

# KING TUT SEALED IN A STONE COLD ROOM

Back with RTE, Ray D'Arcy seems to have lost his magic and his mojo, says *Liam Fay*. Now he has hinted he is seeking a way out to reignite the talent that appears to be buried somewhere in the past



**R**ay D'Arcy is the King Tut of Irish broadcasting. It's almost exactly four years since the erstwhile whizz kid was poached by RTE from Today FM, reportedly for a pharaoh's ransom. D'Arcy's return to Montrose was trumpeted as a game changer for public-service radio and TV, bringing new urgency, heft and edge to talk shows on both mediums. Before long, however, the gilded mask began to slip, revealing a distinctly mummified version of the promised glories.

As even occasional listeners to his mid-afternoon show on RTE Radio 1 will have noticed, tutting rather than talking is D'Arcy's true speciality. The range of topics that trigger the weary disapproval of the 54-year-old Kildare native is vast. Most days, he devotes almost a third of his 90-minute show to grumbling about all manner of trivial

irritations, a stupendously self-indulgent outpouring of bellyaching that has long since gone beyond parody.

D'Arcy emerges from these ritual whinge-fests as an incurable nostalgic who hates modern life and pines for older, simpler, better days. The superiority of popular entertainment during his formative years is a recurring theme. He is constantly exasperated by contemporary manners, newfangled contraptions, language fads.

"What does that tell you about the world we live in?" he harrumphs every other day about the latest manifestation of showbiz idiocy. The more inconsequential the folly, it seems, the fiercer the indignation. Personal peeves loom as large in his diatribes as cultural bugbears. D'Arcy wears boxers and a T-shirt in bed at night but is irritated by the rub of textiles against his skin so he complains about having to wake up to

**Mixing with showbiz royalty**  
King Tut D'Arcy, and above with Pamela Anderson



“ Usually, however, way too much airtime is squandered on flippant celebrity chitchat and desultory babble

remove the T-shirt. He grew a beard during his summer holidays and agonised at length, over several days, about whether to shave it off.

Then there's his fanatical preoccupation with health and diet. Extremely fit and extremely proud of it, D'Arcy never misses an opportunity to advertise his agility, stamina and appetite for physical challenges. However, his radio fulminations suggest a helpless wimp, overwhelmed at every turn by hypochondriac fears and the menace of unhealthy menu options.

His finicky gripes about food and drink have to be heard to be believed. Like Alan Partridge on a slow day at Mid Morning Matters, D'Arcy can get extremely worked up over a letdown in the canteen. Bruised bananas and lumpy porridge are his nemeses. D'Arcy likes the idea of alcohol-free beers and wines but is dismayed by the gassy reality. "After the TV show every week, I'd have one non-alcoholic beer," he once said. "They're not great." Cue a flurry of sighs and tongue clicks. "I find that if I have two of them I wake up bloated the next morning."

The unrelenting frivolity and narcissism of these fustian tirades is especially disappointing given D'Arcy's obvious intelligence and once famed ability to cut to the quick of current-affairs controversies. On Today FM, he had perfected a brisk mix of folksy patter and forthright opining, during which he always seemed clued into the audience's most pressing concerns.

Sure, he occasionally lost the run of himself – in 2010, he famously threatened to emigrate if Enda Kenny ever became taoiseach – but there was a refreshing spikiness and candour to his commentary about social and political affairs, an obvious determination to play a meaningful role in the national conversation.

On RTE Radio, however, he seems uptight, constrained and listless; inordinately fearful of causing offence or making trouble. The shallowness of his monologues is echoed by the skittish superficiality of the weekly attempts at state-of-the-nation discussion – a segment that glories in the cringeworthy title of Having the Chats.

With guests who interest him, D'Arcy can be a sharp and searching interviewer, and his radio programme occasionally snaps to life. Usually, however, way too much airtime is squandered on flippant celebrity chitchat ▶

► and desultory babble. Of late, the show has been making discernible efforts to counteract D'Arcy's neurotic carping by conspicuously celebrating the benefits of an open mind and adventurous spirit. Join a Club Week was a heavily promoted wheeze encouraging listeners to enlist with an activity group or enthusiasts' association. Tellingly, though, the presenter seemed to lose his enthusiasm for the venture long before it ended.

Fans of risk-taking and fresh thinking would be well advised to steer clear of D'Arcy's RTE1 chat show, a weekly

encapsulation of all that is predictable and provincial about Irish TV. "It's Saturday night and we're live on the telly," he trills at the start of each edition, a catchphrase that is gradually assuming undertones of a public apology.

RTE talk shows have long been laughably overreliant on familiar faces from the Montrose family – but D'Arcy's TV gabfest apparently seeks to distinguish itself by concentrating on familiar old faces. Fading luminaries from yesteryear dominate the guest list, a trend that reached a zenith of sorts some weeks ago when the star

interviewed on his radio programme, separately and at varying length. Both encounters were expertly handled by D'Arcy but the Gaybo interview was particularly good, the most thoughtful the veteran broadcaster has ever given.

Nevertheless, it was the chat with Murphy, perceived as Byrne's junior partner, that revealed most about D'Arcy. He is clearly intrigued by status relationships, and it's not hard to see why. D'Arcy is RTE's second banana, its deputy figurehead, designated player of subsidiary fiddle to Ryan Tubridy's lead trombone. Their status relationship, as defined by Montrose management, is most eloquently expressed by their respective pay packets. Latest published figures for RTE's highest paid presenters show that Tubridy's salary was €495,000 in 2016 while D'Arcy was on €450,000, a €50,000 increase on the previous year.

Nevertheless, there was an assumption that D'Arcy would not settle for second best. On his return to RTE, following a triumphant reign at Today FM, many expected him to become the national broadcaster's top dog, in terms of popularity, boldness and innovation. The scope for such a shake-up is enormous. Tubridy is an avowed old fogey, who has grown steadily more foggish. The Late Late Show's weaknesses are glaring and legion. Yet, despite this lacklustre competition, D'Arcy has failed to shine.

“D'Arcy is RTE's second banana, its deputy figurehead, designated player of subsidiary fiddle to Ryan Tubridy's lead trombone

In reality, all he's brought to RTE is a crabbier, prissier version of the inane chatter in which the station is already oversubscribed. His interest in the creative rivalries of the 1980s seems increasingly academic, as his resolve to emulate them appears to be ebbing away. Shortly after the Murphy interview, D'Arcy lapsed into one of his signature moanologues. He mourned the fact that RTE no longer had a show like Morning Call, the light-hearted breakfast programme on which Murphy excelled. D'Arcy then lamented the absence in Ireland of an equivalent to BBC Radio 2, an easy-listening station on which laid-back presenters can ramble on about anything. "There is a market for that in this country," he said. "I wouldn't mind doing something like that ... if anybody's listening."

We're listening, Ray. King Tut seems to be readying himself for an even cushier and more secluded tomb.

TONY KILIAN



**Rain man**  
D'Arcy's return to RTE has been something of a damp squib

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# Cosy and in need of renovation

LIAM FAY



**Dermot Bannon's Incredible Homes** RTE1, Sun

**Das Boot** Sky Atlantic/Now TV, Wed

**Soft Border Patrol** BBC1, Fri

Extravagant pads are the supposed centrepiece of **Dermot Bannon's Incredible Homes**, a laughably giddy vanity production masquerading as an insightful expedition through some of the world's fanciest real estate. In truth, however, the most noteworthy thing about this daft and tacky junket is the extravagant padding.

Bannon is one of Irish TV's hottest properties, a celebrity architect famed as much for his drawing power in audience terms as his expertise at the drafting board. However, like many oversold personalities before him, he's in danger of overexposure, especially now that he's colonising the ad breaks as well as the schedules.

Room to Improve, his primary RTE abode, is what an estate agent would describe as quaint, cosy and full of character – the industry euphemism for dated and shabby. Nevertheless, the home makeover series is the most effective showcase for Bannon's TV shtick, with its carefully balanced mix of gentility and pushiness, arty ambition and problem-solving

practicality. Conflicts between the starchitect's often highfalutin vision and the down-to-earth requirements of his clients are legion – and these clashes ground the show in gritty reality.

Incredible Homes, by contrast, is pure puffery; a tower of babble. The four-part gadabout, in which Bannon pays slavish homage to swanky residences in Australia, Sweden and London, purports to explore cutting-edge design and decor. Yet, in the absence of critical faculties or any semblance of journalistic detachment, what we get is a hollow mess; a model of bad form and indeterminate function.

The first leg of this grand tour of grandiose homes took place in Sydney, a stylish locale whose opera house is not the only building of high note. Sadly, viewers were afforded nothing but the most perfunctory glimpses of the city as Bannon's efforts at travel reportage fell startlingly flat. "Stepping onto the streets, my first impressions are there's a lot going on here," he proclaimed, an assertion not worthy of inclusion on a hastily scribbled postcard, much less a pre-recorded TV show.

Some of the mansions Bannon visited were impressive; others merely outlandish. However, for all the architectural splendour on display, there was a prefab quality to the programme. Each house call followed a similar routine: Bannon walks in, looks around, and loses his freaking mind.

Enthusiasm is an admirable and essential quality in any style guru, but there's a theatricality and incoherence



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“Ceaseless gushing can be the most tedious of all monotonies”

to Bannon's expressions of excitement that quickly grates, a sense he's almost bouncing off the walls.

If the houses were unoccupied, he dashed around in a frothing frenzy, curling up on the furniture, caressing the fixtures and, in one disconcerting scene, treating himself to a bubble bath. When the owners were present, proceedings turned even more cringeworthy as Bannon broke world indoor records for shameless sycophancy. Nosing around other people's homes is the point of property TV, but the USP of this show is closer to brown-nosing.

There were a few moments

in last week's episode when Bannon stopped drooling long enough to critique his surroundings in a grown-up and knowledgeable manner. Most of the time, however, exclamation rather than observation dominated his contributions. He said "wow" at least a dozen times and "stunning" almost as often. "Oh my God" was invoked so regularly, we could've been attending a religious service.

Ceaseless gushing can be the most tedious of all monotonies, and Incredible Homes quickly becomes incredibly boring. Without drama, jeopardy or even analysis, the whole enterprise rapidly merges into a blur of

moving wallpaper and interchangeable superlatives.

The aforementioned padding comes in a variety of guises. Long swathes of Sunday's programme were devoted to larkly vignettes of Bannon at play in Sydney: messing about in his hotel bathroom, dancing in the waves at Bondi Beach, failing to master a surfboard. But further distraction was provided by the recurring overuse of devices such as slo-mo and musical montage to aggrandise the presenter's ditzzy shenanigans. Dream houses are the show's ostensible focus, but we are also being invited to view

Bannon as a dream host. Cramped quarters and tight corners are linchpin features of **Das Boot**, a serialised sequel to Wolfgang Petersen's revered 1981 film about the crushing pressures of life inside German U-boats during the Second World War. Submarine stories are always an unappealing prospect, no matter how well-crafted the drama unfolding beneath the surface, and Petersen's movie is more venerated than watched. But the makers of this confident re-Boot have opened up and broadened out the narrative while maintaining much of the film's claustrophobic tension. Hardcore fans may recoil but, for the most part, it's a success.

The tale opens in autumn 1942, just as the tide is turning against the U-boats. The Enigma code has been cracked but the Nazis don't yet know that the British can read their communications. America has belatedly joined the fray, bringing additional military muscle but also a boneheaded arrogance. Meanwhile, the resistance in Nazi-occupied France is gathering strength. All of these strands and a couple of doomed romances are deftly interwoven into a classic wartime yarn that surpasses the original for thrills and narrative depth.

Unfathomable shallowness remains the fatal weakness of **Soft Border Patrol**, a second season of the would-be satirical mockery about the bumptious policing of a purposely flimsy post-Brexit frontier between Northern Ireland and the Republic. The series continues as it started, as a scattershot assemblage of sketches, monologues and slapstick knockabout. Administrative fudge and waffle are the designated targets and, every now and again, the script scores a direct hit. Yet way too much space is wasted on the limp whimsy and smug provincialism that are the traditional ruin of Norn Iron TV comedy.

Unconvincing official concern about the border and its inhabitants, from Brussels, London and Dublin, is a subject richly deserving of comic excoriation. Alas, far from cutting through the guff and piety, **Soft Border Patrol** merely thickens the fog. ■

## MEDIA PLAYER JOHN BURNS

**D**amien Tiernan certainly slammed the door after himself when leaving RTE to become a presenter on WLR FM, a local station in Waterford. RTE's southeastern correspondent was frustrated at not getting more airtime, he said, and didn't want to spend the rest of his career "begging to get stories on air".

Tiernan claimed that, in the early Noughties, RTE's Waterford studio produced 220 TV and radio stories a year; now it was down to 50-60. He complained that RTE had pivoted towards foreign news and away from regional coverage, and he was largely called upon to cover "bad news". His nickname had become Tragedy Tiernan.

The station has disputed his figures. "We understand that a key factor in the 'drop' [from] 220 to 50/60 is related to an administrative change," it said. "Previously a videotape editor would have itemised each edit of the same story for different bulletins as separate reports. In more recent times the correspondent, when self-editing, has tended to send one version of the story for all bulletins." Fewer edits does not mean fewer stories covered.

Given climate change, Brexit, terrorist attacks, migration, the #MeToo movement and the election of Donald Trump, it's hardly a surprise that RTE has been doing more foreign news of late. Nothing remotely as exciting has been happening in Waterford, Wexford and Wicklow.

Tiernan's beef, though, was not that important stories in the southeast had been ignored; it was that he, and other regional correspondents,

### Staking news

Tiernan says he faced having to beg RTE to broadcast his stories

“Having an RTE regional reporter is regarded as a status symbol on a par with a government minister or university

should be on air more. RTE should "not [be] investing millions of euros in a new studio set or Dancing with the Stars", he said, thoroughly mixing up apples and oranges, but instead "investing in public service broadcasting and getting your correspondents on air".

And not just to cover "bad news", apparently, but "good news", presumably. Affirming stories about the splendour of life in the sunny southeast.

Having an RTE regional correspondent in your town or city is regarded as a status symbol on a par with a government minister or university. When there were

suggestions in 2012 that RTE might close its Waterford studio, the mayor declared bluntly: "The people of Waterford will not accept this." The chief of Waterford's chamber of commerce said that, without a regional correspondent in the area, the reporting of "bad news will become the norm", adversely affecting the region's fragile confidence.

When RTE opened a studio in Dundalk in 2004, and appointed a northeastern correspondent, the local minister Dermot Ahern boasted that it "reflects the area's growing importance". TDs don't usually welcome investigative journalists onto their turf. Yet there is no expectation that RTE regional correspondents will be digging up dirt, exposing political corruption – should it exist – or holding local bigwigs to account.

Instead, these correspondents seem to be regarded by locals as a conduit for sending messages and demands to Dublin, a lobbyist for their corner of Ireland. Waterford, for example, wants a second cath lab and it would be expected that RTE's southeastern correspondent would cover this important "story" extensively – and sympathetically, too.

This is why, as far as the regions are concerned, visiting journalists are no use. In 2012 the Waterford lobbyists declared that a correspondent sent from Dublin would be incapable of conveying the "nuance, subtlety and detail of a region's life".

Nonsense, of course. Roving reporters such as Kate Adie would be out of business if this were the case. On the other hand, a journalist embedded too long in an area is likely to lose perspective, and be less willing to turn over the stones beneath which lurk the biggest stories. ■



# Fine drama, rough justice

LIAM FAY



**Taken Down** RTE1, Sun

**House of Cards** Netflix

**We Need to Talk About Mam** RTE1, Mon

To listen to the advance hype, you'd almost forget that **Taken Down** is made up. Lofty social commentary is presented as the defining trait of the new six-part drama set amid the secrecy and despair surrounding Ireland's direct provision centres. Verifying refugees' stories is a notoriously tricky business, but, according to the grandiose publicity, this crime yarn is the smoking gun, an explosive shot of pure truth.

Direct provision (DP) centres are the glorified holding pens to which asylum-seekers are confined while their claims are processed. Last week's first episode offered vivid fictional evocations of how frustrations can flare when lives are left to moulder in often mouldy rooms. The psychologically warping effects of prolonged uncertainty were skilfully conveyed.

Thankfully, the grandiosity seems to be a fake ID. Co-written by Stuart Carolan and Jo Spain, **Taken Down** is a socially alert tale in which indignation about the treatment of asylum-seekers is discernible. But the worst excesses of issue-based fiction – a hectoring and invariably facile form of storytelling – are avoided by the drama's equally faithful adherence to the demands of the police procedural.

Well-rounded bad guys were the pride and joy of *Love/Hate*, the hit gangland serial with which Carolan established himself as a TV dramatist of agility and ambition. The series had lots

to say about contemporary Ireland but none of that would have mattered if its central protagonists had not been credible and compelling. **Taken Down** draws on extensive research but, like *Love/Hate*, the show stands or falls on its quality as drama. So far, the signs are promising.

An engrossing, well-plotted whodunit began with the discovery of a dead Nigerian girl at a Dublin bus stop, close to the DP centre where she was resident. Preliminary police inquiries uncovered a tangle of lies, with emerging links to prostitution and human trafficking.

The accommodation centre in which much of the action unfolds is both backdrop and protagonist, a grimly austere building that recalls the church-run workhouses of yesteryear. Prisons masquerading as sanctuaries are a longstanding feature of Ireland's social landscape – and **Taken Down** underscores our national compulsion to repeat our most grievous mistakes.

Yet the “big house” environment also provides a useful narrative structure. Stately homes are classic settings for murder mysteries with good reason: there is rich dramatic potential in the tensions that arise when disparate and often desperate characters are thrown together under a single roof. Here, the suffocating atmosphere of a state home is deployed to similar ends.

Hot-headed cops who speak with their fists are another well-worn staple of crime drama, but the conflicting messages conveyed by strong-arm policing are cleverly used to drive the plot and make a statement. Respect for the law is, after all, the justification for the indignities visited on those condemned to the direct provision limbo. As the asylum-seeking characters are repeatedly told, outsiders who seek admission to our



“Psychological warping effect of prolonged uncertainty was skilfully portrayed

society must learn there can be no shortcuts. Justice has to take its course.

Then the gardai arrive, investigating the young woman's apparent murder. Doors are kicked in, witnesses are roughed up. Foolhardy assumptions are made on the basis of ethnicity and demeanour. In the hands of law enforcement, it seems, the iron rulebook becomes an iron cudgel. Respect for the law is quickly forgotten.

**Taken Down** is occasionally over-reliant on generic cop-opera clichés. More worryingly, the opening edition's weakest link was the designated hero. Lynn Rafferty is oddly inert as Insp Jen Rooney, a role that seems decidedly underwritten.

Elsewhere, however, the characterisations are strong and sophisticated. Aissa Maiga brings a battered nobility to Abeni, a Nigerian mother whose husband died when

the boat in which they fled their homeland blew up. Eight years into her family's wait for asylum, Abeni's hopes for a new life have congealed into a numb fatalism.

Brian Gleeson delivered the episode's standout turn as Wayne, the garrulously shifty centre manager who complains of being rushed off his feet but actually seems

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too crooked to sit still. “You get no gratitude from them,” he sighed in exasperation at his troublesome charges. Special pleading in the asylum-seeking system is by no means restricted to the would-be refugees.

Outlandish and often incomprehensible stories dominate the sixth and mercifully final season of **House of Cards**, a once majestic series that should've been killed off years ago. Frank Underwood is dead, because the disgraced Kevin Spacey was fired. Robin Wright's Claire is now US president but she struggles to exercise power, in office and on screen. Frank and Spacey haunt every scene.

**House of Cards** has been a collapsing shack since at least season three, as audacity gave way to brazen silliness. But the concluding episodes are beyond dismal. The real loser is Wright, who does her best with a daft script but winds up looking foolish. When Frank addressed the camera, he was winking at us. When Claire does it, she seems to be sending a coded plea for help.

**We Need to Talk About Mam** was a rambling, incoherent and insolently flimsy documentary in which Brendan Courtney affected to confront the problems facing Ireland's senior citizens by taking his mother Nuala on a licence-fee-funded spree of overseas junkets.

The film was a companion piece to **We Need to Talk About Dad**, a focused endeavour in which Courtney explored the challenges of healthcare for older people by chronicling how the Courtney household coped with the incapacitation of his father Frank, who has since died.

Courtney's **Dad** doc was a thoughtful exercise but this follow-up felt more like a showbiz afterthought, contrived entertainment onto which a few “ishoos” were clumsily tacked. Courtney and Nuala flew to Spain and Florida where they toured villas and retirement villages, to no discernible purpose.

Trivial and trivialising, the film proved that bad programme ideas cannot be redeemed by righteous intentions. ■

## MEDIA PLAYER JOHN BURNS

Great name, Hester Smallbone. Almost 6ft tall, she was a lifelong Liberal and a councillor for four years in Richmond, south London. Her husband Derek died in 1994, bequeathing her a 22% stake in the Leinster Leader group. Just over a decade later, the newspaper was bought by Johnston Press, and Hester Smallbone became a multimillionaire. Her stake was worth €25m.

Another widow got rich quick from Johnston Press's extravagant €138.6m purchase of the Leinster Leader group in 2005. Ireland was enthralled last week by the story of Elizabeth O'Kelly, also a 22% shareholder in the Leader. When she died in December 2016 – four years after Hester Smallbone – O'Kelly left her €30m fortune to five charities.

She had come upon her Leinster Leader stake in an unusual way – through her husband's first wife, Mary O'Kelly, who died in 1945. She, like Derek Smallbone, was descended from James Laurence Carew, a Home Rule MP who became the major shareholder in the Leinster Leader in 1886, six years after its launch. The Leader was a staunch nationalist newspaper, and no doubt Carew hoped to benefit politically by owning it. So there's a neat symmetry in a British newspaper group, Johnston Press, making Carew's descendants rich over a century later.

O'Kelly and Smallbone were far from the only shareholders who got seven- and eight-figure windfalls when British and Irish media companies started to buy up provincial newspapers from the late 1990s onwards. Among the eye-catching early purchases was the €38m paid by Scottish Radio Holdings for the Kilkenny People Group. This made John Kerry

“Have media barons learnt their lesson from the great provincial newspaper crash? Maybe not

Keane, its owner, a very wealthy man. Unlike Elizabeth O'Kelly, who never let on she was rich, Keane went on a spending spree of his own with the proceeds, buying into office blocks in Sandyford, hotels in Britain, a property in Antibes and a home in Switzerland.

Throughout the 2000s, unfeasibly large sums of money were paid for minor provincial titles, even though they were already losing readership. Dunfermline Press, which operated in Ireland as Celtic Media Group, paid €30m for the Meath Chronicle in 2002.

Benefactor O'Kelly left her Leader windfall to charity



Thomas Crosbie Holdings paid €15m for the Wexford Echo group in 2003, and almost €10m for the Roscommon Herald the following year. In 2007, Independent News & Media (INM) paid €25m for the Sligo Champion. Johnston Press eventually shelled out well over €200m on 14 titles in all four provinces.

Even before the economic crash, wise heads warned that the buyers had taken on too much debt, and that cost-cutting and the efficiencies gained by pooling resources across a portfolio of newspapers wouldn't be enough. So it proved. In 2012, Celtic Media Group entered receivership and was bought out by local management. Thomas Crosbie Holdings effectively collapsed in 2013 and a receiver was appointed. The following year, Johnston Press sold all of its Irish titles for just €8.5m.

It's an ill wind... We now know that five charities, including the Irish Cancer Society, ultimately benefited from the extravagance of Johnston Press. Also thanks to Elizabeth O'Kelly's generosity, a Catholic church in Stradbally got a new coat of paint and all 180 staff at the Leinster Leader got a discreet Christmas bonus of €3,000.

Have media barons learnt a lesson from the great provincial newspaper crash? Maybe not. Last year INM tried to buy Celtic Media's local titles, while The Irish Times has just bought the Irish Examiner and seven weekly regional papers, including the Roscommon Herald. The purchase prices were more modest – but then the revenue and readership bases of the provincial press are smaller than ever. ■