



Fungi has been in Dingle since 1983, and is likely aged in his mid-30s; inset, a boat of sightseers heading out of the mouth of Dingle harbour.
Pictures: Dominick Walsh

SKIPPER Tom Sheehy steered the MV Lady Laura towards Fungi, the world's best-known, free-living dolphin, in Dingle Harbour.

Seeing nothing, I struggled to believe that the famed Fungi would appear so soon after my boat left port. I assumed it was part of the act, a 'near-encounter'.

As we bobbed along, I recalled my editor saying "I want you to track down this dolphin phenomenon. See what all the fuss is about. Surely, he's not the same animal that first surfaced all those years ago."

With that brief, I'd headed for Dingle.

My quest was to catch sight of Kerry's water-borne mascot, and unravel the 'legend' a little. And now, I was sailing straight for him, with the minimum of effort, pondering under my breath: "This is just too easy ... he couldn't be so close to shore. Treading water. Waiting for me."

"There you go," said the skipper. "Right there." Mr Sheehy pointed starboard, and I craned my neck. And there Fungi was, riding alongside us, breaking the foam, just enough to tease out the notion he'd, indeed, come to meet both me and my boat. Dipping, tilting, arching and twisting; then swerving and diving below us, popping up port side, Fungi was putting on a show. A true pro.

Slipping into the boat's wake, Fungi toyed with his audience's attention, before swapping us for another nearby craft. Mesmerised, the passengers watched him greet the new company.

Every time he saluted above the surface, cheers rang out to applaud him. When they did, my conscience buzzed, and I questioned if we were

I went to Dingle sceptical of seeing the famed harbour dolphin, and if I did see him, sceptical it was the same mammal since 1983, says **David Young**

chasing, maybe even harassing, this poor dolphin, because he is ageing.

Considering his legend — he first appeared, already an adult, in the harbour in 1983 — Fungi's far from his heady, juvenile days.

"The best guess says he's somewhere in his mid-30s. But he's as lively and playful as ever," said the skipper. "More often than not, you find him like this. Jumping

clean out of the water."

"Put it like this," said Jimmy Flannery, of the Dingle Boatmen's Association. "Fungi can get away from our boats at any time. Where our top speed is nine miles an hour, his is 35. Trust me. When he wants to go, he's gone. As for age, well, the experts say 25 years is it for those in captivity. Fungi's wild, and I've been looking at him for 23."

How do they know he's the same 'Fungi'?

That is the question that's been asked a million times. Yet, it doesn't raise the hackles. Dingle folk are too wily to be worried by a doubting tone.

They're also seasoned watchers of this creature, and so, they're most able to detail his markings, movements, and behaviour to prove his bona fide world-record-holder status.

"You see that little nick on his tail fin?" said Mr Flannery. "That little cut? He has it well over 20 years. That's how we distinguish Fungi from other dolphins.

"All the skippers can pinpoint him from his dorsal fin, even when he's in the middle of a visiting pod of 50 others."

There may be no CSI Dingle, but the veterans know their stuff.

"Ask any farmer to tell two sheep apart, and he will," said Mr Flannery. "Same here. We're looking at him everyday." What about the early sallies to meet him? "We thought we had to go out on a surf board, banging stones together — to attract his attention," said John, a local diver, laughing at the innocence of it all. "We'd no idea how to get up-close-and-personal. 'Dolphins may be friendly, but they're still bloody wild animals at the end of the day' — that's what was running through my mind."

The boat captains and their

crews enthuse about their lot. Revelling in the good fortune of tripping along a stretch of ocean that just happens to be minded by a force of nature; one which has come to influence them. And anyone else, for that matter, who's willing to succumb to Fungi's charm.

They know Fungi won't be around forever.

"We'll deal with it when the time comes," said Mr Flannery. "I'd like to think he'd give us a sign, though." While other dolphins visit, and often hang around a while, they're aware it's taken territory. Even the females of the species pay Fungi brief conjugal visits (which might explain a few things).

Like his life, Fungi's arrival has been a 'fairy tale'. The lore of nearby Inch strand says Fungi had a female partner, who died in un-



known circumstances, and washed ashore.

And ever since, Fungi's remained, unwilling to leave, perhaps tied through fate to a coast-line that's welcomed and comforted him over the years.

It's the kind of narrative you can spin to your kids, so they see the world a little differently. I'm not

sure if it was the boat trip and the stunning vista of a thriving fishing town, nestled into God's country, or the spirit of those ferrying wide-eyed visitors, from near and far, out on to the harbour's waters, but I returned ashore smitten.

"If he wasn't around anymore, another might take his place," Mr Flannery said. Perhaps, there'll be a vacancy for the mantle of Dingle dolphin. Fungi's legacy, though, is as solid as the statue of him on the pier.

Long after he's gone, people will boat in the keyhole-shaped inlet, and holler his name, every time the water darkens a little beside their boat.

Having Fungi in your day — well, it's probably like falling out of the right side of the bed, every morning.

So, did I get him? I can't say I got to the bottom of his story, but I can say 'I get him'.

FAMOUS ANIMAL ATTRACTIONS

A common octopus, called **Paul**, was living an anonymous life, at a sea-life centre in Germany, when fame struck. Somehow, his feeding behaviour was used to correctly predict the winner of each of the German national soccer team's matches in the 2012 World Cup.

Lonesome George, a conservation icon and a symbol of Ecuador's Galapagos islands, was the last remaining



tortoise of his kind when he died. He was also thought to have been more than 100 years old.

Knut the polar bear (inset) rejected by his mother at birth, survived his first 44 days in an incubator, and subsequently became Berlin Zoo's biggest attraction — making the cover of *Vanity Fair* in 2007. Sadly, Knut was only four years old when he died in controversial circumstances in his enclosure.

Monsters Inc: Irish horror is a hit

SCRIPTRITER Kevin Lehane does not believe in "ghosts or demons or anything like that," but he loves them in films. "I think they're great as story devices and for entertainment sake," says the 31-year-old. "I grew up reading a lot of Stephen King books and watching horror films that I probably shouldn't have — because of irresponsible babysitters in the family — but I think everybody who works in the film industry tends to have seen films that they weren't supposed to when they were kids and then tries to replicate that intense rush that you get [watching them]."

Lehane, who was born in Surrey, England, has lived on the north side of Cork City since the age of six. Although he has a dollop of that sunny English county in his voice, Cork is home and he is back this week for the release, on Friday, of his monster-comedy movie *Grabbers*.

The movie tells the story of heavy-drinking Garda, Ciarán O'Shea (Richard Coyle), and his recently arrived, uptight understudy Lisa Nolan (Ruth Bradley), who are charged with defending a small local town in the West of Ireland when it is invaded by vicious, tentacled sea-monsters. The only antidote to the monsters is alcohol, which gives the town dwellers the excuse of going on the tear to save themselves.

Lehane had the idea for the screenplay in 2003. Having completed a degree in film production at St John's Central College, Cork, he went on a trip around the world, including to Oceania.

"Everywhere I went, I was getting savaged by mosquitoes," he says. "By the time I arrived in the Cook Islands, I was really getting fed up and people kept telling me I should eat Marmite, which was a complete wives' tale. But I believed it at the time and I couldn't figure out why it wasn't working for me. I was complaining about the fact that I was still getting bitten, while I was

Set in Donegal, *Grabbers* is a scary movie with a sense of humour. Booze is key to the plot, its writer Kevin Lehane tells **Jonathan deBurca Butler**

having a drink, and I said, 'wouldn't it be great if they were allergic to alcohol rather than Marmite'.

"And that was it. I woke up the next morning and wrote in my travel journal 'get drunk to survive'. Every internet café I went to, I kept checking to see if it had been done before. I just couldn't believe that after all the years of vampire movies, that nobody had put two and two together. You've had vampires allergic to garlic, but not to alcohol, and I just thought 'you could have a lot of fun with that'," Mr Lehane says.

The film was shot in three months around Christmas 2010,



in the Donegal town of Moville. The location, right at the top of the country, offered spectacular scenery and lighting, but also logistical nightmares.

"We were there during the blizzards and gale force storms," he says. "We got kind of lucky with the weather in a way, though. Yes, we'd have to stop filming because it would be pouring with rain, but then we'd turn the camera back on and we'd get this beautiful light. But we did have to shut down production on a number of days. We're very happy with how pretty it looks, though, and so it really shows off the best of the country."

The movie was a surprise success at this year's Sundance Film Festival, where it had five screenings and received favourable reviews. It was also among 'best of the fest' at this year's Edinburgh festival.

"At Sundance, we were put in the midnight category, so we were surrounded by really gruesome, straight horror films," says Mr Lehane. "*Grabbers* just popped up and it was this very charming, heart-warming triumph over adversity with these silly characters dealing with their issues and these monsters. It was a complete

change of pace [for the audiences] but it was great for us. It gave us a huge lift. And we got an incredible reaction at Edinburgh; much bigger than at Sundance, to be honest. I think they picked up a lot better on the colloquialisms."

Mr Lehane says the key to the movie's success is its accessibility.

"I've always called it a bit of a monster movie, but it's sort of become a classic date movie," he says. "It's got scary moments, and there's a little bit of the romantic comedy about it, in parts. You could happily bring your girlfriend along."

Ruth Bradley, Richard Coyle and Russell Tovey in *Grabbers*, whose monsters are allergic to alcohol. Inset, screenwriter Kevin Lehane, who has loved horror movies since he was a child.

TOP FIVE SCARY IRISH MOVIES

- Wake Wood (2011):** Starring Aidan Gillen, Eva Birthistle and Timothy Spall, this is a real spooker, which tells the story of a couple who are granted three days with their deceased daughter. Unsurprisingly, she's not the pretty girl they remember and things quickly go wrong.
- Legend of the Bog (2009):** When a 2,000-year-old murder victim, preserved in a bog, is disturbed by developers in the countryside, an archaeologist and his crew are charged with sending him back. Bloody developers at it again.
- Shrooms (2007):** On their way to collecting magic mushrooms in a wood, three couples meet some of its strange inhabitants and get a 'trip' they hadn't bargained for.
- Isolation (2005):** An experiment with a cow goes horribly wrong, resulting in a potential epidemic of bloodthirsty humans and er ... cows. A-moo-sing in parts.
- Boy Eats Girl (2005):** A classic zombie movie, starring Samantha Mumba as the girl the cool zombie, who doesn't want to be a zombie, wants. Clear on that?