

TELEVISION

5 MINUTES WITH... LAURA CARMICHAEL

Laura Carmichael rose to fame as Lady Edith on ITV's hugely successful *Downton Abbey* – but now she's the star of another period drama, *The Spanish Princess*, available to watch on streaming service Starzplay. The Tudor-era series centres around the story of Catherine of Aragon, and Carmichael, 34, plays Lady Margaret Pole, a cousin to Henry VIII.

WHERE IS MAGGIE THIS SERIES?

Maggie is back finding her feet in the Tudor court, having been exiled in the last series. Her cousin Edmund de la Pole is a political prisoner, in the tower.

HOW DO YOU THINK THE STORY AND YOUR CHARACTER RESONATE WITH VIEWERS?

It's wonderful to see this time period told very much from the perspective of the women in the court – that feels very modern. Living within this restricted view of what's available to them as women, I think is something that really resonates. Whether it's being a mother or finding your voice in the workplace, those are things that are actually popping up, even though these women lived centuries ago.

WHAT DO YOU THINK MAKES THE TUDOR PERIOD SO FASCINATING?



Henry VIII is popular history, isn't it? I feel like everyone's got an image of him and his many wives – there's kind of a very macho image. The first series was before Henry VIII was famous, and now this series is how he got to be that tyrant that we have in our minds – and you see that from the point of view of his poor wife.

THERE ARE AMAZING COSTUMES IN THIS SHOW. DID YOU KEEP ANYTHING?

As actors, you don't feel like you're walking around like: "Oh I'll just help myself." You're very much a visitor. My interest on set was: "Where did you get these thermal tights from because they're keeping me really warm?"

YOU RECENTLY PLAYED A BABY SNATCHER IN THRILLER THE SECRETS SHE KEEPS. IT WAS A VERY DIFFERENT ROLE FOR YOU...

It's funny, I do feel like in lockdown, I have been recognised in a different way. My mother-in-law (Carmichael's partner is her *Downton Abbey* co-star Michael C Fox) runs a nursery, and I went with her to work and I suddenly was aware as all the parents were coming to pick up the kids. I was like: "I don't think I should be here, I think I'm just going to be freaking everyone out!" I loved the show so much, I'm really pleased the BBC got it and it went down well.

HOW WAS YOUR PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF LOCKDOWN?

It's definitely been a weird time. I'm very aware though, in these quiet times, that you're just so lucky to be coming off a job, for all of the reasons, for financial reasons. There are so many people who would normally be working now who aren't, and that's disastrous. Particularly for people who work mostly in theatre, and for our theatres, it's a really scary time. For everyone, no matter what you're working in, it's been a very reflective time to think about your community. So I think for us, coming off the back of a job like *The Spanish Princess*, you feel very lucky, and you feel very lucky to be celebrating it coming out.

● The *Spanish Princess* Part Two premieres on Starzplay tomorrow



Belly laughs

BY DANIELLE DE WOLFE

British comedy show Taskmaster is proof that laughter really can be just the tonic.

Despite filming for the forthcoming 10th series being temporarily halted due to Covid restrictions, the essence of the Bafta-winning series lived on during lockdown courtesy of internet spin-off Hometasking.

The adaptation saw *Taskmaster* creator and co-host Alex Horne mirror the recorded concept, dreaming up ludicrous tasks for the public – rather than celebrities – to complete from the confines of their homes.

"I think it's one of the few shows you can do in lockdown fairly easily," says Horne, 42.

"We're quite a lucky show in that people come to it and do it in isolation anyway," he says, referring to the individual nature of *Taskmaster*'s creative showdowns.

"It was no more stressful than usual – except for the whole Covid nonsense I suppose."

Now, following the move from Dave to Channel 4 as part of a landmark six-series deal – and with the new series complete – *Taskmaster* Greg Davies and his assistant Little Alex Horne (as he's

affectionately known) are ready to entertain audiences once again.

"We'd all been cooped up, so I do think there's a renewed energy there," says comedian and *Taskmaster* host Davies, 52.

"I was just thrilled to be out and doing something... before Covid, I ensured Alex was never closer than five metres to me anyway. So if anything, Covid is more intimate than I would choose. The pesky virus has drawn me closer to him."

With lockdown acting as a period of reflection for the duo, it appears Horne has made some startling realisations.

"I don't think it really hits me until late at night, what bad things he's made me do," he confesses.

"In a TV studio you feel so safe about saying all these things and you forget there will be potentially millions of people watching this torment. But I don't think you need to worry, I'm pretty strong inside."

"It's a very strange switch that clicks though," counters Davies of their on-screen relationship.

"I feel nothing but affection for Alex until we walk out on to the studio floor. And then I feel genuine animosity."

"I guess it's some sort of form of method acting that I'm not in

charge of, but the minute we sit down in those chairs, I look at him and I think... I bring the energy of a father who knows it's not his real son."

Like many shows returning to filming following lockdown, the production was required to swap live audience for a studio filled with empty seats.

You'd be inclined to think such a change would alter the show's dynamic for the worse. However, the change of format seems to have had quite the opposite effect.

"We all kind of let loose," says Horne. "We didn't have an audience and in a way that freed us up – we didn't worry about making people laugh, we just tried to have as much fun as possible."

"For Alex and I, it's a real change just to be dealing with the five people rather than entertaining a larger crowd at the same time, and I, for one, thought that it was wonderful that we could just focus all of our attention on them," agrees Davies.

Much like its predecessors, *Taskmaster*'s 10th series sees a brand new panel of comedians scored on their efforts as they take on increasingly obscure challenges.

With Johnny Vegas poised to go shoulder-to-shoulder with Daisy May Cooper, Katherine Parkinson,