

PATRICK FREYNE

'The Late Late Show' is madness itself but it cannot change because nobody knows why or how it works



"It lives not, yet it cannot die," is a strange motto for a television show, but it works for *The Late Late Show*. Its continued success makes no sense to anyone – the producers, the audience, the guests or Ryan Tubridy himself, and it cannot be altered without a constitutional amendment.

Oh, some elements "change", but these are superficial. There's that jazzed-up theme tune from the show's band of the damned (they once played Rosanna Davison's wedding). There's a new set, seemingly the attic of an abandoned factory (just off camera, interns keep roving hobos and wild dogs at bay). And Gay Byrne's paternalistic gaze has been replaced by Tubridy's haunted eyes.

"Oh my God, I'm still here," they seem to say at the start of each episode.

"Oh God, so are we," say the audience at home.

When Tubridy got the job, it was heralded as a big career move. We now know it was actually the result of a gypsy curse. "Hey Kenny, what was that you slipped into my pocket?" I imagine Tubridy saying in the RTÉ canteen as Pat Kenny ran for freedom. "A wizened monkey paw? What's the significance of this? Kenny? Kenny!?"

A typical *Late Late Show* is all over the place. The most recent



begins with ensmuggled chef Marco Pierre White wearing a woollen smock like a French peasant who eats smaller French peasants, talking about his gardener.

Harangued a socialist

Then Tubridy harangues a socialist. He starts asking about Paul Murphy's apparently Fine Gael relatives. "[That's] like when people say your family is Fianna Fáil," says Murphy (Tubridy was gifted to RTÉ as a child tribute by the party in the 1980s.) It ends with him tetchily asking Murphy to condemn behaviour he has already condemned and to guarantee behaviour from protesters he

can't guarantee. There's a real discussion to be had about the boundaries of civil disobedience, but against such pre-emptive disapproval Murphy is measured and patient, while Tubridy seems blasé about the arrests of protesters.

When not being combative on behalf of a middle Ireland which doesn't exist, Tubridy is a good interviewer, as he proves when talking to calm, dignified Linda Boland, whose mentally ill brother killed her father. And the show ends with likeable Elaine Crowley speaking about her life, family and depression.

Crowley is from TV3 and has never been in Montrose before, which makes this segment like

when Sean Connery visits the home of the Eternals in *Zardoz*. "What is love?" Tubridy wants to ask, but instead says: "Why are you single?", like an inappropriate uncle at a wedding.

Oh, and I nearly forgot, in the middle there is a sing-song because someone has left both Chris de Burgh and a guitar on the couch.

"Ah s**t, Chris has seen the guitar," I say, which is usually my reaction when this happens at parties. Then I remember that I like Chris de Burgh. He sang *Spanish Train*, which is about God and the devil on a haunted train; *Patricia the Stripper*, a jaunty ditty about the sex industry; *Don't Pay the Ferryman*, a song about exorbitant transit fees (I think); and *A Spaceman Came Travelling* (but not by ferry obviously), which Tubridy asks de Burgh to explain. Jesus might have been a spaceman, explains de Burgh. "It's there in the lyrics, Ryan!" I shout at the telly.

Wake with scars

As Chris plays, the camera keeps cutting to the glassy-eyed studio audience clapping along looking confused. It's happened to us all. You're minding your own business in a bar, then you blackout and wake with scars where your kidneys should be, groggily singing along to Chris de Burgh in a *Late Late Show* audience.

Then de Burgh introduces a new song, *The Hands of Man*. "The things that we can do with these hands..." he says, "particularly thumbs." Which is brilliant. He should have called the song *Particularly Thumbs*. And I might borrow that name when I start my mitten shop.

Anyway, some of this is entertaining and much of it infuriating and together none of it makes sense. All of these items

The most recent 'Late Late' begins with ensmuggled chef Marco Pierre White wearing a woollen smock like a French peasant who eats smaller French peasants

are so tonally distinct any sane producer would put them in separate programmes. But the *Late Late Show* is madness itself. It's too long and less than the sum of its parts. Elsewhere, chat shows have morphed into shorter, wittier celebrations of celebrity good-sportsmanship. Even locally we have the zippier *Saturday Night Show* (Tubridy and Brendan O'Connor now fight for our damned souls like God and the Devil in *Spanish Train*). But *The Late Late Show* cannot change, because nobody knows why or how it works.

It survives, sustained by tradition and spite and the fact that it's older than Newgrange. Each week we watch in vague remembrance of Gay Byrne putting condoms on bananas, being patronising to disobedient women, or doing hard-hitting interviews with Judge from *Wanderly Wagon*. We trudge into our sitting rooms as though the theme tune were the call to prayer, because like Fine Gael or the weather or the music of the Script, it's no better than we deserve. They should put it in the ads really. "*The Late Late Show*: It's no better than we deserve" or "*The Late Late Show*: It was always thus" or maybe even: "*The Late Late Show*... sure, what did you expect?"



★★★★★ EMPIRE ★★★★★ TOTAL FILM

★★★★★ THE TELEGRAPH ★★★★★ THE INDEPENDENT ★★★★★ THE GUARDIAN

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PATRICK FREYNE

Underpromising, vaguely defeatist, un-specific – what could be more Irish than *Room to Improve*?



I often feel like saluting during the intro credits of *Room to Improve* (Sunday RTE 1). The theme music, to me, is the national anthem. The title underpromises and is vaguely defeatist, un-triumphalist and un-specific, like all the classic Irish political slogans (Lots Done, More to Do; Tíocfaidh ar La). And it gladdens my heart to see so many people donning the Irish national costume – a hard hat and a high viz jacket – to engage in the national pastime: building an extension. Didn't the heroes of 1916 die so we could build extensions? Don't check Wikipedia. The answer is "Yes."

Each week, Dermot Bannon rolls into town like the Littlest Hobo or the Incredible Hulk (both analogues for Jesus) to help troubled families suffering from bungalow-dysmorphia. Their bungalows all look fine, but saying this to an Irish person is unpatriotic. We have a

goddamn right to renovate our bungalows and if you try to stop us you're a West Brit.

Dermot is often eerily reassuring and this also makes me feel patriotic. Perhaps it's because he resembles the midpoint between Ryan Tubridy and Enda Kenny – if Tubridy was to transform into Kenny (which, for all we know, is something that happens). I also like that at one point, while chatting with a local shopkeeper, he happens to be purchasing, without saying why, a big bag of penny sweets like a large skinny baby. Why does he need all these penny sweets? It's his dark secret and we'll never know.

In this episode, Darragh Egan, Sarah Lovett and Darragh's mother Mary, hope to turn the house Darragh's late father built into two separate dwellings. This is potentially a case-study in internecine passive aggression made all the more potent by the presence of Dermot as an ersatz

border commission. The family explains what they want. They wish to share the same living space but not interact. "We want to live together, and separately."

Dermot listens carefully then builds what he always builds: a tasteful scale model of an aircraft hangar with loads of windows. Think of as many windows as you can. Dermot wants to add more windows than that to every house he sees. The man is obsessed. His job he explains, is "bringing in space and bringing in light", much like our lord. Yet, his grotesque window-filled chimeras resemble the reality bending worlds of MC Escher or HP Lovecraft or Renua. Sometimes when he's done, I can't look at the TV without screaming.

There are two types of music on the programme. There's the jaunty arpeggiated glockenspiel music, suggesting the family have no complaints or are, at least, not yet clinically depressed.

And then there are the discordant synth tones suggesting the family have views of their own and that Bannon is displeased. His brow darkens and he stuffs his maw with penny sweets.

He can be chilling. One of his collaborators talks of him as though he's a trickster character from Irish folklore. "Be wise to Dermot and his tactics," she says (really), squinting at the fire and jabbing her clay pipe in our direction (not really).

Sometimes the family resist Dermot's attempts to mould their lives according to his mad whims. At one point, Mary walks around the stripped-out shell of the house her husband built. "I hate seeing the place torn apart," she says sadly. The word "demolish" is literally written in pencil on one of the walls. The editor missed a trick here by not having Dermot laughing maniacally on the audio track. Mary's daughter-in-law is less concerned. "I never lived in this home. I don't have sentimental feelings about it," she says.

She has her own problems. A conversation about why Sarah doesn't want to get handle-less presses for the kitchen segues into Sarah diagnosing herself with OCD and concludes with Dermot saying: "No-one is saying you're a bad mother." It's an extreme escalation. But clearly he's thinking: "If she doesn't get

these handle-less presses I'm calling social services."

The project finishes. The builder is at his wit's end. The family are teetering over budget and now own a tasteful scale-model of an aircraft hangar with loads of windows. Dermot's work is done and the music from *The Littlest Hobo* starts to fade up. Sarah tries to take some credit for an idea. "We'll take joint credit," says Dermot through gritted teeth, before ascending to refurbish his father's house, which is heaven.

Yes, *Room to Improve* is the apotheosis of the dreams of 1916. The new, slightly triumphalist, Liam Neeson-narrated documentary about the rising, *1916* (Wednesday, RTE 1), also resembles the first half of an aspirational homeland-improvement programme – the bit where they start knocking everything down.

"I wonder what they'll build in those ruins?" I ask, as the rousing strings sweep me out the door, gun in hand, towards the GPO. An overwhelming conservatory, no doubt, that wallows in disappointment, leaks in winter and has a good room for the priest. Luckily in the next episode Neeson leaves the microphone to go and sort everything out (wait, am I thinking of *Michael Collins*? Or possibly *Taken 2*?).



"A SHIMMERING TALE OF JEALOUSY & INTRIGUE"



"OUTSTANDING PERFORMANCES"



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