

# A Day in the Fair City: Soap Opera Exclusive!

*from Totally Fushed, September 2003*

*Love it or hate it, RTE's Fair City is Ireland's most popular soap. Or should that be Ireland's only soap? Either way, when Ben Doe gets the chance to become an extra, meet the cast and crew, get two free meals, and earn €63.74 just for walking behind some tables, he doesn't turn it down. Well, not the first time, at least...*

I think it's the earliest I've ever been up in my life. 5:45. Sounds better than a quarter to six, doesn't it? When I arrive at the RTE complex, it is virtually deserted. Even the reception desk in the main TV building is vacant.

I am here to act as an extra in Fair City. My uncle Gerard, you see, is one of the stars of the show, and the producers had been looking for a bum to hang 'round a homeless shelter – so naturally my name came to Gerard's mind, and he passed it on to his employers. Gerard told me to wear the oldest, scruffiest clothes possible. Of course, I just went and picked something from the cupboard where I keep all the clothes other people normally throw out.

Seeing as there is no one here, I go over and sit in one of the large beige leather armchairs, underneath framed pictures of glowing, has-been RTE stars. It's quite comfy. At about 7:15, some more would-be homeless people arrive. They are called 'Mike', 'Jake' and 'Tom'. We all have one-syllable names, so we should get along just fine.

It's 7:30 before anyone from Fair City comes around to see us, but one of the actors eventually does, and she brings us to the costume department. To turn the other three into homeless people, the girl there takes three perfectly good jackets from her coat rack, slashes holes in them, and covers them in soot, shoe polish, and some kind of ointment. I, apparently, already look quite homeless enough in the clothes I'm in. I'm not sure whether to feel insulted or flattered.

When we're all ready for the day's filming, we head out to the minibus that will take us "on location" – to the Dundrum Community Centre, which will serve as a homeless shelter. Except, they don't let us on the bus. The main actors, including Gerard, are travelling on ahead, on their own, first. Hmph! Just because we're homeless, they feel they can treat us like second-class citizens.

When we eventually do get to Dundrum, there is more waiting. We have breakfast and watch TV, and it's 11:00 by the time the crew is ready for us. While they are setting up the cameras and microphones in the room in which they're going to film, we are informed that they may not even use us at all. They'll only include us if our presence will add something to the scene. Still, it's intriguing just to watch them set up...intriguing, and tedious.

So, we hang around at the back of the room, watching scenes being shot. There are several “homeless shelter” scenes due to air in the week for which the crew is now shooting, so all of them are being filmed at once.

It soon becomes apparent how little of TV acting is actually about the actors. There is waiting, and deciding on angles, and editing and directing, and moving props and installing wiring and takes and retakes and constant clouds of smoke and spluttering as cigarettes are sucked like they’re about to be banned. You really have to be in acting for the profession, not just the art, to survive this.

The crew manage to get two scenes done before lunch (sadly, I’m not in either of them), and then we all hop on the bus and journey back to RTE for another taxpayer-subsidised meal. Along the way, the Extras Coordinator [politically incorrect title: Runner] hands me my canteen voucher. She calls me ‘Benners’, and inquires as to whether or not I know where the ‘canners’ is. Really, I thought when we said real people talked like that, we were just being hyperbolic. Seemingly not.

I have lunch with Gerard, and we discuss RTE. My uncle says there is a school of thought within our national broadcaster that would see it completely reformed, scrapping all foreign shows and even the likes of Fair City, and instead focusing on Irish news and homemade documentaries. I say that is bad. What they don’t realise, says Gerard, is that Fair City, through its popularity, brings in the cash necessary to fund things like Irish language programmes, etc.

But enough digression! When we return to Dundrum, I actually get to appear in a scene! My job is to act all scruffy and homeless as I...walk behind some tables. I know, to your small minds, that doesn’t seem like a great deal; but you have to see it to believe how much my presence adds to the atmosphere and verisimilitude of the scene. Oh yeah.

After I have raised the tone of the afternoon with my devastatingly brilliant behind-the-tables stroll, courtesy of a request from Gerard, I am invited to sit with the director. He’s English, and is exactly the stereotypical English director you imagine. ‘Awright’, he says, ‘we’re going to go up as far as ‘shat ap you bleeding granny.’ [Note how the Dublin-accented actor says the line differently: ‘Sherrup ye bleedin’ granny!'] At his chair, the director has two little screens, which show him what each of the two cameras in use is filming. The director instructs the cameramen, and tells the actors where to place emphasis. Ultimately, he and the editors will decide how each scene looks in the final cut...camera angles, bits taken out, etc. It’s fascinating to watch him at work. He’s surrounded by floor managers, technicians, writers (on hand to make sure the actors accurately bring to life their scripts) and soundmen. It’s a major operation. Gerard informs me later, that because of RTE’s limited budget and because of time constraints, a maximum of five takes is allowed per scene. So there can’t be much messing around. The gap between filming and airing is generally four weeks.

Presently, during a break in filming, I am privy to a conversation between the director and one of the actors. The two are discussing the actor’s concerns about the script.

The storyline they're working on, you see, involves Gerard's character returning a troubled teenage runaway to his parents. But what this actor is concerned about is that the show doesn't address any of the issues which led to the boy leaving home. Parents or teenagers with domestic problems will not find any good advice in this episode, the actor says. I am there thinking that anyone who looks to Fair City to find advice on solving his or her problems likely has more problems than he or she realises.

By six o'clock, my day with the Fair City gang is over; it's back to RTE for everyone. The next week, I was asked to reprise my role as Unnamed Unspeaking Homeless Person Who Walks Behind Tables (And Does It So Well). Sadly, I was in backwater Clonmel, Co. Tipperary at the time, and couldn't make it up to Dublin. Which was a pity, 'cause despite the tedium of hanging around, being a Fair City extra is easy money – I ended up with €63.74 and two free meals for walking behind some tables. Overall, a very enjoyable day was had by me.

But did I actually learn anything? Sure – if I want to go into TV, I'll first have to become a chain smoker. Now, off to the Duty Free...