

Irish Daily Mail

COMMENT

'...Sentimental to retching-point, homophobic, itch-lousy with single entendres, somehow managing to be both twee and vulgar, achingly unfunny, it made The Vicar Of Dibley look like Father Ted.'

A true sport... or just a bloody spectacle?

EIGHT months ago Joao Carvalho tragically died following injuries sustained during an MMA fight in the National Stadium in Dublin. The Portuguese cage fighter's death brought the tally of martial art fighters and kickboxers who have died since 2007 to 13, a long list of fatalities that has, over the years, helped make the huge money-making spectacle a byword for brutality and savagery.

While there is no gainsaying the impressive athleticism of MMA's most successful practitioners – or indeed the astonishing skills of Conor McGregor, RTE's Sportsman of the Year – the violence of MMA has drawn criticism in parallel with its growing popularity.

Its defenders claim the sport isn't dangerous but critics say that by combining the ancient art of boxing with the explosive physicality of bare knuckle fighting, MMA fighters run a risk of catastrophic brain injuries that is far higher than in conventional sport.

Of course many popular sports call for high levels of aggression and player contact, but there are rules to enhance the safety of these games and to guard against concussion. In MMA, however, the objective seems to be to render opponents senseless by kicking and punching them repeatedly. Sports Minister Shane Ross is to be applauded for reviewing Mixed Martial Arts, with the aim of regulating it.

Can MMA be a sport that excites without becoming a tawdry spectacle? The question should be asked – and Shane Ross is right to want to ask it.

Get a grip, Mr Harris

ANOTHER year, another outbreak of flu that predictably throws our creaking health service into chaos and confusion. And another opportunity for the various agents in the health service to exploit the crisis in order to draw attention to their respective grievances about the running of the organisation.

GPs maintain that the overcrowding crisis is a result of their being over-stretched due to underfunding, the HSE blame it on hospital staff shortages, the Health Minister points the finger at hospital managers, while managers cite population growth as a probable cause.

But the problem of hospital overcrowding does not call for conflicting sets of analysis. The problem calls for effective leadership, and for Simon Harris to address the emergency in a firm and resolute manner.

The Health Minister has one of the toughest roles in the Government, precisely because it calls for a certain amount of treading on toes and tackling vested interests in order to safeguard public health.

Since his appointment Minister Harris has shown commendable energy for his portfolio but this crisis, although predictable, may be his toughest challenge to date.

It is also one at which he cannot afford to fail, both for the sake of patients and his own considerable ambitions.

Giving up the ghosts

IN THE years following the economic crash, ghost estates became a potent symbol of the bailout and a dispiriting reminder of the economic mismanagement that brought the country to ruin. Nama's plan to dispose, this year, of the last remaining 25 estates on its books is therefore a cause of if not celebration, then certainly gratitude that another symptom of the property collapse is being resolved.

In private rather than public hands, ghost estates may be completed and sold on. Or as many campaigners have suggested, some could even help provide a solution to homelessness.

If they do, they would make for a fitting end to the trials of recent times.

Why this London TV critic is so, so wrong about Mrs Brown's Boys

ON Christmas night, and again on New Year's Eve, in common with hundreds of thousands of others, I sat down to watch Mrs Brown's Boys. Across the water, millions did likewise – in fact, the Christmas Day episode came third in the festive ratings in the UK, attracting an audience of just over nine million fans.

I know it's not everyone's cup of tea, but I love the show. I love its bracing, seaside-postcard smuttiness, often crude but never mean, and its heavy reliance on farcical situations that more often than not depend on Agnes Brown trying to right a wrong, but creating more problems than she solves.

At the heart of it all, as writer and lead performer, is Brendan O'Carroll, who I believe to be the most gifted physical comedy actor of our time – part of a long tradition from the music hall era through Norman Wisdom to David Jason in Only Fools And Horses – and a farceur who more than compensates for in enthusiasm what he clearly lacks in subtlety.

Winner

Woven into episodes of Mrs Brown's Boys, there often is a homily of sorts, a message addressing a particular societal problem. On New Year's Eve, it was schoolyard bullying, and the closing message – 'make yourself a promise, from today, don't let anyone take away your smile' – reached a bigger audience than any anti-bullying campaign could do, and in a matter of seconds it had been repeated and it spread on social media.

To its critics, this makes Mrs Brown's Boys pretty lowbrow television. It has, it seems, none of the nihilistic, lacerating and often cruel wit of the likes of Extras or The Thick Of It (both of these shows I enjoy, incidentally), and therefore it must be bad. Indeed, many compare it to When The Whistle Blows, the sitcom-within-a-sitcom in Extras, which is rooted in the sort of comedy that seemed to have died out in the Seventies and Eighties.

The problem is that those sitcoms – Terry And June, Man About The House, Bread, and so on – had millions of fans, and many were left with nothing to watch when a new generation of critical darlings, ironically knowing shows such as Absolutely Fabulous and I'm Alan Partridge, came along.

The fact that this audience has not been served made Mrs Brown's Boys a surefire winner from the start, but it remains critically panned.

On Sunday, in the (London) Observer newspaper, television critic Euan Ferguson, watching for what seems to have been the first time, called it 'absurdly successful', and 'sentimental to retching-point, homophobic, itch-lousy with single entendres, somehow managing to be both twee and vulgar, achingly unfunny, it made The Vicar Of Dibley look like Father Ted'.

Now, there is a difference between criticism and accusation and, as we saw after Panti appeared on Brendan O'Connor's Saturday Night Show, homophobia is an



PHILIP NOLAN

accusation, given that RTE paid out thousands of euro to people who felt they had been defamed.

Why would anyone think Mrs Brown's Boys was homophobic? Possibly because Mrs Brown's son Rory and his husband Dino are camp. Looked at differently, though, you might see them just as caricatures, as Mrs Brown herself is, unless your own mammy accidentally has taken LSD and dressed as Wonder Woman before crashing through the front window, or bikini-waxed herself in the living room (I'm guessing neither of these things has happened).

This hardly is a surprise. Most sitcoms, even those loved by critics, employ caricature. Manuel in Fawlty Towers (and David Kelly as the Irish builder). Fr Jack in Father Ted. Mrs Doyle in Father Ted. David Brent in The Office. Cameron in Modern Family. Gloria in Modern Family (archetypal Latina? Well, yes, actually). Sue-Ann Nivens in The Mary Tyler Moore Show. Alice, the nanny in The Brady Bunch. Phoebe in Friends. Alf Garnett in Till Death Do Us Part. Mrs Slocombe in Are You Being Served? Even titular characters – was anyone ever really like Lucy in I Love Lucy?

Subversive

Sitcoms depend for their very lifeblood on caricature, but they also can be subversive.

If Euan Ferguson habitually watched Mrs Brown's Boys, he would have noticed that Agnes fiercely loves and defends all her children equally, straight or gay. Rory and Dino are camp and funny but they are not the butt of homophobic jokes. Rory's siblings never treat him and Dino any differently to the other couples.

Detached critics also might have missed the episode in which, when Rory and Dino wanted to get married, Agnes asked Fr Damian why they couldn't do so in church. When he said that was impossible, she asked him to show her where in the Bible Jesus Christ ever disavowed love – all love – and left him spluttering like a fish that just had been landed on a pier.

Mrs Brown's Boys indeed paints comedy with a very broad brushstroke, but it reaches a massive audience and it shows a loving family in which different sexual orientations

are normal. If that's 'homophobic', then I'm missing something.

In the UK, it is hugely popular in Scotland and the North of England, and that doesn't surprise me. I spent all my childhood holidays in Yorkshire and Lancashire and you find there the same sense of community, with strong matriarchal figures, as is the case in Mrs Brown's Boys, and a more intuitive ease with sentimentality than often is the case in the metropolitan south-east around London.

Danger

Sentiment in comedy, it seems, is a bad thing. In more elitist circles, comedy must be challenging, edgy and dark, or sophisticated and elegant. As it happens, all those also appeal to me, but I have no idea why they must do so exclusively. I see no contradiction in howling laughing at Mrs Brown being knocked head first through a glass coffee table by a collapsing Christmas tree and wincing in delight at schoolboy sexual fumbblings in The Inbetweeners. If it makes me laugh, it makes me laugh. Full stop.

But that's not enough for the likes of Euan Ferguson. With a brushstroke far broader than the comedy in Mrs Brown, he concluded his review by saying: 'I suspect those of us in our high ivory metropolitan-elite towers (translation: humans who paid even nugatory attention to at least one class in school) missed a trick in 2016: the popularity of this shameless excrement... which was voted by Radio Times readers the best sitcom of the 21st century should have given a huge clue to the Brexit vote'.

How absolutely astonishing to generalise about nine million people in such a dismissive way. How on Earth would he have any idea about the political proclivities of that massive audience based solely on their taste in television comedy?

He does raise an interesting point, though. By politicising it, he misses the clearer conclusion to be drawn. If many of its audience did vote to leave the EU, and if many in the US voted for Donald Trump, it is in no small part down to point that he, and other commentators, live in a bubble where everyone agrees on everything. If 2016 taught us anything, it is that the unchallenged liberal consensus (and, yes, I'm often guilty myself) is the great danger of our time.

Brendan O'Carroll knows that. He talks to his audience (literally, when he speaks straight to camera), not down to them, and they love him for it. He uses that intimacy, that trust, to raise the real issues that face families, in a comedic way – be it bullying, fertility treatment (Cathy once went to London to investigate having a baby by donor), having a gay child, helping your children out financially, and all the other issues that real families deal with every day of the week.

To the critics, that indeed might be sentimental. Euan Ferguson once said he 'normally [would] recoil from feelgood unless it was preceded by "Dr"', but for most of us out there with our feet on the footstools, watching with three generations at the time of year when families come together, I'm damned if I can find anything wrong with 'feelgood'.

Maybe everyone should just lighten up. If you like it, watch it. If you don't, don't, but for heaven's sake don't haughtily sit in judgment on me because I do.