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INSPIRATION

NIAMH SHAW

In her 40s Niamh Shaw decided to pursue a childhood dream that many would deem impossible – space travel. Now she is planning on being one of the first people to live on Mars

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Most of us may smile and feel nostalgic when we recall what our childhood selves dreamed of being as a grown up, from rock stars to doctors to authors. When Niamh Shaw was eight-years-old she wanted to be an astronaut. But a creative project made the engineer turned theatre maker realise that she had completely quashed that ambition. "I was looking back at all the potential outcomes of my life as part of a show and wanted to see what it would be like if they were actually happening, if I had become a ballerina or an astronaut for example," Niamh says. She filmed herself living out these lives, borrowing an astronaut suit from the European Space Agency. "As soon as we started filming it became clear I had no frame of reference for what an astronaut actually did. Even though I had always been interested in astronomy I had never studied it. I realised that this was a big dream I wanted so much but I never went near it, I was so afraid of failing that I never even tried." She has since gone on to do the space studies programme at the International Space University. Now not only is she passionate about educating herself and others about space as artist in residence at Blackrock Castle Observatory, she is taking every opportunity she can to train for space travel. She has created two plays about her experiences. The first *To Space* is about her decision to try to pursue this impossible dream of space travel in her 40s. The second, *Diary of A Martian Beekeeper* premiered during Space Week and is set in a future where Niamh lives on Mars. She is using her art as a way to educate others, and earn herself a place on a future space mission. "Now my life is like a performance piece because it is about capturing, logging and documenting my journey to get to space. Every experience I have is like one step closer along the way," she says. "I had to finish the show *To Space* last year because there are lots of fantasy sequences in the show and nearly all the fantasy sequences I have realised bar becoming the astronaut in residence at the international space station. The show was out of date. I had achieved so many of those things, I'd done a simulated Mars mission and an anti-gravity mission. It was like the show I wrote was an incantation."

While initially her dream was to get to the International Space Station, seeing Elon Musk speak about his plans to create a civilisation on Mars has inspired her to aim to be one of the first space colonists. "It's history repeating itself. It is like when people emigrated to America, it seemed impossible, people thought they would never see them again and they laid down the foundations for that civilisation. It is exactly the same."

In January 2017, she was part of a six person crew on a simulated Mars mission at The Mars Society's Mars Desert Research Station in the Utah desert in the USA, acting as journalist and artist for the two week mission. "We had a tiny habitat eight metres in diameter with two floors. For our living quarters my room was probably a meter and a half wide. We had to wear really cumbersome backpacks that were our ventilation systems and hot air was constantly being pumped in," Niamh says. "It was really intense, but the

whole experience made me realise you do really have to think about culture when you are setting up a civilisation. A lot of people are thinking about the spacecraft and the engineering but that's all the technical stuff but we need to think how to keep people happy, how to build a better civilisation and an artist like me is needed there for that. I realised I had huge value and could capture the experience and keep people's spirits up."

In August, Niamh took an anti-gravity flight in the Cosmonaut Training Centre in Star City in Russia. After a full medical and the same training cosmonauts undertake, the participants are flown in a plane at a 45 degree angle, curving to create a weightless reaction before descending at a 45 degree angle again. Before and after the weightless effect takes hold you are under 2g of pressure, two times the weight of gravity, which is so intense it can cause you to vomit. This repeats over ten cycles. Niamh is proud to say her stomach held out over the experience, and she hopes to continue her anti-gravity training. "People say swimming is the closest feeling to it. The force is incredible then the second that stops you fly up. I was covered in bruises," Niamh says.

Next on her list is to get some practical skills to equip her to be a useful member of a space colony. "There's a course in America called Project PoSSUM. It's a course to prepare people for the reality that there will be production facilities orbiting earth in a couple of years. Because of microgravity there are some technologies that could take advantage of that so they are training people to be astronaut scientists."

She will be touring her play *Diary of a Martian Beekeeper* in Dublin in March 2018 for Engineers Week, and hopes to take it to Edinburgh and further afield. Perhaps this play will prove to be an incantation too. It is set in the 2030s, a decade Niamh believes we could have human life on Mars. "I think minions like me will be there on a mission by then laying down foundations for the civilisation that is coming," she says. As for skeptics, she says just a little research proves how soon a colony on Mars could be a reality. "People just need to realise that there are hundreds of thousands of people putting so much work into this right now," she says. "There was a time when we didn't think a member of the general public would ever be on an airplane now look at us. Things shift all the time." ☺