

# Stars *in her* eyes

What's it like to aim for the stars? Dr Niamh Shaw knows all too well. **SOPHIE WHITE** catches up with the engineer, scientist and performer to find a woman who turned her dreams into a fantastic reality.

**D**r Niamh Shaw's CV is a funny one: a PhD in food science, a stint on RTÉ's *Fair City*, an in-demand keynote speaker, a theatremaker, a crewmember of a Mars simulation... The twists and turns are unlikely to say the least. Astronaut is not an option on the CAO, and for the first decade of Shaw's career, it looked like her secret ambition to visit space would be shelved, filed away with all the other ballerinas and vets and archaeologists of childhood dreams.

"The dream was always there," Shaw tells me over breakfast. "It was just about being brave enough to admit it. Mum and Dad would have encouraged us to ask questions and be curious. Dad got the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, so knowledge was very much in the house, and it was a very positive thing."

The daughter of an engineer and a former nurse, Shaw grew up in a house obsessed with space. "We watched *Blade Runner*, *The Six Million Dollar Man*, everything."

Shaw produces a recent snap of the entire Shaw clan. I see her striking features and auburn curls mirrored in three generations, all in full *Star Wars* garb. "My mum's Obi-Wan Kenobi," she laughs.

"I was afraid to admit to people that I wanted to be a part of space. I couldn't see anybody in my direct line of sight that had done anything like that," she explains. "There were no astronauts hanging around the Dundalk shopping centre!"

Shaw left school and fulfilled her parents' ambitions for her, completing her degree and postgrad, but upon finding herself ensconced in a life of academia, she suddenly felt lost.

"In my early thirties, I knew I needed to do something drastic, so I applied for a research job in New Zealand." She got the gig and began preparing to leave for a new life and a new lab in New Zealand.

"I was due to fly out on the 10th of January 2002, and I just wanted to do this play before I left. And it was an awful play!" Shaw laughs ruefully. "I remember realising then that I was more excited about acting than I was about going to New Zealand. I'd already handed in my notice to UCD. I'd made the strongest leap, and so it was somehow easier to say, 'I'm going to step away from research.' I'd kind of fooled myself into making the decision."

Shaw is casual describing how she soon found success with a recurring part on RTÉ's *Fair City*. Making a living in that precarious industry is no small feat, but Shaw was still restless.

"Once I was doing well at that, I realised this still wasn't it... I missed some of those conversations you have around science

"I'll keep doing what I'm doing – making art, giving talks... I want to go global with my work, so that the day I meet Elon Musk, he will know who I am and I will have earned my place."





**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE** Dr. Niamh Shaw in Baikonur, Kazakhstan to witness her first rocket launch; experiencing her first zero gravity flight to explore weightlessness on earth at the Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Center in Russia; on a simulated Mars mission in the Utah desert.



upset. I realised that I'd been really flippant about something that was actually really authentic. It was a very deep need in me to do this."

Starting into the unknown is hard at any stage. Many of us reject the idea of following far more attainable dreams than space travel simply because of age or logistics, but Shaw was uniquely equipped for what would become her journey to space.

"Through acting, I'd gotten comfortable with failing, and knew that failing was the only way to create. I'd realised that my parents were fine with me being an actor, so being an astronaut was grand! And it's not even being an astronaut now – it's wanting to explore space, because I'm too old to be an astronaut in the classical sense of the word, and I don't have the right degrees, so I have to write my own CV for that. Communicating space for society is, I realised, my best ticket to space."

Still, where does a fortysomething theatremaker and ex-academic even start in a country with no space programme or track record in the industry?

"The first step that I made was that I went into Science Foundation Ireland, and they have an office for the European Space Agency (ESA). I said, 'I want to go into space' and they went, 'Good luck with that! We'll try and support you... but we don't know how to!' And then I went to Blackrock Castle Observatory in Cork and I said, 'I want to

make a show about going to space', and they said, 'Great, do you want to be our artist in residence?' They helped me get funding to make *To Space*."

Shaw's second show, *To Space*, was ostensibly about the fantasy of space travel, but in fact it was a catalyst for making Shaw's previously hypothetical notion, suddenly quite tangible. Through making contact and working with ESA, Shaw earned a scholarship to study at the Space Studies Program run by the International Space University.

"That was the massive game-changer," says Shaw. "120 participants came from all over the world, some were already involved in space. I was the only artist there that year."

As a result of that programme, Shaw then found herself in a remote part of the Utah desert last year, a suited-and-booted-up crewmember of a simulated mission to Mars. Conditions were tough, food and water were limited, and Shaw loved it. She received funding and last year based her third show, *Diary of a Martian Beekeeper*, on Mars. Since then, Shaw has experienced weightlessness in a flight simulation and travelled to Kazakhstan, where she witnessed her first launch.

"I'll keep doing what I'm doing – making art, giving talks... I want to go global with my work, so that the day I meet Elon Musk, he will know who I am and I will have earned my place, and for him to say, 'You need to go to Mars' and I'll say, 'Yeah, I do actually Elon!'"

"It's like now I'm part of the space community, everyone knows what I do, and it's happening. I'm doing it – I'm walking slowly towards space in my own way," she smiles.

and that curiosity. Space was there, but I was always afraid to do it, afraid to change the course I was on, afraid of what people would say."

Having made the leap out of academia and into a different final frontier – acting – Shaw began to consider how to bring science back into her life. With the profile she'd gained from beaming nightly into Irish living rooms, she negotiated a regular slot on *Seoige*, an RTÉ daytime show, talking science.

"I realised that I was really good at explaining science in plain language. I was also working with a great theatre company, and they encouraged me to bring my science background into the devising room. It was through making my first show that I realised that wanting to be an astronaut was, deep down, a very truthful part of me. I was sad that I'd done nothing about it."

Of course, without realising it yet, Shaw had set herself on the exact right path that would bring her closer to this seemingly impossible dream. In 2011, at the age of 42, Shaw made her first solo show for the Fringe Festival. The subject matter was as ambitious as its creator. *That's About the Size of It* sought to explore the one unifying element we all possess – atoms. The play focused on the myriad ambitions Shaw had harboured to date, among them Shaw the academic, Shaw the engineer, Shaw the actor, Shaw the ballerina, and Shaw the astronaut.

"As a dramatic device, we made videos of each of these lives as though they'd continued. For the girl that wanted to be an astronaut, I contacted the European Space Agency, and they gave me a flight suit. Initially, it was very funny, and then I started getting really

Dr Niamh Shaw will be co-chairing the Humanities department at the summer Space Studies Program in the Netherlands, speaking at New Scientist Live in London in September, creating a new radio series for RTÉ Radio 1 called *Curious Humans*, and presenting a number of public events for Space Week, [niamhshaw.ie](http://niamhshaw.ie).