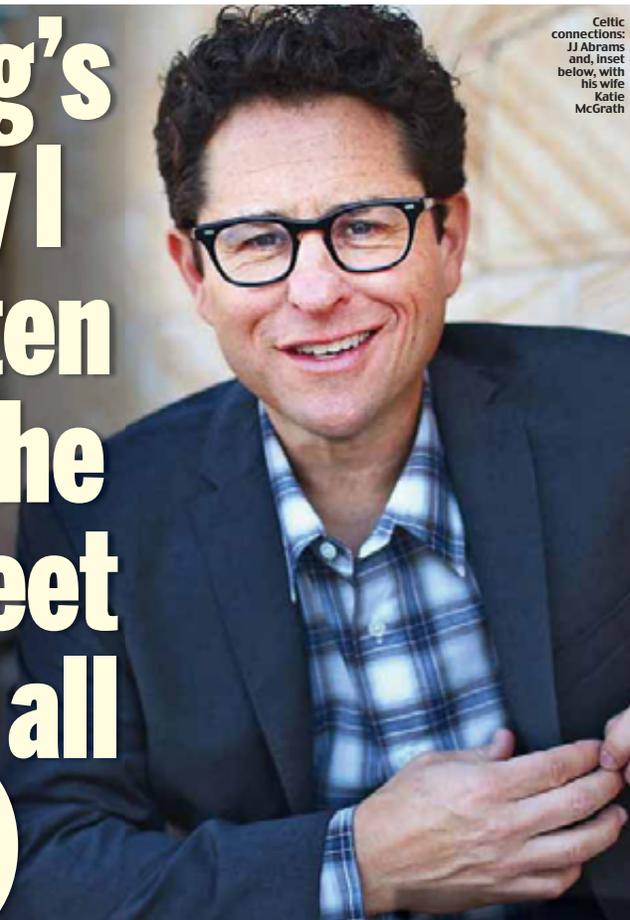


Spielberg's heir: why I am smitten with all the Irish I meet (most of all my wife!)



Celtic connections: JJ Abrams and, inset below, with his wife Katie McGrath

Hollywood mogul behind the *Star Trek* films tells how a Co. Sligo woman changed his whole life



by Patricia Danaher

WHEN Hollywood director JJ Abrams talks about Ireland, he can barely contain his enthusiasm. The famed storyteller behind *Lost*, *Felicity* and — more recently — *Star Trek*, Abrams seems just as delighted to talk about his exploits here as he is about his critically acclaimed projects.

His face lights up as he animatedly recounts tale upon tale, displaying an impressive knowledge of Irish culture and geography — and a refreshing willing-

ness to be self-effacing as he describes an incident with a garda in Mayo caused by his absent-mindedness.

'I have a terrible habit of losing things, which my family is always teasing me about,' Abrams says. 'I lose my glasses, my phone, whatnot several times a day. I lost my wallet four times, twice in New York and twice in LA and I never saw it again.'

'Well, I lost it for the fifth time when I was in Ireland and I didn't realise it until we were walking around Westport.'

'While my family were rolling their eyes at me, I called my office in LA to ask them to cancel my credit cards and they said: "Don't worry JJ, Ireland found your wallet!"'

'Someone in Charlestown, where we'd had lunch, had found my wallet, looked me up on the internet, found out that I was represented by the William Morris



Endeavour Agency and phoned my agent to say they had handed it in to a police station in Charlestown.

'We drove back to Charlestown, where we met this policewoman in the station. She said "The wallet is yours. Do you want it?"

'She thought it was hysterically funny

6 I have yet to develop the sexy accent that goes with being Irish 9

that the creator of *Lost* had lost his wallet and she joked she wouldn't hand it over to me until I told her how *Lost* ended!

So enamoured is the cinema wunderkind and godson of Steven Spielberg with Ireland, that he is actively looking at locations in Ireland to film parts of both of his next two movies — *Star Wars* and *Mission Impossible*.

The New York-born, Jewish director is married to Irish-American Katie McGrath, whose family come from Sligo.

She worked in Ted Kennedy's office in Washington for two decades and it's thanks to her influence and her friendship with former colleague Trina Vargo, president of the US-Ireland Alliance, that Abrams was made an honorary Irishman and given an Oscar Wilde award a few years ago.

'Overnight, I went from being Jeffrey Jacob Abrams to John Joe Abrams but I've yet to develop the sexy, roguish accent that goes with it!' he jokes.

He and McGrath have been married for 16 years and have three children: Henry, 15, Gracie, 14, and seven-year-old August.

He jokes that his family comprises 'a mini Ireland-Israeli alliance'.

'When my first son was born, we didn't have a bris, we had a "bristening", where we read Irish poems and dowsed him with water from the Atlantic,' he says.

Abrams, 47, was born to a television producer father and lawyer mother and grew up among the cream of the entertainment industry in New York and Los Angeles.

He started writing movies in the early Nineties, but didn't enjoy much success until the cult television drama *Felicity* hit screens in 1998.

Following this, he developed and wrote *Alias*, another huge television hit, before

releasing the phenomenally successful *Lost* in 2004.

The series changed everything for Abrams and two years later, he was asked to direct *Mission Impossible III*, followed by the reboot of *Star Trek* in 2009. He also wrote and directed the very successful movie *Super 8*, which was his ode to Steven Spielberg.

The follow-up to *Star Trek*, *Star Trek: Into Darkness*, has just opened around the world to significant box office numbers. But successful Hollywood talents like Abrams never sleep — or at least they don't rest for long on their laurels — and when we meet in London he is already at work on *Star Wars*, which is due for release in 2015.

Part of it will be filmed in Britain and he's very optimistic that more of it could be filmed in Ireland.

'I love Sligo, where Katie's people are from, Donegal, Galway — and the landscape in the Burren is just unbelievable. I saw shades of green I've never seen in my life anywhere and cliffs more dramatic than anything I could imagine.

'Ireland is an amazing location, with such incredible variety in the landscape. We've been scouting locations and we're very excited and hopeful,' he says.

Abrams' connections and passion for Ireland came about firstly through his wife, but also through Steven Spielberg, who is a regular visitor here and who shot *Saving Private Ryan* in Co. Wexford in 1998.

Spielberg has taken part in several poetry workshops in Ireland with the poet David White, and he told me earlier this year that he too hopes to make another movie in Ireland in the future.

He directed Daniel Day Lewis in *Lincoln* and spent quite a bit of time in Dublin and Wicklow while writing the script. 'My wife and I consider Ireland our third home,' said Spielberg. 'I love the Burren and Connemara and Dublin is of course a wonderful city.

'I have every intention of making another movie in Ireland. I don't know when it will be or what the subject will be, but it will happen.'

Tom Cruise, who starred in *Mission Impossible III*, is also a close friend of Abrams and recently claimed his Irish heritage during a visit here in March. It was Cruise who presented Abrams with his Oscar Wilde award in LA a few years ago.

Among the other projects which Abrams is currently working on is the film adaptation of Colum McCann's novel *Let The Great World Spin*.

McCann wrote the screenplay and is collaborating closely with Abrams. 'Katie showed me a review of this novel after it had just come out and she said, "You have to make a movie



out of this" — and she never says that to me!

'It's been a joy collaborating with Colum on what is truly an amazing piece of literature,' he says.

'During my first visit to Ireland in

‘I’ve scouted locations and we’re excited and hopeful’

2009 with my family, I found myself falling in love with Irish people I wasn't already married to, on an hourly basis,' says Abrams. 'One day our rental car got stuck in the mud in the middle of the countryside and out of nowhere people just showed up and started pushing the car out of the mud.'

The love affair with Ireland continues to grow ever warmer and it's clear that he would relish the opportunity to spend more time here, while also bringing jobs and tourists.

If he films these movies in Ireland, it would promote the country to a whole new global audience — 60 per cent of people who visit Ireland say they do so after seeing the landscape on the big screen.

'The experience of being in Ireland, from the very first time, has felt like some place I've been before and that I belong there,' he says.

'My love for Ireland has deepened and grown, and collaboration is something that I'm very excited about. So many brilliant composers, artists and film makers have come from there.'

For the past two years, he has hosted the annual Oscar Wilde party at his Bad Robot production offices in Santa Monica. This year, Colin Farrell was one of the honorees and the event was attended by Steven Spielberg, Warren Beatty, Cameron Crowe and Irish über agent Hylda Queally — the Dublin-born talent spotter who counts Marion Cotillard, Cate Blanchett and Penelope Cruz

among her clients. Abrams plans to host next year's event also and is a huge admirer of the work which the event's organiser, Trina Vargo, has been doing to attract inward investment into Ireland through this event and the Mitchell Scholarship programme.

'Trina and my wife Katie go back a long, long way and I have huge regard for her,' he says. 'There's no one quite like Trina and the Oscar Wilde party is always a great night. The music is always brilliant and you never know who is going to look in.'

'This year, Dublin band Heathers were one of the groups that played and my daughter is just nuts about them. We haven't stopped listening to them since.'

Given Abrams' standing in Hollywood and the international audience that exists for his film and television work, his presence in Ireland while filming parts of major franchises like Star Wars would provide enormous benefits to the economy and the film industry at a crucial time.

'I've been encouraging JJ to film something in Ireland and I really hope that the incentives he's offered by the Irish Film Board will be sufficiently attractive to make this a reality,' says Trina Vargo.

'I took IFB reps to meet him and his Bad Robot colleagues in February and we provided them with Irish location possibilities for Mission Impossible and Star Wars.'

'Knowing what film production can mean for jobs and tourism, I hope JJ decides to film there and that Ireland can make him an offer he can't refuse.'



Star turn: Zoe Saldana at the Star Trek: Into Darkness premiere

