THE SINKHOLE

Drama Comedy

6 x Episodes for TV

Created by Peter Feeney

TINDERBOX

What happens most often is not protracted grief, but a period of levity, of clowning, like Hamlet's clowning, born of the belief that it's all pointless, life means nothing, and death is its random end, and we either laugh darkly or go under.

Bob Ellis

THE SINKHOLE

As the first anniversary of his son's death approaches, Milo O'Connor is battling to keep his family together. But beneath his jovial veneer Milo is barely coping himself - and his forced levity is pushing his wife, Tully, away. As a sinkhole appears in the O'Connor's back section, seemingly intent on taking a sacrifice, Milo will be forced to face his ghosts, do battle with the monsters of his daughter's imagination, and somehow confess his part in Liam's death to Tully.

The Sinkhole is inspired by the award-winning stage-play 'Milo's Wake,' by Michael and Margery Forde.

TONE & AUDIENCE

Like a pint of Guinness, The Sinkhole is light and frothy on top, disguising the dark beneath. The audience is welcomed into the orbit of the O'Connor's by humour, Milo's bonhomie - and intrigue. What is up with this family? Why is daughter Mary escaping into shoplifting and a world of fantasy? Why can't Milo and Tully speak about the elephant in the room – their absent son? Like recent TV shows Flowers and The Bear, an undertow of sorrow and unfinished psychic business stalks the lead characters, pulling the audience in, propelling them toward a second half season arc of cliff hangers and climactic reveals that are bold, challenging and startling.

A dark comedy that combines elements of psychological drama with imaginative fantasy, The Sinkhole is inhabited by vivid, working-class characters. At its heart beats the love story of Milo and Tully, testament to the power of family both to harm and to repair. Like Pan's Labyrinth, The Sinkhole is also a paeon to the power of imagination: a child's fantasies become entangled in the waking world, triggering horror, humour and healing. As in After Life, comedy is brought to bear on a mercilessly serious subject. Visually, the show resembles the sombre tones of Manchester by the Sea.

The Sinkhole taps into universal themes of loss and grief, as well as a current teen suicide korero both in Aotearoa and globally. While an ensemble show, the central character, and many of the mythological and cultural elements, are Irish, which opens co-production possibilities, as does the inspiration for the story, the powerful Australian play 'Milo's Wake.' The Sinkhole will find a wide audience both at home and overseas.

Think…

After Life * Pan's Labyrinth * Manchester by the Sea * The Bear * Flowers

SEASON STORY

It's been almost a year since Liam's death. His dad, Milo O'Connor, is putting on a brave face. But his relentless positivity, at times alternately entertaining or infuriating, is holding at bay a sadness in his heart that threatens to overwhelm him if he ever faces it. And he won't talk about Liam. It's like he never even existed. It's driving his family nuts.

Nine-year-old Mary O'Connor is delighted when a sinkhole opens in her back yard, even after she falls into it. But she despairs of ever playing Witchy again, the game she LOVES doing with her mother, Tully. Even though it scares her half to death. But Witchy stopped when her brother Liam died… Where did Liam go? Are her parents divorcing? What's wrong with dad? Searching for answers, Mary searches for meaning in her collection of totems, all stolen items, and becomes obsessed with the bog family she believes inhabits the sinkhole.

Tully attends a support group but Milo hits upon the idea of hosting his own wake. How better to cheer himself up than by hearing all the kind things people have to say about him - while he's still alive to hear them! To allow herself to grieve, Tully is forced to leave her husband. She finds solace in Joel, a man she meets at the support group, the two pushed together by shared lived horrors.

As the stress piles on Milo's emotional back, and he becomes less and less like the dad she once knew, Mary wonders if he's been somehow replaced by someone – or something. Determined to drive out the monster and turn the clock back to when everyone was happy, Mary makes her play, forcing Milo to look at a mirror and see himself as he really is. Unfortunately, perched on a wonky stool for this tricky manoeuvre, she falls mid-exorcism and knocks herself out. When Mary wakes, she proclaims that Milo has changed. But has he?

When the house he's working in collapses, Milo hasn't got much more to lose. He admits to Tully his childhood torment and secret guilt about Liam. Tully confesses about Joel. Milo's wake turns into a remembrance for Liam. As the dead are toasted, the clock starts up again on the living.

THE WORLD

Milo and Tully's business - house re-piling and cladding - combines structural change with cosmetic improvement, neatly summing them up as a couple. Milo's all about the good craic to be had in life, while Tully is common sense. Their business has raised Milo up from the muck of his migrant origins, but much of the work also involves squirming in dirt and dark in claustrophobic spaces, as does Milo's recurring childhood memory, of being locked in a cupboard by his mother. Meanwhile, the rain won't stop falling in the wettest spring on record, brewing a calamity at the latest O'Connor work site.

The muddy sinkhole that appears in the O'Connor's back yard becomes a symbol of the emotional mire that may well swallow the family whole. It's also a convenient dumping ground for Mary's secret stash, home to the creatures of her imagination, a muddy embrace awaiting anyone unfortunate enough to fall into it, a stand in for the bogs of Milo's Irish childhood, and – once the crack at the base widens enough – a life threatening peril.

Our somewhat damp take on Dunedin, with its neo-gothic grandeur, contrasted with down at heel suburbs, and recent history of catastrophic landslides, makes our oldest city a character in itself. The Sinkhole will put Dunedin on the map as a film making location.

MILO O'CONNOR (**50s**)

Milo from Country Mayo (it's all food food food with him!) has spent his life laughing in the face of adversity. With his house cladding and re-piling business, he's also made an outward success of his life in his adopted country. A devoted dad and husband, the great provider, he loves a pint and a good pub belter, especially if it's Irish folk singer Damien Dempsey (who would be great in this role too!) But Milo's bonhomie is a cloaking device. If he appears the life and soul of the party, he can more easily bend others to his will. His benevolent control keeps his greatest fear at bay: that life could spiral out of his control. He's long shed his Catholic faith, and although tethered to the stories, myths and ancient horrors of old Ireland, in his emotional core: he's lost. He can't let himself grieve, so he's not letting anyone else grieve either. Milo must learn to bear the pain of being himself, something he's managed to dodge all his life, if he is to have any hope of keeping his family together. Can he also own up to his part in his son's death?

TULLY O'CONNOR (**40s**)

Tully, Ngāpuhi, has been with Milo for 20 years – they met in the UK when Tully was on her OE. Milo is a force of nature, and till now Tully has been content to weather the storms of his temperament and follow the path he's blazed. And it's worked out well, starting with Milo's decision to move to Dunedin all those years ago. Tully supported this, as she wanted to raise her children away from the racism and lack of opportunity in Northland. But lately Tully has been struggling with Milo's cheery denialism and is feeling an intense loneliness in her grief. She's also harbouring a pent-up rage at Milo because there was no tangihanga when Liam died; Milo wasn't having that. Tully will discover that she has followed her husband at some cost to her own individuality. She needs find her emotional way home again.

LIAM O'CONNOR

Dead, but far from forgotten, 17-year-old Liam appears in Mary and Milo's dreams, and in flashback. But he's a relentless presence in the O'Connor household, by virtue of his absence. How did he die, and why is no one talking about him?

MARY O'CONNOR

Milo and Tully's daughter, Mary is a hard case kleptomaniac. She's also an escape artist who finds comfort in the world of her imagination. She misses her dad of old. Milo still has the bad jokes and the smart Alec answers to everything. But she can see through his act, sensing that now, under the bravado, something is broken. Mary misses Liam too. She can't save him, but she's determined to save her dad – and bring him and her Mum together again.

JOEL

Joel lost his wife to cancer, then his only son committed suicide on the anniversary of her death. He's been struggling since, and to cope he gets along to the parent Support group. There he meets Tully, and their mutual need will lead to something more than just friendship.

MRS MARSHALL

The O'Connor's neighbour, and Mary's babysitter, widower Mrs Marshall watches, alarmed, as the sinkhole appears in their back section, then grows, threatening to swallow the back fence. Her granny flat will be next! Mrs Marshall tolerates Mary's kleptomania, until it's one snow globe missing too many. Then she snaps…

NICOLE

Tully's sister, Nicole has a vague scent of revolution, of daring alternative lifestyle – or is it the whiff of armpit hair? With her tales, tall and true, of Ngāpuhi, and of her and Tully's childhood in Northland, Mary finds her fascinating. Nicole is also her sister's confidant, and her house becomes a bolt hole for Tully when things get too tough with Milo. Nicole represents the capacity for reconnection, yet to be taken up by Tully, with her Ngāpuhi-tanga, her ancestral roots.

SEAN

Nearing retirement, Sean is also an Irish migrant, whose memories of old Ireland have seemingly ancient roots – and plant the seed for Mary's revelation that her dad is a 'Changeling.' Sean is one half of the Wren band, who will appear at Milo's Wake, and works in the 'O'Connor Cladding' gang.

CELTIC CULTURE AND MAORITANGA

When their son died, Milo discouraged Tully from holding a tangi for him. She allowed herself to be persuaded. At that moment the clock stopped on their lives, and the O'Connor's became spiritual zombies, forever haunted by Liam's ghost. Milo's obstinance had to do with his sense of guilt and fear of grieving - lest it lift the lid off his own stew of repressed emotional ills. But when Milo declares that he will hold a wake for himself, it becomes further impetus for Tully to realise that her and Milo's needs are not always aligned, and that she's given up too much of herself and her beliefs in pursuit of a harmonious marriage with the man she loves.

Milo's renunciation of his Catholic faith, his difficult upbringing, and his migrant status, all combine to make him only loosely tethered to a sense of belonging. Any spiritual ties for him lie in an older Celtic mythology, which opens the door for his daughter to work her ancient magic on him.

For her part, Tully has always followed in Milo's wake, but now with the help of Nicole, her sister, she must find her way back to her own spiritual anchorage. She'll discover that she's better grounded in her whanaungatanga, her sense of belonging, than she thought, and that Milo needs her more than he knows. Tully's inner journey will force a reckoning with her husband that will save him from himself - and bring her family back to life.

There are further story explorations still to be made at the busy intersection of Maori and Irish cultures, such as may be found in the tensions of a bicultural marriage. There's also room, within Mary's motley collection of grab-bags from myth and fable, for the addition of Maori cultural elements - all the better to conjure up a potent mythological cocktail to bring her father back from the brink!

Our Hungatiaki; our advisor in matters Maoritanga, is Pita Turei. See his Bio HERE

ACT ONE: EPISODES 1-2

In a dark crawl space that initially resembles a coffin, a man half buried in brick, dust and timber awaits rescue. 'It's dark,' the man says into his mobile phone. 'It's so dark…'

And so, in flash forward, we meet Irish born Milo O'Connor: a sleepwalker who loves a laugh, but takes a little white pill every morning, sometimes after reliving in nightmare the memory of being locked as a child in a cupboard by his mother. He's a 'prolapsed' Catholic who mocks the Church yet wears a Scapular round his neck (a sign of religious devotion). Milo's wife Tully is still playing by Milo's rule book of relentless positivity. But the two can't hold eye contact. Milo can't bear to see the grief in her eyes, the reflection of his own. The O'Connor's neighbour is eccentric pensioner Mrs Marshall, the proud custodian of an extensive snow globe and National Geographic magazine collection. And then there's…

Milo and Tully's hardcase daughter Mary. Fresh from some petty shoplifting she's thrilled to discover a sinkhole in her back yard – until she falls into it, becoming its first casualty. Mary's missing till she turns up with a tut-tutting Mrs Marshall. Mary's absence clearly shakes up her parents profoundly, hinting at a deeper cause for their anxiety. Like a wound that can't be healed, Milo boards up the sinkhole, but it expands; he calls the Council, but they are busy and can't get around to an inspection for at least a month…

There's magic in Mary's world. She marvels when Milo and Tully's team jack up the house they are re-piling and all the cracks on the interior walls disappear. Milo and Mary share a love of Irish song, story and silliness – using her wonky stool Mary plays a mad accompaniment to Milo's twin melodic spoons… At Mrs Marshalls, Mary is attracted to one of the snow globes on display, showing a happy family of four. Then she spies gruesome images of a primeval bog man in one of Mrs Marshalls' precious Nat Geo magazines. She rips out some pages and takes them home where she starts sketching versions of the bog man – complete with a noose. The bog man, she explains to her mum, was some kind of sacrifice. But he must have done something pretty bad to end up in that bog too. Tully is chilled to hear all this talk of nooses and has no answer for Mary when she asks her Mum why they don't play 'witchy' anymore, a game where Tully would deliciously scare Mary half to death.

The fourth member of the O'Connor family, Liam, is a haunting presence. The anniversary of his death looms large. Tully drives on auto pilot to find herself outside their old house, and mistakenly spots Liam in a crowd of teenagers. She announces she wants to honour him on the anniversary of his death. Mary has a secret slide show of Liam, and a photo of him holding her as a baby. Milo won't talk about Liam, but on the sly he stakes out a teenager, Theo, at his house, never revealing himself. He complains to Tully that he wishes they still had Liam's phone, where he's sure Theo's hateful messages might well still reside. We find out that Mary has Liam's phone. She uses it to 'call' Liam, to ask him where he is, and what it's like there… Milo is cross to learn that Tully has decided to visit a 'Support' group on her own. He seeks out his own version of therapy at his local Irish pub. Then he spins the O'Connor universe into a whole new orbit when he announces he's going to have a wake for himself – why wait until you're gone to hear all the nice things everyone has to say about ya!?

Milo's declaration brings latent tensions with Tully to the fore. Mary hears them argue and becomes obsessed with making things right in the family herself. On a playdate with her Aunt Nicole at the library she discovers a book about the changeling, a creature from the bogs of old Ireland that inhabits the body of another. The changeling can only be exposed if it is forced to look at its own image in a mirror. Coincidentally, there's not that many mirrors in the O'Connor house right now, and one less after Milo accidentally smashes a replacement that he bought for the bathroom reno. Mary steals the changeling book, adding it to her eclectic collection of treasures - all signs and symbols she hopes will somehow help her make sense of why her parents aren't the same anymore since Liam left. Her google research reveals the existence of 'Yde' girl, another human sacrifice pulled from an ancient Danish bog. In reconstruction the young red head looks a bit like Mary herself. Mary flings stolen Rose's chocolates and $2 shop toys, still in their packets, down the sinkhole, guessing that the bog wants a sacrifice, but insisting that sacrifices don't have to be human…

Milo overcomes Tully's concerns, and their work gang accepts a re-piling job on an old house with a landslide risk. That's worrying - but then, things get REALLY serious, when Mrs Marshall notices that one of her precious snow globe collection is missing…

ACT TWO: EPISODES 3-4

Mary has a playdate where a friend falls down the sinkhole but – luckily - is unharmed. Mary is caught shoplifting at the mall and a hoard of pilfered loot is subsequently discovered by Tully in her bedroom. Mary is made to apologise to Mrs Marshall but still stubbornly won't admit to stealing her snow globe – or a missing padlock. Scared of getting sprung Mary flings all her remaining stolen goods into the sinkhole - the bog man pages ripped out from Mrs Marshall's Nat Geo, the padlock, and some toys her parents didn't find. But in the end she can't bear to part with Liam's phone, the snow globe and the changeling story book.

Theo's dad, Sam, spies Milo staking out their house and phones Milo, warning him off. Tully pleads with Milo to open up more about Liam's death but he can't see the point of wallowing. Increasingly Tully finds herself confiding in Joel, a man she's met at the Support group.

Mary starts to put the pieces together of one part of her puzzle: what's wrong with her da since Liam died?

First, Milo has his recurring dream, imagining he is locked in a cupboard as a young boy. But when he comes to, he's standing in his back section. Instead of his trademark scapular around his next, he finds a plaited leather thong – the same as the Bog man's noose. In front of him he catches a flash of Liam, standing there, an extension cord wrapped around his neck. Startled Milo steps back - into the sinkhole, where he WAKES UP. He was sleep walking, and only narrowly escapes falling down the bottomless (or at least very deep) crack at the bottom of the hole. Muddy and slimy and stepping by to get to the shower, he's spied by Mary – looking rather like a Bog man himself…

Second, Milo then breaks this shaving mirror, the last in the house – and angrily blames Mary, for click clacking on the wonky stool and distracting him.

Finally, at the pub with her dad Mary hears Sean, an older Irish man, tell of his childhood cutting peat on the bogs back in Ireland with his old da, and his fear of falling into one of them and a bog man pulling him down and taking his place in the real world. Mary starts her sketch over. Is her new bog man picture now resemblng her dad?

Milo sends emails and prints flyers inviting one and all to his wake. Mary finds that, try as she might, she can't stop her compulsive shop lifting, or even explain to her mother why she does it. In any case most of it ends up in the sinkhole, where Mary happily chats to her new imaginary friend, bog girl. Bog girl tells her that her bog dad doesn't care about her. He only cares about Bog boy – the son he lost. Mary can relate to that…

Tully announces she's leaving Milo – for a few days anyway – to get her head together. She tells Milo that his denial is shutting down her grief too. Mary tells Liam over his phone that her Mum and dad are divorcing and it's ALL his fault. She deletes her slide show of him – and tells him to NEVER call her again.

Milo sees Theo by chance and confronts him about bullying Liam. Tully takes Mary for a night and Milo heads off to the pub to rehearse some songs for his wake. Leaving he's attacked by Sam, Theo's dad. Sam tells Milo Theo is NOT the culprit Milo is looking for. If he is looking for reasons why Liam killed himself, perhaps Milo should look at himself…

ACT THREE: EPISODES 5-6

Beaten black and blue, Milo crawls into his car where he calls his wife, leaving a message where he starts flippantly but then does the one thing she's always begged him to do: talk truthfully about Liam. He tells her he failed Liam because he never expressed his deep love for him. He adds that he needs Tully back home too – he's missing her terribly. But hearing just the first part of the message, where Milo's speech is slurred (because of this injuries) Tully skips the rest, thinking that he's drunk. When she drops Mary off next day, she makes no mention of it. That night Mary begs Milo to go Tully, who's at the support group – 'she just wants you to be dad with her daddy.' And so, he does, springing Joel comforting Tully with a hug, and misreading it as something different. He over-reacts, Tully screams at him - and he goes. On his return home Milo is upset and is therefore abrupt when Mary admits to him that she made a slide show of Liam, then deleted it and now she wishes she hadn't.

Joel and Tully realise they are too upset to attend the session. Instead, they retire to a bar, share war stories, and their needs collide in a kiss.

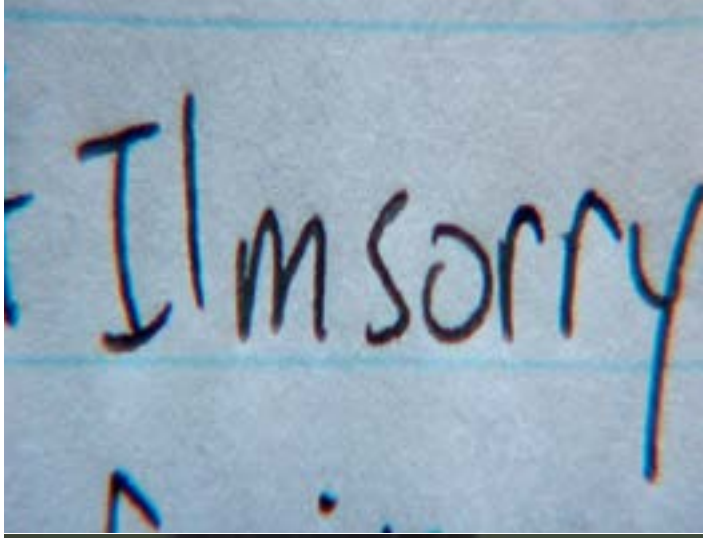
A contrite Milo texts an apology to Tully which she receives at 3am – in Joel's bed. At that very minute Mary wakes and sees Liam, standing in the hall. She follows him outside, arriving at the sinkhole where she at last confronts the bog man: slimy, greasy, and flattened by the weight of the bog. Yet he also strangely resembles her own father, only wearing Mrs Marshall's padlock round his neck, instead of Milo's Scapular, with ancient snow globes festooning his body. Mary discovers the Bog man's crime – the reason he was chosen for sacrifice – he was directly responsible for the death of his son. And at that moment their friendly chat turns into a life and death combat, as the bog man tries to pull Mary down into the bottom of the sinkhole. The betrayal of bog girl consigns Mary to the abyss.

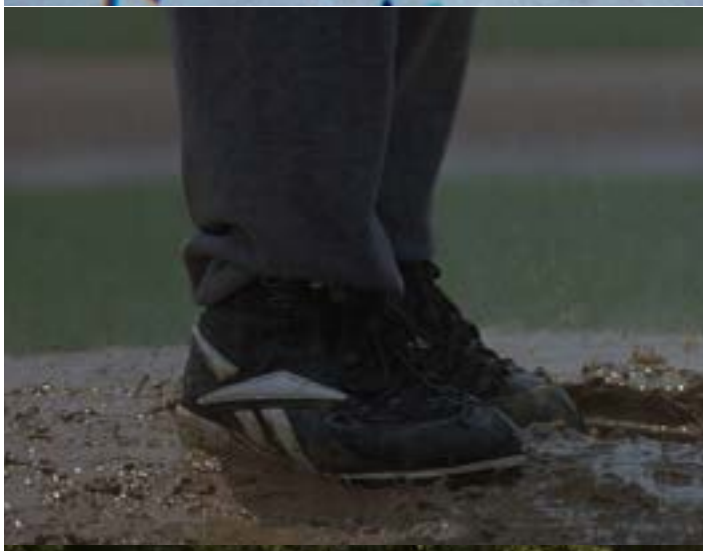
Mary wakes. It's 3am – and Mary's scared she's stuck in some kind of Groundhog Day dream loop. Seeking her dad for comfort a realisation hits Mary – there is not one mirror in the house. Her imaginative flashback replays have Milo deliberately vandalising every single one! A quick scan of the library book confirms it – her dad must be a changeling! There's only one way to know… Digging out Mrs Marshall's snow globe from its hiding place in her bedroom she trades it with Mrs Marshall for a large mirror. She then wakes her father up and confronts him, forcing him to look at the mirror, screaming – 'go and send my own father back to me!' But the wonky stool she's standing on breaks and Mary falls. Milo rocks her unconscious body and flashbacks to meeting Tully at their old house, just after she'd found Liam dead…

When Milo wakes Mary is lying next to him in his bed, tracing her finger over his shoulder tattoo (a tiny bird, a wren, with a thorn through its heart, and a single drop of blood). She tells him he was trying to change him back to how he was before Liam died. Before everything became terrible in all their hearts…

Leaving Joel, Tully meets with her sister Nicole who, to Tully's surprise, stands up for Milo and encourages Tully to talk to him.

Mary goes to Milo's work to watch the house re-jacking. But the operation goes wrong when the earth shifts, and the house starts to tilt. Sean is felled by a falling beam and Milo saves him, but not himself, as the house collapses on him. Milo calls Tully, a voice (almost) from the other side of the grave, telling her: 'it's dark. So dark…' Tully tells Milo that she won't be listening to any death bed confessions over the phone – save it till they've rescued him. Losing consciousness, Milo relives his dream of being locked in a cupboard. This time his mother opens the door and asks him if he's ready to be a good boy. As young Milo blinks in the bright light, adult Milo comes to in the hospital. He's concussed, bruised, and has some broken ribs - but has he had any sense knocked into him?





At Nicole's, Mary tells her mother that she stole things to feel scared. To feel alive. Like she felt when her and Tully played witchy. She tries to convince Tully that Milo really has changed, thanks to her fine mirror work. When Tully goes Mary pulls out his old phone and 'calls' Liam to apologise for saying she'd wished he'd never been born.

Tully accidentally plays Milo's old phone message and listens as he speaks to his feelings about Liam. She shows up at his place, telling him she's ready to hear his confession. Milo tells her that he saw Liam the day he killed himself. He could tell something wasn't right with him, but he had to get back to work. And he left him. Tully describes the horror of finding Liam dead later that day and confesses about sleeping with Joel, and that he can't EVER give her a hard time about that. She was so lonely because he wouldn't talk to her. Not about the stuff that mattered. About death. And the hell in all their heads. And in the end, it was squeezing the life out of her. Milo tells her he missed her too. He forgives her for Joel.

The two make love, discovering each other's new selves, all over again. After, Tully tells Milo that it wasn't his fault. If Liam hadn't killed himself that day, it would have been another. He was so good at hiding his feelings. Milo tells her that Liam got that from him. Milo's own mother couldn't handle him, couldn't handle his feelings. He never learnt to handle his feelings either. He just pushed them away.

The O'Connor's gather at the Sinkhole. Each tip in a thing of value – Mary, Liam's phone; Milo, his scapular; and Tully the Changeling book. A digger fills in the hole as they watch. Tully attends her first University lecture, the O'Connor business reopens - and Tully and Mary play witchy again.

Milo's Wake... except it isn't. It's a remembrance for Liam at the local. Sean sings 'The Parting Glass.' Milo speaks from the heart. Tully catches his eye. They hold the connection.

PETER FEENEY
Writer

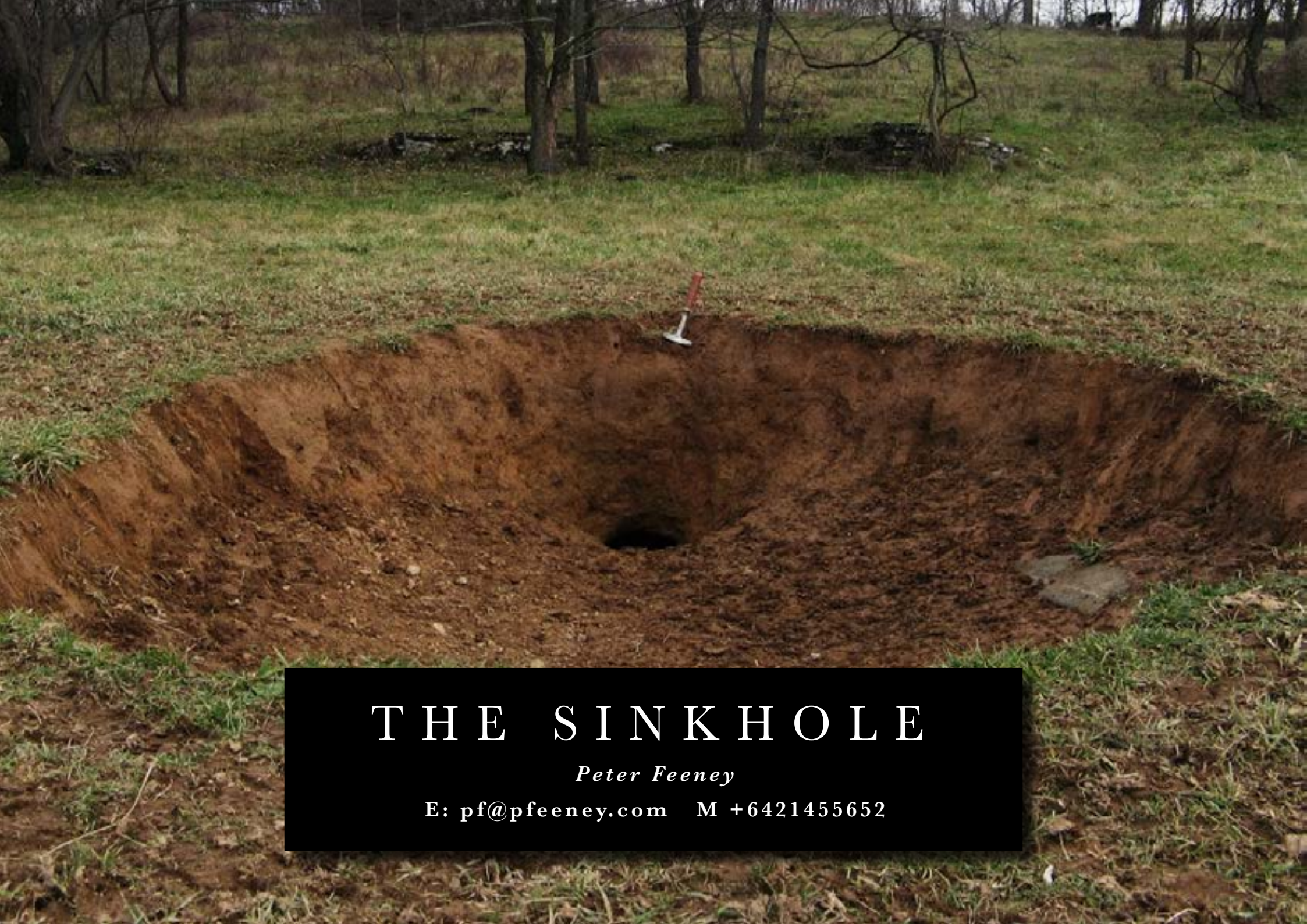
An NZ Pakeha of Irish heritage, Peter has been a professional actor since 1994, working in UK, US, Australian and NZ Theatre, TV & Film. He runs his own Auckland Screen Acting school, the Actors Lab Studio, and is a guest teacher at Drama schools and for organisations such as MEAA, NZ Equity and SDGNZ. Peter is also a published author and has written numerous articles and several screenplays and books. His handbook on acting, 'Acting and How to Survive it,' was published in 2020 to great acclaim.

Peter's first novel, 'Blind Bitter Happiness,' was published by Harper Collins. Since 2020 Peter has written, produced, directed and acted in a limited TV series based on 'Blind Bitter Happiness,' now slated for broadcast in NZ and internationally. In 2005 and 2006 Peter directed and played the title role in the Auckland Seasons and national NZ tour of Michael and Margery Forde's stage play, 'Milo's Wake,' the inspiration for the world and characters of The Sinkhole.

Peter is represented in Australia by LMCM and in NZ by Frank Management.

TINDERBOX

Tinderbox is Peter Feeney and Sam McKillen



THE SINKHOLE

Peter Feeney

E: pf@pfeeney.com M +6421455652