

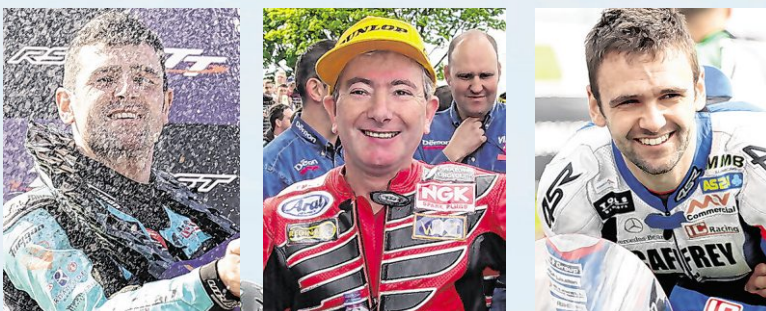
AGONY AND ECSTASY: DUNLOP FAMILY STORY TAKES TO STAGE

ROAD MODEL



PLAY: from left, McCracken as Michael Dunlop; Fra Gunn as Liam Beckett with McCracken; and Gunn

Star of new production on 'buzz' ahead of Belfast shows



FAMILY: Michael (left and above left) Joey Dunlop (centre) and William Dunlop (right)

ANDREW McCracken is taking on the role of a lifetime to show the heartbreak and heroism of the Dunlop racing family.

EXCLUSIVE BY ROISIN GORMAN



The actor says his dream guest in *The Safety Catch* would be Michael Dunlop.

The show has already attracted racing fans from all over Ireland and is set to get its Belfast debut later this month.

It follows 21-time TT winner Michael on the eve of the epic Isle of Man race as he wrestles with his future in the sport which has already claimed the lives of his brother William, dad Robert and uncle Joey Dunlop.

JUSTICE

Andrew, who grew up in Coleraine, just a few miles from the Dunlops' birthplace in Ballymoney, says he feels a duty to do their story justice.

"I live quite close to the North West track and there's a certain pressure in being from the area," he says.

"I'm telling the story of people from there, who are characters in the play as well as being real people.

"And there is real buzz about it coming north because people are more familiar with the Dunlop story."

He's already seen the affection for the racing family when the show, with Fra Gunn as Joey's friend and mechanic Liam Beckett, was staged in Leitrim and Dublin.

"We weren't far from Skerries where William passed away and it's a big road racing circuit around there. People came down from Ballymoney to see it, and there were cars in the colours of Joey Dunlop's helmet."

The 29-year-old says the Dunlop story is an epic tragedy on a local scale.

In 2000, Joey died while racing in Estonia on a 125cc bike after winning in the 750cc and 600cc categories. More than 50,000 people attended his funeral.

In 2008, his brother Robert died in a practice lap for the North West 200, and in July 2018, his son William died in a crash during a race.

Michael then faced the agonising decision about whether to continue in the sport. He opted to carry on and won the race his father had died practising for.

In 2014, the documentary *Road* captured the tragedy of the brothers' deaths, and the actor believes the story is worthy of a drama.

"It's about risk versus reward and it's a hard battle. Do we lose our identity if we step away from the thing we love the most," asks Andrew.

"It's not just about money, it's how you live your life. If I give this up, who am I?"

"Nick Snow, who wrote the play, compares it to Greek heroes, the families who are warriors who fall in the field and someone picks up the sword when they've fallen."

The show also has to portray a nail-biting race on stage and Andrew says it has captured the adrenaline and emotion.

"Mark Conlin, who rented us his bike, says that's how it feels, that we got the movement and feeling of the race, and the kick that comes from racing. That comes from really good writing."

He hopes the show will play on the north coast and that Michael will approve of his portrayal.

"I'm hoping that Michael will come along.

"I know people who are friendly with the family and we've had a good response about how we're capturing them.

"They are legends in their own time and it's fantastic to portray someone from home as a hero," says Andrew.

■ *The Safety Catch* is at the Lyric Theatre in Belfast from October 31 until November 4.

'It's fantastic to portray someone from home as a hero'

