



## HACKMAN'S NEW PLOT

HARDLY HAD the ink dried on Goldhawk's report of a default on a \$1.1bn studio mortgage in sunny California for Ardmore and Troy Studios supremo **Michael Hackman's** group (see *The Phoenix* 30/1/26) than some sunny PR appeared courtesy of **Patrick O'Donovan**. The culture minister breathlessly announced the striking of a deal on the future of Limerick's Troy Studios between Hackman and **Pat Kiely's** BiggerStage outfit.

Followers of Irish adventures in the screen trade will know that BiggerStage was one of the main movers and shakers behind a five-year campaign to have Irish taxpayers support the making of reality TV shows. It was, there-

fore, hardly a surprise, given that the lucrative new tax credit (Section 487a) was rolled out in early January, to see the minister now eagerly announcing the new corporate bromance between Hackman and Kiely.

O'Donovan's press release describes the Troy deal as "a major multimillioneuro agreement" between BiggerStage and Hackman Capital Partners' (HCP) Troy Studios, also featuring a HCP "affiliate", The MBS Group. Apparently, the aim is "to establish a global unscripted production hub" in Limerick.

The culture department's press release also highlights the "major international formats such as *The Floor*, *Next Level Chef*, *Beat Shazam*, *Name That Tune*, and *Don't Forget The Lyrics*" that BiggerStage has produced in recent years. Goldhawk wonders if the 'culture test' that O'Donovan must apply to projects seeking taxpayer cash under Section 487a would be satisfied by such output. (The test requires the minister to satisfy himself that "the production of the unscript-

ed programme will contribute to the promotion and expression of Irish or European culture".)

Those tricky plot points aside, some observers might consider the excited announcement in the context of Hackman's long-mooted blockbuster media campus in Greystones, where "action" has not been called since the greenfield site was fenced several years ago.

In fact, Hackman's business

model of rapidly paced film and TV studio acquisition, building, and renovation – with management and equipment services exclusively provided by his MBS Group – seems to be drifting into a third act dogged by unforeseen market forces.

*THE ENERGETIC Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport, Patrick O'Donovan, paid a timely visit to Paris last week and managed to fit in an awful lot.*

*The department's press release was certainly comprehensive when it came to detailing the minister's packed schedule for*

*his sojourn in the City of Lights. The events included a reception at the Irish embassy, hosted in partnership with the IRFU and its French counterparts.*

*The press release went on to highlight the minister's planned visit to Notre Dame to receive a briefing on the restoration progress. This was followed by engagements at the Centre Culturel Irlandais, including a tour of the centre, and lunch with the Fondation Irlandaise.*

*Later in the day, O'Donovan held bilateral meetings with French culture minister Rachida Dati and Anne Le Hénanff, minister delegate responsible for AI and digital technology.*

*According to the press release, the next engagement scheduled was a visit by O'Donovan to the Basilica of Saint-Denis, after which the minister would return to Ireland.*

*Much to be done then, which might explain why there appeared to be no time for O'Donovan to check out that France-Ireland Six Nations opener at Stade de France.*

*Happily, however, while it didn't quite make it into the detailed schedule circulated, the good news is that the minister did indeed make it to the big match.*

*Quelle surprise!*



## CLEARING THE BYRNES BOYS

IT IS unclear if there are any real winners from last week's ruling of the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board's (IHRB) referrals committee on the long-running controversy over the unseating of jockey **Philip Byrnes** from *Redwood Queen* at Wexford way back in May. There was certainly plenty of expensive legal firepower on show but the lingering sense is that a social media pile-on was too big a factor in the process.

Trainer **Charles Byrnes** and his jockey son, Philip, were fully exonerated following the

dismissal of all charges brought against them, with the latter's tumble put down to "poor horsemanship".

The IHRB was represented by **Remy Farrell** SC and **Louise Troy** BL, while the case for the Byrnes's side was put by **Frank Crean** SC and **David Geoghegan** BL. The panel was chaired by former High Court beak **Peter Kelly**, alongside **Martin P O'Donnell** and **John McGuire**.

Probably most interesting was the disparity between the evidence from stipendiary steward **Leighton Aspell** that the unseating of Philip Byrnes was "very hard to explain". Aspell concluded that he could "only view rider Byrnes's unseat as a deliberate act".

The Byrnes's team had objected to the admissibility of Aspell's expert testimony but Kelly's committee allowed it to stand. Champion jump jockey **Davy Russell**, however, said he "disagreed wholeheartedly" with the accusation that the unseat was

intentional, while equestrian **John Watson** concurred, saying Byrnes "was determined" and "made a good effort" to keep the partnership intact.

Charles Byrnes, meanwhile, had been charged in relation to comments made to the *Irish Field*, in which he criticised the undertaking of an investigation "to please faceless people on social media".

With both father and son exonerated, it looks like he may have had a point on this occasion.

## DONNELLYS' FALLOW PERIOD

THE DISMAL season for owners **Joe and Marie Donnelly** continued last month when their Champion Hurdle favourite, *Sir Gino*, suffered serious injury in Cheltenham's Grade 2 Unibet Hurdle.

The **Nico de Boinvill**e-ridden odds-on shot was pulled up turning for home. This left the way clear for **Dan Skelton's** *The New Lion* to scoop the prize money for owner **JP McManus**.

The nag has been installed as Champion Hurdle favourite following the various mishaps suffered by *Constitution Hill* and the sidelined *State Man*, owned by the hapless Donnellys. Moreover, *Sir Gino* was found to have fractured his pelvis.

The Donnellys would have been hoping for better luck with *Kitzbuhel*, another odds-on shot, when he travelled to Sandown for the Virgin Bet Scilly Isles Novices' Chase. **Paul Townend** was on hand to ride *Kitzbuhel* due to the rescheduled Dublin Racing Festival (DRF) and the **Willie Mullins** charge was faced by just three rivals.

Nevertheless, the French-bred grey got no further than the sixth fence before depositing Townend on the Esher turf. The Donnellys' sole representative at the DRF was *Anzadam*, who also disappointed when managing to only beat one of the four other runners home, behind the **Gordon Elliott**-trained mare *Brighterdaysahead* in the Timeless Sash Windows Irish Champion Hurdle.

The recent performances featuring the Donnellys' yellow and black silks have been far from the glory days of previous years and trainer Mullins must be scratching his head.



Philip Byrnes