

Dick And Dom's 'Bogies': Goodbye The Irreverent?

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The UK has had a rich history of genuinely irreverent and at times radical children's television. Some of these shows have been extremely subversive, with many challenging the practices and structures of the adult world. In this light we will consider Saturday-morning live children's television, spanning the era from *Tiswas* (1974–82) to *Dick and Dom in da Bungalow* (2002–06), with a particular focus on the later show's 'Bogies' pre-recorded inserts.

Children's television has often sat at the centre of highly contested debates about what constitutes 'childhood', and clumsy 'media causes harm' debates have positioned children's TV as a bad influence and responsible for poor behaviour. Shows as recent as *Teletubbies* (1997–2001; 2015–18), *Pokemon* (1997–), *Rastamouse* (2011–15) and *Peppa Pig* (2004–) have all been criticised at times for their seemingly malevolent grip on their young audience. As we shall see, *Dick and Dom in da Bungalow* similarly faced criticism for being a bad influence and in poor taste.

Dick and Dom in da Bungalow ran for 263 episodes and was first aired on the then newly-launched CBBC channel, scheduled against other live studio based shows *SMTV Live* (1998–2003) on ITV and *The Saturday Show* (2001–03) on BBC One, before *da Bungalow* itself moved on to BBC One in 2003. As was common to other children's Saturday morning shows, *da Bungalow*'s 'zoo format' combined live studio segments with pre-recorded inserts, with one of the inserts, 'Bogies', acting as a playful 'prank' disruptor of public space 'acceptable behaviour'. 'Bogies' followed *da Bungalow*'s two presenters, Dick (Richard McCourt) and Dom (Dominic Wood), as they, tentatively to start, competed with each other to 'hijack' places where etiquette and behaviour aligned with conventional (serious and humourless) adult social norms – such as museums, libraries, theatres, restaurants and even a yoga class.

Children's television, as we generally recognise it, is inherently made by adults *for* children, with little room for children's genuine input into a production. However, Saturday morning children's TV in the UK almost always featured a rowdy live audience, with children taking part in quizzes, activities and even interviewing celebrities and popstars. In this way, children could be seen as claiming some measure of agency and even, at times, acting as 'co-owners' of the show. Yet this agency was generally limited to 'playing along' with the intent of the producers and presenters (not independent of it), and the children within the audience didn't get to bring much of their 'real' lived experience to the screen.

On *Dick and Dom in Da Bungalow*, the two adult presenters performed as exaggerated character versions of themselves. This exaggeration was sometimes extreme, such as when performing as mini cupboard-bound 'Diddy Dick and Diddy Dom' characters. For most of the time on screen, they could be seen to perform as the 'children's TV presenters' Dick and Dom, rather than as their 'authentic' Richard and Dominic selves. Adopting a 'child-like' persona, they operated in studio within a world shaped *for* children (by the producers of the show), and, keeping this childlike persona in play, they then re-entered, and disrupted, the 'adult world'. 'Bogies' featured Dick and Dom in hybrid 'constructed' settings, as they inserted a pre-shaped scenario into seemingly real situations. Here we should be cautious as to how much control of the 'real' environment might have been in the hands of the production team, and this caution should also be applied to the 'reality' of the challenges as

presented on-screen in relation to shot choices and edit decisions. Most 'Bogies' end with Dick and Dom 'fleeing the scene' like criminals and then dissolving into laughter during a post-challenge debrief and replay. During this post-mortem the double act look back on the experience, both as themselves and as if they were the audience. The in-challenge (often repressed) laughter translated into a post-challenge release, as they act as audience for themselves and in turn as proxy for the child audience.

Dick and Dom sit within a 'double act' tradition that spans comedy and children's television. The Chuckle Brothers' show *ChuckleVision* (1987–2009) brought a Laurel and Hardy-like comedy to children's TV, but their double act was traditionally scripted and allowed little room for interaction or improvisation with the audience. Trever and Simon's comedy sketches on Saturday children's television shows *Going Live* (1987–93) and *Live and Kicking* (1993–97) did offer room for interaction with children, but here the comedians remained in character. However, it was Ant and Dec who can be said to have established a successful children's TV double act template. Ant (Anthony McPartlin) and Dec (Declan Donnelly), originally child actors, had mastered their double act during their time presenting *SMTV Live* (1998–2003), switching between performing as themselves and in character. With the turn of the millennium however, they were successfully relocating their enthusiasm, playfulness and soft irreverence to primetime TV; they had left a 'gap in the market' for others, like Dick and Dom, to follow.

Dick and Dom, and in particular the 'Bogies' challenge, can also be seen to be shaped by the work of comedian Sasha Baron Cohen in his Ali G and Borat personas, both of which were significant in the cultural landscape at the time *Dick and Dom in da Bungalow* first aired in 2002. The 'in da' within the show's title acts as a direct homage to the *Ali G Indahouse* film of the same year. As Sasha Baron Cohen stated, the 'discoveries' within Ali G and Borat were the 'idea of taking a comic character into a real situation', and that 'an Establishment setting was a wonderful place to prick pomposity and undermine it'. This coupling of character/real hybridity with the ways in which Ali G and Borat would routinely subvert the hubris or arrogance of those representing established knowledge and authority, also play out, in a less provocative manner, within 'Bogies'.

Many UK children's TV shows that can be seen to be irreverent and, to an extent, radical; showing a lack of respect for people or institutions that are otherwise taken seriously. Looking at *Tiswas*, for example, a 'running order' led rather than scripted show, we see presenters like Lenny Henry, Chris Tarrant and Jasper Carrott, who had strong backgrounds (and futures) in adult comedy, slipping in and out of character. The show, first aired in 1974 and produced by ATV for the commercial ITV network, can be seen as a counterpoint to the safer shows on the BBC. *Tiswas* featured irreverent characters and sketches, and often children were more than just a distant, passive and approving audience; they were seen to play along with the sketches and 'lean into the frame' as presenters sat amongst them, rather than in front of them. Intriguingly, it may be more than coincidence that *Tiswas*, the earliest of the shows discussed so far, aired across a time when punk was born and became a defining cultural force.

Prior to *Tiswas*, presenters and characters would interact with children appearing on shows in limited ways. The children might be cheering, on cue, within the audience; be a contestant on a show like *Crackerjack* (1955–2020), the BBC's long-running children's gameshow; and they might occasionally appear as callers, vetted and rehearsed by a researcher to ensure they hit the right 'marks'. Yet within these confines, there are moments where children didn't behave as intended (for example, when the pop group, Fivestar, were abused during a live

phone-in on *Going Live*). In general however, the child on-screen could be seen to be a safe contained proxy for the actual child audience, representing a socially ideal child, rather than children in themselves with their own agency and voice.

Saturday morning children's television was, of course, made by adults, for children, but these shows tended to be live, loosely scripted and usually featured children not just in the audience, but as participants too; controlled chaos was the order-of-the-day. The shows appeared at times obsessed with bodily functions (often farting) and food: particularly interaction with food, and food-like substances, in ways that would not be acceptable in other settings – and indeed, in an Ofcom ruling in 2012 on one of Dick and Dom's follow up shows, the UK media regulator identified concern for the wellbeing of child participants during a 'vile concoction' in-studio eating challenge. *Tiswas* famously featured the (custard pie throwing) 'Phantom Flan Flinger' with many shows ending in some kind of food fight. *Tiswas* also helped cement the children's television 'gunge' tradition of covering child contestants, and adult 'guests', in a slimy-runny custard. *Dick and Dom in da Bungalow*, although operating in a different broadcast era, was little different. The show routinely featured contestants and hosts being covered in gunge and what Dick and Dom dubbed 'creamy muck muck'.

'Bogies' itself featured Dick and Dom entering often 'sacred' adult spaces, such as museums and libraries. Once there, they would act like children – or how children would perhaps like to behave. Dick and Dom would then take it in turns to say or shout the word 'Bogies' at increasing levels of volume until one conceded defeat – the challenge being won by the presenter who shouted or screamed the loudest – with embarrassment seeming to prevent the loser from continuing. Hidden cameras would capture reactions to hearing the shouts and each challenge would be edited together with an innuendo-laden voiceover, in a mock sports commentator style: it's a "battle between two giants of the game" (in a cinema), it's "very, very tight at this stage of the game" and "is the pressure starting to show?" (in library settings).

During the 'Bogies' challenge at the Mitchell Library in Glasgow the presenters are immersed in the 'hushed' traditions of the old-fashioned reference library. The library users we see are all adults and appear to be using the place for silent reading and study. It is unlikely that many, or any, of the library's users have an awareness of the double act or the 'Bogies' rules of engagement. Dick and Dom look like they might be of student age, so the challenge could appear to be a student prank of sorts and a few younger library users appear amused by the shouts, but the shaken heads and stern scowls of the older library users seem to articulate a clear annoyance at the ways in which Dick and Dom are breaching formal library etiquette. The double act's own highly repressed laughter suggests a significant discomfort within the library environment – and it is notable that the 'Bogies' shouts at the Mitchell Library feel the most muted and awkward within the challenges overall (only reaching a '4.2' on the show's on-screen graphic audio level 'Bogie-o-meter', compared with a full-throated '9.6' at the International Boat Show). The subversion of behavioural norms is of course only temporary, and arguably the awkwardness, and in turn the comedy within these challenges, sits in the tensions inherent between the subversion and normal order being reasserted.

Over time the structure and conventions of 'Bogies' became more established and understood by the audience – and during the challenge set in a cinema, they begin to join in; with some children by the end on their feet screaming 'Bogies!', much to the obvious embarrassment of many adults around them. During a challenge similarly set within a live theatrical

performance of *Peter Pan*, an actor on the stage opens with: “All children grow up...” and the voiceover immediately adds: “...apart from Dick and Dom!”. The children in the audience clearly get the ‘joke’ and sense what is happening as the volume of ‘Bogies’ increases – the adults do not, and broadly remain contained within the conventions of being in a theatrical audience (however pantomime-like). Within this specific ‘Bogies’ the children perhaps become as much part of the performance and experience as the actors on the stage.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, *da Bungalow* tended to upset those who prefer a certain behaviour from children on- (and off-) screen, and there were even calls in the UK parliament for the show to be taken off-air for being ‘lavatorial’, with MP Peter Luff asking if the show is ‘really the stuff of public service broadcasting’. However, debates about the appropriateness of the content on children’s television, and *Dick and Dom in da Bungalow* specifically, might be recognised as more about a ‘fear of childhood’ than any serious concerns about harm.

Production of *Dick and Dom in da Bungalow* concluded in 2006, bringing to an end the era of live, loosely scripted Saturday morning children’s television (*The Saturday Show* having ended in 2005). The spirit of these shows does live on, to a much lesser extent, in some corners of children’s TV. Notably, live studio links (between programmes), such as Hacker T. Dog’s chaotic, and often quite adult, appearances on CBBC, have long offered space for playful subversion, but with the decline of the main channel children’s TV programming, and in turn the decline of the children’s standalone channels (with children’s offerings moving towards on-demand and online) there is less and less space for the irreverence that had once been a significant part of UK children’s television culture.

The generation that grew up watching *Dick and Dom in da Bungalow* are now young adults, but the children who followed, growing up in a streaming and social media era, are of course no less irrelevant. Indeed, content made *by* children is now common and shared through platforms like YouTube and TikTok. Although there are routine fears for children’s wellbeing in relation to these platforms and the media on them (whether made by or for children), they do offer children agency, and agency to be irreverent and radical, in ways that traditional children’s TV, made *for* children, never fully could.