled me to tell a more universal story."

Having originally trained as a barrister in the King's Inns, Egan dramatically changed course to pursue a stage career, studying at the Gaiety School of Acting and Trinity College. Her work has taken her all over the world, including a five-year stint in Finland

where she was embraced by the local theatre community, gaining impressive fluency in the "difficult" language and developing lasting friendships with "the very direct, very generous" people in that "country of extremes".

She remembers in the years before the Waking the Feminists movement started in 2015 being slightly disillusioned with Irish theatre: "Here we go again, another play with 11 men and two women, where the women are either the young ingenue or the haggard mother." When *Waking the Feminists* happened, she was going through treatment for her cancer. "It was a turning point and you can really see now that there is a greater diversity of work that reflects women's stories – all stories, really. It's all going in the right direction."

Most recently, audiences will have seen her in Ruth Meehan's award-winning *The Bright Side*, which coincidentally also told the story of one woman's breast cancer.

While the medical path through chemotherapy, radiotherapy and recovery forms the main narrative of *Warrior*, a parallel story concerns the cancer and eventual death of the main character's sibling. Egan confirms that this tender and heartbreaking storyline is "loosely based" on the death of her own brother. However, the overwhelming message of the show is how family and friends and medical professionals move in to support at times of crisis. "I hope the piece will show the power of family and friends and exhausted nurses, how their love and support can wrap you in cotton wool and get you through those dark moments and difficult situations. In a way they are the warriors. My brother had a difficult life. He was a warrior."

The other message Egan wants to leave people with is laid out in the show's epilogue: gratitude. "The experience helped put my life in perspective. I don't take my health for granted. I don't take my family for granted. I don't take the fact that I have a roof over my head for granted. I feel I've had an unbelievably lucky life. I'm happier than I've ever been. Whether it's cancer or something else, we're all going to have our battles in life, and we have to face them."

Ultimately then, *Warrior* is a story of survival. An all-singing, all-dancing story of sisu.

*Warrior* will be available to watch on-demand between March 21 and April 3. Tickets via [projectartscentre.ie](http://projectartscentre.ie), [mermaidartscentre.ie](http://mermaidartscentre.ie), and [everyman.com](http://everyman.com)



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