The Woman Who Made Us Laugh Through Tears: Farewell to Catherine O’Hara

Catherine O’Hara lit up the screen every time she showed up—whether she was screaming “KEVIN!” in holiday chaos, dancing possessed to “Day-O” in a haunted house, or delivering lines in an indecipherable accent while clutching a wig collection. Funny, tender, goofy: these weren’t just adjectives for her performances; they were the essence of her presence. Her death on January 30, 2026, at age 71, left a void in comedy that feels both sudden and impossible, given how timeless her work remains.

Born March 4, 1954, in Toronto, the sixth of seven children in a large Irish Catholic family, O’Hara grew up in an environment where humor was survival. Dinner table conversations demanded wit; laughter wasn’t optional. “Fun was a necessity,” she later recalled in interviews, describing how her parents’ sharp humor shaped her. After high school at Burnhamthorpe Collegiate Institute, she took a job waitressing at Toronto’s Second City theater. When Gilda Radner left for *Saturday Night Live*, O’Hara stepped in as understudy, then cast member, launching a career rooted in improvisation.

Her breakthrough came with *SCTV* (1976–1984), the legendary Canadian sketch comedy series alongside John Candy, Eugene Levy, Andrea Martin, and others. O’Hara’s impressions—of Lucille Ball, Brooke Shields, Katharine Hepburn—were spot-on, but her original characters stole hearts: the melodramatic Lola Heatherton, the quirky Dusty Towne. She won an Emmy in 1982 for writing on the show, proving her talent extended beyond performance. SCTV honed her ability to commit fully to absurdity while grounding it in relatable humanity—a skill that defined her career.

Hollywood noticed. Tim Burton cast her as Delia Deetz in *Beetlejuice* (1988), the pretentious sculptor wife whose home becomes a supernatural battleground. Delia’s transformation—possessed, lip-syncing “Day-O” with wild abandon—showcases O’Hara’s physical comedy genius. She goes big without apology, her wide eyes and exaggerated gestures turning camp into something oddly endearing. She reprised the role in *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice* (2024), proving her timing remained impeccable decades later.

Then came the holiday staple: Kate McCallister in *Home Alone* (1990) and *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York* (1992). As the harried mom who accidentally leaves her

son behind (twice), O'Hara balances frantic panic with genuine tenderness. Her iconic "KEVIN!!!" screams echo through generations, but beneath the comedy lies real maternal desperation. Macaulay Culkin called her "Mama" long after filming; in tributes after her passing, he expressed heartbreak. O'Hara grounded the slapstick in emotion, making audiences laugh while feeling the sting of family separation.

Her collaborations with Christopher Guest elevated mockumentary to art. In *Waiting for Guffman* (1996), she's the dramatic Sheila Albertson; in *Best in Show* (2000), the eccentric Cookie Fleck with her trail of ex-husbands; in *A Mighty Wind* (2003), the soulful Mickey Crabbe. These roles let her improvise freely, blending goofy quirks with quiet vulnerability. Cookie's deadpan delivery of her chaotic backstory remains a masterclass in understated hilarity.

Yet O'Hara's greatest triumph arrived later: Moira Rose in *Schitt's Creek* (2015–2020), created by Eugene and Dan Levy. Reuniting with her SCTV friend Eugene (as Johnny Rose), she played the former soap star turned motel-dwelling matriarch. Moira's wardrobe (all black, dramatic capes), accent (a bizarre mid-Atlantic mashup), and vocabulary ("What is burning smell like?") made her iconic. But O'Hara infused tenderness: Moira's fierce love for her family, her growth from vanity to vulnerability. The show's 2020 Emmy sweep—including O'Hara's win for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series—capped a career renaissance. She joked in interviews that her real accent disappointed fans expecting Moira's voice.

O'Hara's humor was never mean-spirited. She drew from observation—streetcar rides, family dinners, everyday absurdities. "I think everyone is born funny," she said. "Sadly, some lives beat it out of them." Hers stayed intact through fearless commitment. Off-screen, she was self-deprecating, quick with sarcasm in relationships: "We do a lot of it with jokes… Sarcasm helps!"

Her legacy spans generations: kids know her as Kevin's mom, millennials as Moira, cinephiles as Guest's muse. She brought joy without ego, proving comedy could be profound. Funny enough to make you snort-laugh, tender enough to tug heartstrings, goofy enough to embrace the ridiculous—she made every scene better simply by showing up.

In her final interviews, O’Hara downplayed wisdom gained, quipping she’d “learned nothing.” Yet her work teaches volumes: commit to the bit, find heart in chaos, laugh at life’s absurdities. The world is dimmer without her light, but her performances endure, forever making us smile through tears.