

News

Ruth's star is on the rise with BBC

Alan Owens

ETHIOPIAN-BORN actress Ruth Negga, who grew up in Limerick, has been cast in an iconic role as the lead in new BBC drama 'Shirley Bassey: A Very British Diva'.

The rising star, who recently appeared in RTE's Love/Hate and previously had roles in BBC's Criminal Justice and E4's Misfits, will play Bassey in the film, which is set "against the backdrop of mixed-race Britain from the Thirties" and charts the singer's journey from poverty to global stardom. It will air in the autumn.

Negga said she was "thrilled" with the casting, saying it was "an absolute honour to be playing her in such an intimate story of her life".

The striking actress, seen as a serious star in the making in Irish film circles, has also appeared in Neil Jordan's Breakfast On Pluto and Ciaran O'Connor's Trafficked.

Born in 1982 in her father's native Ethiopia, Negga lived there until she was four, before moving to Limerick, from

where her mother's family hail. Ruth's father died in a car accident when she was just seven.

Negga went to school in Limerick - attending primary in Scoil An Spioraid Naomh in Roxborough, Ballysheedy and the Mount for a time - later moving to London with her mum when she was 18. She is currently based in London.

Speaking in an interview last year, Negga said that, although she missed out on a relationship with her father, she felt part of a large, loving group while in Limerick, where she "had a very, very close-knit family".

"My mum has a lot of brothers. My family is quite boy-heavy actually, so I had a lot of male input in my life," she explained.

She added that she didn't experience any racism while growing up in Limerick, "probably because black and brown people were an unknown quantity then. My auntie used to take me down to the Crescent shopping centre and people used to stare. I was definitely a sort of fascination."

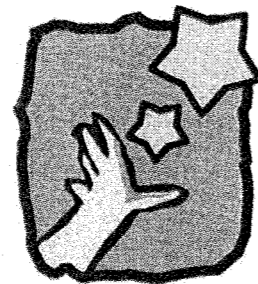


Ruth Negga who grew up in Limerick will play Shirley Bassey in a new BBC drama

Limerick author

Niland rewarded for titantic efforts at Wimbledon in June

Local man receives person of the month for becoming first Irishman in decades to qualify for slam



LIMERICK PERSON OF THE YEAR

Alan Owens

THE life of a pro-tennis player is a lonely one - endless hotel rooms, strict training schedules, thankless matches against tough opponents, a life spent travelling the globe. For an Irish pro, who rarely, if ever, sees any compatriots on the tour for 11 months of the year, it is even harder.

Then, for Limerick tennis pro Conor Niland, 29, to experience a riot of colour, sound and overwhelming support on his debut at Wimbledon in June, it was like all of his dreams had come true. Not only was he playing at his favourite tournament for the very first time - arguably the world's most prestigious - after almost a decade on tour, but everywhere he looked around the court he was surrounded by family, friends and screaming supporters, a concept almost alien to him in the lonely world he inhabits.

"I would look into the crowd and see my friends, see people I played tennis with and my family - it was like I knew every single person personally, it was unbelievable," laughed Niland this week, speaking as he collected the Limerick Person of the Month award for his exploits at Wimbledon.

"It was incredible to have that. The fact that it was at Wimbledon as well was the best part, that I was able to share it with everybody, and they were there and able to watch - it meant a lot. Definitely the tough thing about being a tennis player is not the



Limerick tennis player and Limerick Person of the Month, Conor Niland, with Eugene Phelan, deputy editor of the Limerick Leader, Philippa Keogh of Southern and Liz Godfrey, Sales and Marketing manager of the Clarion Hotel.

PICTURE: EUGENE RYAN

matches, or the training, it is the lifestyle, being on the road and not necessarily having that support."

Ultimately, while he lost a marathon, four hour first round match against France's Adrian Mannarino, having been 4-1 up in the final set and facing the prospect of playing six-time Wimbledon champ Roger Federer in the second round, being surrounded by that blanket of support helped him deal with the crushing defeat.

"When I lost the last round of qualifying in Australia years ago it really stung for a long time, I would think about it and it really bothered

me that I had lost," he explained.

"I have watched the video of the Wimbledon match recently and I do feel like I should have won, I feel like I was the better player on the day, I just kind of had it inside and gave it to the guy. So that is tough to take, but I haven't been dwelling on it. I should be losing sleep over it when I think about it, but the reaction was so positive directly after the match and subsequently that it is hard not to look at the whole experience as a great thing."

He added: "Basically people's reactions to it made it a lot easier,

I wasn't dealing with the loss just myself, but everyone was really positive about it. I think if I was in that position again, I would deal with it better."

The Limerick man had faced defeat and match point in the first round of qualifying for Wimbledon, so says he "would have taken that if you told me at 5-4 down in the third in the first round that I would get to play a five setter at Wimbledon and have a lot of people there to watch it".

He is hoping his success will help others coming through, not least young Limerick prospect Sam

Barry, who is expected to make a breakthrough in years to come.

"People can relate to it a little bit, an Irish guy doing it, so the more kids who play tennis, the more who see 'if he can do it' - it removes a mystique," he said.

In the meantime, he heads to New York on Saturday to try and qualify for the US Open, the last grand slam of the year, and you wouldn't bet against him.

The Limerick Person of the Month is sponsored by the Clarion Hotel, Limerick Leader and Southern.