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Dead Still review: 'It's a real joy to come upon an RTÉ comedy that feels confident and fully-formed from the very first episode'

Dead Still (RTE1) - 4 stars



Kerr Logan, Michael Smiley, Eileen O'Higgins in new RTE drama Dead Still

Pat Stacey

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RTE's production and distribution deal with Acorn Media Enterprises hadn't exactly resulted in any great oaks up to now – more like stunted saplings.

Alleged thriller Acceptable Risk was the ideal series to read a book by, provided you muted the volume on the leaden dialogue.

The South Westerlies, set in West Cork but clearly filmed in Wicklow – which will muddle the hell out of American tourists when they go wandering around Clonakilty looking for directions to the Sugar Loaf – was basically Ballykissangel with even less social realism.

I'll say nothing more about the second season of Finding Joy. My mother always told me never to speak ill of the dud.

Given that dismal hat-trick, the latest RTE-Acorn collaboration, the Irish-

Canadian comedy mystery mini-series Dead Still comes as a wonderfully refreshing surprise. It's off-beat, funny, a little creepy, attractively produced with a good period feel and different enough from anything else out there to make it stand out.

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Ghoulish, gory murder mysteries set in the 19th century are all the rage. The Alienist, whose season two showrunner is Love/Hate creator Stuart Carolan, is a case in point.

Dead Still, written by Kilkenny man John Morton from an idea by him and Imogen Murphy, who shares directing duties with Canadian Craig David Wallace, broadly belongs in the period crime thriller territory but stamps its own singular comic sensibility on it.

It retains the ghouliness but replaces the gore with delightfully deadpan humour (fitting, since the Irish production company involved is Deadpan Pictures).

There are corpses aplenty here; most of them, however, are seen through the lens of the splendidly-named Brock Blennerhasset, played by Michael Smiley.

Brock, a member of the Anglo set, is Dublin's most in-demand memorial photographer, a sort of David Bailey of the dead who takes photos of the recently deceased with their loved ones posing alongside them. Being a former embalmer, he knows just how to make the dead appear as if they're still alive. Believe it or not, this was a real if relatively short-lived craze at the time.

Brock – a wonderful performance by Smiley – is a pernickety fellow who gets very distressed if the grieving parties touch so much as a hair on the corpse's

you can imagine, then, now upset he is when Detective Fred Kegan (Aidan O'Hare), a wily, impish Corkman with an eye on a posting among the big boys in Dublin Castle, tells him that someone appears to be going around killing people, making it look like a suicide and posing them much like Brock poses



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his subjects.

This news caps an already bad couple of days during which Brock injures his foot, nearly falls into a grave and discovers the crucial photographic plate from his last job has been stolen – the handiwork, he believes, of one of his many rivals in the photography business.

As it turns out, he's wrong. It's an altogether more complicated business involving conflicts with the in-laws and a little casual grave-robbing.

We've endured plenty of RTE series – comedies and dramas – over the years that were poorly conceived, poorly written and appeared to have been waved through without any sense of quality control, so it's a real joy to come upon one that feels confident and fully-formed from the very first episode.

Smiley's a hoot and Brock is a great creation, but Morton surrounds him with equally appeal-

ing, well-drawn supporting characters, including his independent-minded niece Nancy (Elizabeth O'Higgins), who's an aspiring actress; young gravedigger Conall (Kerr Logan), who becomes Brock's assistant; and his sarcastic driver Carruthers (Jimmy Smallhorne), who has a cigarette butt seemingly glued to his lip.

In subsequent episodes, Morton cleverly weaves in the political complexities of the time without sacrificing an ounce of the morbid, mischievous fun.



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