Opinion
Guest Voices
Catherine O'Hara, the Emmy-winning actor known for comedic roles across including Kevin's

Catherine O'Hara, the Emmy-winning actor known for comedic roles across including Kevin's beleaguered mom in "Home Alone" and Moira Rose in "Schitt's Creek," died at age 71 Jan. 30. She is pictured in a May 21, 2025, photo. (OSV News/Reuters/Mario Anzuoni)



by Jim McDermott

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The actor Catherine O'Hara died Jan. 30 at age 71 after what has been described as a short illness.

Over the course of her career, O'Hara was known for many things — her work in the groundbreaking Canadian variety show SCTV; her role as the mother who forgets her youngest child in "Home Alone" and its sequel; for her work in Christopher Guest's series of improvised mockumentaries; and finally for the five seasons she spent playing a deranged actress and mother Moira Rose on "Schitt's Creek."

O'Hara grew up in Toronto, the second youngest of seven kids in a Catholic family. "I'm pretty much a good Catholic girl at heart," she said in an interview in 1983. "And I believe in family. I also have a basic belief that God takes care of me. I believe in prayer, even though I'm not that religious. I just have that foundation from

my family."

Age 29 at the time, she already had good reason to believe that God would take care of her.

While she was in high school her older brother started dating a young Gilda Radner. Radner treated her like a sister. "Gilda would take me downtown and let me stay at her house, where I had pumpernickel toast with cream cheese and cucumbers, which I'd never had before. So exciting!," she told The Guardian in 2021. "Then she was cast in a production of 'Godspell' alongside Eugene, Martin Short — all these people who would become my friends. Then she got into Second City, and me and my sister Mary Margaret worked as waitresses there, so I got to see her every night."

It was seeing Radner's path that convinced O'Hara that she could be an actor, too. "Living in the suburbs of Toronto, I never saw the possibility of theater being a career. So Gilda really opened my eyes to the possibility of being silly for a career, and how to do it well. I would not have a career without her, God bless her." She would eventually become Radner's understudy at Second City.

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O'Hara grew up in a funny family. "My dad would tell jokes," she told The New Yorker , "and my mom would tell stories and imitate everyone within the stories." In a story some years before, her interviewer revealed that she had gone to grade school with O'Hara, which O'Hara did not realize. And they had an iconic memory of the family: "The story I remember from those days is that the seven O'Hara kids loved to play 'family massacre'," she recalled, "pouring ketchup all over yourselves, lying in various rooms and waiting for your folks to get home." After initially denying it, O'Hara admitted, "Well, okay, maybe we did it a couple of times. But it wasn't me! I had five older brothers and sisters, so I just did whatever they told me to do."

O'Hara's first role actually came from the church: She began acting at age 7 by playing the Virgin Mary in a Nativity parade. As a member of Second City and then on the hugely successful SCTV show, O'Hara would mine her Catholicism. So on

SCTV she and fellow cast member Andrea Martin did a sketch where her character Lola Heatherton, one of O'Hara’s many self-deluded characters, interviewed Mother Teresa.

While SCTV was still hugely popular, O'Hara suddenly quit without warning. Later she revealed it just wasn't fun for her anymore. In the years that follow people would write stories about her in the vein of "whatever happened to Catherine O'Hara?" And in them she would admit that she'd had plenty of offers. The problem was the roles were never good. "I always got offered these parts where the character would say to the guy, 'Gee, you're looking good. What's your name?' " she told People Magazine in 1986. "That's the Hollywood woman's part — the friend of the leading actor. I guess they need a woman — the only alternative would be having the male character just talking to himself."

"If you don't treat yourself with respect, who will?" she wondered. And so she passed on many roles. And others, like the Holly Hunter part in "Broadcast News," she didn't get.

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But within a few years of those stories, she was cast first in "Beetlejuice" and then in "Home Alone." Both films would prove to be unexpectedly iconic. And the former saw her playing another absurd character. She told The Guardian, "I'm always drawn to characters who have no idea of the impression they're making on other people." And yet she saw herself not doing parody or social commentary but mirroring humanity back at itself. "We're all delusional, really," she explained. "I love that about us humans and I love playing it," she says.

But the delusionary aspect of many of her characters also echoed the misogyny around her. Characters like Moira Rose leaned into exactly the kind of hysteria and presumed fragility that men have historically put upon women to diminish and dismiss them. And yet somehow O'Hara would use that weapon against them. Whether performed written on the page, improvised or somewhere in between, O'Hara's characters would not be dismissed. At the very moment in fact that her characters would seem about to fall off the cliff into total parody, she would draw upon a deep and unerringly true well of fury.

"I will play who you say we are — b*tches be crazy," O'Hara's performances said again and again. "But I will be so much more than you can imagine — more deranged, more fragile, more surprising — that you won't be able to write me off. I will win out over you and I will do it using the weapons you try to wield against us."

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In one of her last roles, O'Hara played a psychologist in a town of survivors of worldwide zombie-like apocalypse. It's a straight role and a serious character. And yet the tools she brings are the same. If anything the straightness of the role allows us to see that much more clearly the talent, the sincerity and the take-no- prisoners ferocity she brought to the craft.

O'Hara first met Eugene Levy while she was waitressing at Second City. "We tried dating, actually," she admitted to The New Yorker. "There's nothing sexier than making each other laugh." But she also admitted she was glad it hadn't worked out. "We probably wouldn't be working together if we'd gone longer on the dating."

It was years later, in Christopher Guest's movies that O'Hara and Levy started working together. In "A Mighty Wind," they play a former folk duo reuniting after 30 years apart. In "Best of Show" they play an oddly-matched couple, he nerdy with buckteeth and bad fashion, her sexy and with a long list of former boyfriends, but devoted to him.

That devotion ends up being the secret ingredient in all their work. Where married couple comedy would often turn on the couple not getting along, theirs instead always emerged out of the fact that they did. In the original conception of "Schitt's Creek," O'Hara's Moira and Levy's Johnny were supposed to be unhappily married. But neither Levy nor O'Hara wanted to do that.

"Schitt's Creek," like the Guest films, allowed O'Hara to put her own stamp on the character. Moira's use of fancy language came from her. So did her fashion. She told The New Yorker the idea of Moira wearing a vest as part of her pajamas came from her.

To contribute was both an insistence that she was a partner in the work she was doing and emerged from her training in improvisation. "You always give something back," she told Salon in 2000.

In 2004 she and Levy performed the song "A Kiss at the End of the Rainbow" from "A Mighty Wind" at the Oscars. They play it in their characters, and create some funny moments.

But when all is said and done, what's really striking about that performance is the palpable sense of care that flows off O'Hara. No doubt it's true to the character, but it's also coming from a real place in O'Hara.

In her 1983 interview, O’Hara said, "When you think that you're just a human being and one of God's creatures, you can't take anything that seriously." And she certainly knew how to delight in our silliness. But beneath that was a tremendous affection. She was someone who loved being in our bizarre and often absurd world, and relished the chance to share that love with us.

May she rest in peace.

This piece originally appeared on Jim McDermott's "Pop Culture Spirit Wow" Substack.