

### ***Ireland's Got Talent*, November 2017 – March 2018**



*Ireland's Got Talent* was hosted by Lucy Kennedy, and featured celebrity judges, Louis Walsh, Jason Byrne, Denise VanOuten, and Michelle Visage. I appeared on this program on 3 March 2018. *Ireland's Got Mór Talent* was hosted by Glenda Gilson and James Kavanagh. My performance was the final act featured on the Saint Patrick's Day finale of this program broadcast on 17 March 2018. The framing of this performance was unique among my other performances. Not only was this performance recorded to be televised by a national broadcaster, but the editing of my performance and interviews was entirely beyond my control. Additionally, I would simultaneously perform in front of three essential audiences: the panel of celebrity judges, the live studio audience largely consisting of families with young children, and the wider audience of millions of television viewers. Complicating matters, each of these audiences had different expectations and viewed the performance with different agendas.

Following the successful London debut of *Unfathomable*, the Deans received an offer to perform our show at the *Edinburgh Fringe Festival*. I was hopeful that our new show might have a bright future. Mr. Hart, however – acting as our manager and producer – declined the invitation, citing financial risk. He argued that if we had more public exposure then we could tour the show with much less financial risk. He proposed that we audition for *Britain's Got Talent*, and later, for *Big Brother UK*.

Until this point, I had dismissed television reality talent shows as being degrading and exploitative. As Robert Kilborn has noted in *Staging the Real*, such programs ‘allow the TV audience to peer in voyeuristically on other people’s lives in a way that carries strong reminders of the fairground freak show.’<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, just as mentalists have long engaged with an Othering and animalising of their bodies, mentalism has long been an important part of sideshows and freakshows. I was also aware that a number of my friends and former colleagues had benefited from appearances on *America’s Got Talent*, *Britain’s Got Talent* and *Penn & Teller: Fool Us*.\*

I further considered Panti Bliss’ use of footage from *The Maury Povich Show* and the “behind the scenes” commentary in her one wo/man show *High Heels in Low Places*, and I could see the usefulness of appearing on TV, no matter how degrading and exploitative the experience may be. In fact – drawing inspiration from Panti Bliss – the more scandalous or awful the experience, the more useful the footage may prove.

So it was with some trepidation that we, as the Deans, consented to audition for all of the above. We were not selected to appear on *Britain’s Got Talent*. And although we were among the final 50 couples chosen for *Big Brother UK* from a pool of 10,000, we were not among the dozen or so couples cast to appear on the show. By this point, Maggie had relocated to Italy to complete her Master of Fine Arts degree, and the stress of the TV auditions coupled with distance led to the dissolution of the Deans. Soon after, I terminated my partnership with Mr. Hart over a disagreement regarding the *Big Brother UK* auditions.

Nevertheless, following the debut of *Eddie Dean, Telepathy Rock Star: Smells Like Dean Spirit* – I was invited to appear on Season One of *Ireland’s Got Talent* and the spin-off program *Ireland’s Got Mór Talent*. I appeared on both programs but was not among the 24 acts to advance to the semi-finals. In my audition piece – of which approximately 50% was broadcast – I stripped down to my trunks and was blindfolded with cotton gauze and athletic bandage. Using a set of vintage Zener cards, I achieved a 1-in-90 outcome against chance.

During the preparation for this performance, I began considering what would make “good TV”. I ultimately decided to attempt to integrate the strip search. Given the extremely restricted time

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<sup>1</sup> Kilborn, Richard. *Staging the Real*. 2003. pp. 75-76.

\* This includes the Brothers from Different Mothers, Jonathan Burns, the Lords of Strut, Nash Fung, Eric Dittleman, Louie Foxx, and Vita Radionova.

frame of my audition, however, this would prove a challenging task. I was originally allotted two to three minutes, and later told that I could *possibly* take as much as five minutes in extreme circumstances. Clearly the strip search sequence from *Eddie Dean, Telepathy Rock Star: Smells Like Dean Spirit* – which included undressing, having my clothing examined, and redressing – would take longer than my allotted time. Consequently, given the time constraints, I opted to simply strip and – after having my ears examined while the judges applied the cotton gauze and athletic bandage blindfold – perform the entire demonstration in my trunks.

Since branded articles of clothing were not allowed on camera, I realized an earlier vision to replace my *Calvin Klein* trunks with custom made *Eddie Dean* branded knock-offs. Not only would this sidestep the branding issue, but would help establish my name with viewers, and provide a small amount of quirky comedic relief. These trunks were the catalyst for my favourite joke from my filmed audition for *Ireland's Got Talent*. After stripping, I acknowledged my trunks and said, 'You can get these in the *Eddie Dean: Smells Like Dean Spirit Catalogue*.' And then, winking at Jason Byrne, I added, 'Well, I don't just write it for the articles.' Not surprisingly, that joke was not televised.

Time was no small matter. The longer I stayed on stage, the greater my risk of alienating the judges or being subjected to extreme edits. In fact, I was ultimately "buzzed" by judge Denise VanOuten – who has been described by *DublinLive* as the 'nasty judge'<sup>2</sup> – who criticized my 'slow' and 'boring' performance and expressed her disappointment that I 'got [hers] wrong.' While the stripping did use valuable time, at the time I felt that it was necessary to preclude the use of concealed electronic devices, as such performances are often dissected *ad infinitum* on the internet. I also maintain that the strip search made for better TV and may well have contributed to the fact that I received both press and airtime during an extremely competitive program.

My short, but precise, audition piece was devised with consultation from my former teacher and colleague Andy Crook.\* Significantly, Mr. Crook is a former student of Jacques Lecoq and he and I were both drawn to the theatrical possibilities of the exposed body in relation to the covered face. Approaching the piece as an exercise in neutral mask, we explored ways of using movement,

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<sup>2</sup> Pownall Sylvia. 'Denise Van Outen is the "nasty" judge on Ireland's Got Talent.' *DublinLive.ie*. 15 Jan 2018.

\* 'Biographies of Collaborators.' See appendices: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367>

stillness, and breath to capitalize on that inverted and uncanny image. This performance purported to be almost exclusively mental; yet, ironically, the performance was unusually corporeal.

# EDDIE DEAN

*Eddie Dean underwear design by Clifton Barnhart*

## *The Aesthetic of Failure*

Prior to my appearance on the stage of *Ireland's Got Talent*, I was interviewed by Glenda Gilson and James Kavanagh for *Ireland's Got Mór Talent*. After explaining the nature of my doctoral research on “non-physical communication,” and after describing my family involvement with telepathy and the second sight, the hosts naturally asked me to show them something. This situation presented a conundrum for me, since I had previously studied Uri Geller’s infamous 1973 appearance on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. Geller is widely claimed to have gained international credibility after *consistently and unintentionally failing* to demonstrate his purported abilities during this appearance.<sup>3</sup> I have analysed this footage, along with other Geller footage, in the appendices of this dissertation.\* In my interview with Gilson and Kavanagh, I opted to follow the course of Geller.

The nature of my “psychic” demonstrations requires a certain amount of time in order to be contextualized, framed, and presented. For instance, I typically perform the Zener demonstration five times consecutively in order to achieve odds which are significantly higher than chance; and I often miss once or twice during those five attempts. Still, the odds of guessing correctly three times out of five, are 1 in 125; a decidedly significant result. There are very few “quick” and certain demonstrations I can give without falling back on conventional conjuring artifice.

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<sup>3</sup> Higginbotham, Adam. ‘The Unbelievable Skepticism of the Amazing Randi.’ *The New York Times*. 7 Nov 2014.

\* ‘Uri Geller: Paranormal Superstar.’ See appendices: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367>

Naturally, I was extremely reluctant to associate myself with any conjuring technique whatsoever on television, as it would discredit my onstage performance to those with rudimentary knowledge of conjuring; a not insignificant population. Remembering Geller, I opted to distance myself from the many trick wielding magicians auditioning for the program by simply telling the hosts ‘no’ and adding, ‘I have a lot on my mind right now just to be able to survive what I’ve got to do today.’ This response was televised.

Distancing myself from conjurers was no small matter. For instance, on 7 October, Lucy Kennedy made several short comments on *DublinLive* about the forthcoming program *Ireland’s Got Talent*. Oddly enough, her brief statements include the curiously specific statement, ‘There’s been loads of magicians, the weirder and the wackier the better.’<sup>4</sup> Strangely, she did not single out the “loads” of singers and dancers, which would have massively eclipsed the relatively small number of magicians, or comment on any other genre of performance. On 1 December, less than a week ahead of the filming, Kennedy made two statements about *Ireland’s Got Talent* for *Evoke*. One, that she was ‘excited’ and ‘chuffed’ to get the ‘gig.’<sup>5</sup> And, two, the seemingly random statement, ‘I’ve met a few of the acts that are going to be auditioning. We’ve been inundated with a lot of magicians.’<sup>6</sup>

I do not know why, of all of the many comments she might have chosen to make about the talent pool, she singled out that detail. But it does go to show the need to separate oneself from the pack of run-of-the-mill conjurers. Thus, I was delighted when I read in *The Irish Times* about ‘multiple magicians’ and ‘stripping psychics.’<sup>7</sup> I was unique. Similarly, I was singled out by *Ireland’s Got Mór Talent* co-host James Kavanaugh in an interview on *DublinLive* in which he described the talent pool as follows: ‘People come in with parrots and dogs, there’s kids doing mime artistry. We’ve had a never-ending parade of dance troupes, and a lot of magicians. We saw one guy who could read minds who was brilliant.’<sup>8</sup> The fact that I received a solid three minutes of air-time on a very competitive program would seem to confirm the effectiveness of this approach.

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<sup>4</sup> de Burca, Demelza. ‘Lucy Kennedy reveals some of the best bits of her hit show get cut out.’ *DublinLive.ie*. 7 Oct 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Kissane, Andrea. ‘Two famous faces revealed as spin-off hosts of Ireland’s Got Talent.’ *Evoke.ie*. 1 Dec 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Kissane, Andrea. ‘Two famous faces revealed as spin-off hosts of Ireland’s Got Talent.’ *Evoke.ie*. 1 Dec 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Bruton, Louise. ‘Ireland’s Got Talent, Everything you need to know.’ *The Irish Times*. 4 Feb 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Pownall Sylvia. ‘Denise Van Outen is the “nasty” judge on Ireland’s Got Talent.’ *DublinLive.ie*. 15 Jan 2018.

I learned much from Geller regarding the ability to fail successfully. Most of my statistical demonstrations inevitably involve a certain amount of failure. Sometimes I attempt to fail purposefully in order to instruct the audience to participate more intently, or to prove that I am not using 100% reliable conjuring tricks. On other occasions, my failures are simply unavoidable, given the limitations of my techniques. I have failed on stage many times since beginning this praxis: In *Visions and Revisions*, my demonstrations of suggestion largely failed to work as intended. In *Meet the Deans* – on several occasions – we embarrassingly “blew” our finale, failing to correctly give the name of a spectator’s pet; In the preview of *Unfathomable*, Maggie failed to correctly identify a drawing of a flower; In the debut of *Unfathomable*, Maggie failed to correctly identify the location of the “murderer” and was forced to “give up;” and on *Ireland’s Got Talent* – in front of millions of viewers – I failed to correctly identify Denise VanOuten’s selected Zener shape on my first attempt.

I have privately considered my performance approach in my later performances as *the world’s worst mind reader*. While most mentalists seem to overcome odds of 1 in billions (or beyond) *repeatedly* throughout their shows, the nature of my techniques has limited my hit rate to between approximately 1 in 2 and 1 in 125. Even in *Project Viola Ten* in which I guessed correctly at a rate which exceeded the odds of 1 in a million against chance, it was only as a result of hundreds of accumulated trials. A conjurer or average mentalist using conventional artifice could apparently overcome these odds in a single demonstration. Counterintuitively, perhaps, I managed to stand out from the pack by being *worse* than my competition. Consequently, I was *different*. My intention was to *seem* more *real*.

During my audition for *Ireland’s Got Talent*, however, I was concerned that even a single miss would lead to my premature elimination from the program. My intention, therefore, was to guess correctly on each of my four guesses (one per judge). Unfortunately (and fortunately) I did miss once. I was correct on the first, third, fourth, and fifth guesses, but missed on the second guess. In total, I was correct on four out of five attempts; an outcome which should occur by chance only once in every 90 performances.

Despite the extraordinary unlikeliness of my results, the single failure was cited by VanOuten as the reason for hitting her elimination buzzer. The failure was also broadcast in the televised version

of my audition. My final correct guess was not aired, and neither were the complimentary comments of the judges. Visage, for instance, who voted in the affirmative, and was on the whole complementary, is presented on TV criticizing the colour of my underwear and implied to have voted in the negative. Walsh, who voted yes without hesitation, saying, ‘I’d like to see more,’ was completely edited out of the segment.

Nevertheless, I am glad that I accidentally missed, as by attempting not to miss in the first place, I was violating my own *world’s worst mentalist approach*. And – like Geller on *The Tonight Show* – I believe that my miss did not entirely undermine the three televised hits. In fact, in line with the example of Geller, I believe the miss may have even added an element of sincerity, credibility, and drama to the entire preceding.

### ***(Hyper)Reality TV***

It was during *Project Viola Ten*, and later during *Eddie Dean Telepathy Rock Star: Smells Like Dean Spirit* that I began to unambiguously *claim* to possess psychic (or non-physical communication) abilities. This claim – albeit a false one – reached a peak during my performance on *Ireland’s Got Talent*, during which – in front of an audience of millions – I made this claim, provided historical and personal context for the claim, and supported the claim with my credibility as a PhD researcher. In this regard, the concept of hyperreality is, once again, an interesting lens to consider.

I experienced a level of hyperreality first-hand during my exploration of reality TV in which an interview, along with my apparent demonstration of telepathy, was broadcast to an audience of millions, with no attempt whatsoever to challenge or corroborate the explanations I offered. That the version of events which were broadcast were not even a fully accurate portrayal of what actually occurred, only presents another layer of fabrication on top of an already fabricated performance. Yet, on the other hand, that which was broadcast – for all its lack of reality – constitutes its own hyperreality. Paradoxically, the broadcast becomes true, in a sense, by the nature of its being broadcast. Ultimately, whether I believe I am psychic or not is of little

importance compared to the fact that millions of people either believe that I am, or believe that I believe I am. Such outcomes are very real.

Richard Schechner has noted that ‘many people have been for quite some time very aware of the collapsing difference between “fiction” and the “real.”’<sup>9</sup> According to Schechner, ‘this is not only, or even mostly, a matter of theory, but a practice in performance art, media, film, the internet, experimental theatre, and the visual arts.’<sup>10</sup> Offering reality TV as one example, Schechner points out that reality shows such as *Survivor* ‘strive to erase the distinctions between the real and the staged.’<sup>11</sup> Schechner argues that since ‘cameras were always rolling...[and] the film was edited... what *Survivor* contestants were enacting was not improvised theatre, exactly; nor was it real life, exactly.’<sup>12</sup>

In his 2002 book, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Slavoj Žižek similarly notes the ‘falsity of “reality TV shows”’<sup>13</sup> arguing:

Even if these shows are ‘for real’, people still act in them – they simply play themselves. The standard disclaimer in a novel (‘Characters in this text are fictional, any resemblance to real-life characters are purely accidental’) also holds for participants in reality soaps: what we see there are fictional characters, even if they play themselves for real.<sup>14</sup>

Literature theorist Germaine Greer has similarly, and bluntly, observed: ‘Reality television is not very real. The situations are contrived and the protagonists are handpicked. No one on line or on TV sees everything that is seen by the cameras because what is streamed is already edited.’<sup>15</sup> Despite the obvious truth of her statement, Greer paradoxically contradicts her previous claim that: ‘Reality television is not the end of civilisation as we know it; it is civilisation as we know it. It is popular culture at its most popular, soap opera come to life.’<sup>16</sup> How can something that is ‘not very real’ also be ‘civilization as we know it’?

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<sup>9</sup> Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. p. 111.

<sup>10</sup> Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. p. 111.

<sup>12</sup> Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. p. 112.

<sup>13</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. 2002. p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. 2002. p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Greer, Germaine. ‘Watch with Brother.’ *The Guardian*. 24 Jun 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Greer, Germaine. ‘Watch with Brother.’ *The Guardian*. 24 Jun 2001.



It is my contention that reality TV possesses elements not only of the hyperreal (despite not possessing any strong claims to reality, it *is* civilisation as we know it), but also of what I describe as pseudo-reality (despite its extremely tenuous claims to reality, it purports to be, and seeks to be consumed as, real). Richard Schechner has observed this paradox, as well, writing of the erosion of ‘the walls once separating “entertainment,” “news,” and “sports.”’<sup>17</sup> According to Schechner, ‘It’s all entertainment now.’<sup>18</sup> ‘Ironically,’ he continues, ‘that’s where “reality” is located.’<sup>19</sup>

Performers on reality television are often acutely aware of the need to “make good TV,” and therefore, the behaviour of performers on these programs is inevitably amplified, heightened, extreme, artificial – or at the very least – constructed in a particular way in order to achieve a particular outcome. Consequently, the apparently honest reflections of these performers, regarding past and future events, are likely to be equally amplified, heightened, extreme, artificial, and constructed. Additionally, production teams guide the performance/behaviour of participants through various forms of directing and coercion. Even if contestants are not told precisely *what to say*, they are certainly told *what to talk about*.

For instance, during my appearance on *Ireland’s Got Talent*. I was repeatedly instructed by members of the production team to use certain phrases (ie., Telepathy Rock Star) and I was instructed to have lengthy conversations with other participants on topics which we never would have otherwise chosen to discuss (ie., *What will you do with the prize money if you win? Do you think you’ll get the Golden Buzzer? Which judge do you most want to impress and why?*). On one occasion, I attempted to evade the mandated discussion topics, and the production team insisted (*Can you talk a little more about what you’ll do with the money if you win?*). I remember feeling – as I was discussing an absurd and embarrassing topic on camera – that I had two choices: cooperate or walk away. I also remember feeling that the production team would be fine with either outcome. They seemed perfectly willing and able to erase me from existence if I so desired. I remember realizing that – if I wished to appear on TV – cooperation seemed to be the only path forward.

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<sup>17</sup> Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. p. 113.

<sup>18</sup> Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. p. 113.

Interestingly, I was to put this theory to the test much sooner than I intended. When I stepped off the stage – following the judges’ audition – I was unhappy with how the performance transpired. I was unhappy with the way in which the judges interacted with me; unhappy with my interactions with Lucy Kennedy; and certainly unhappy to not advance to the semi-finals. On the other hand – given all of the above – I was also happy not to proceed. I was immediately informed by a production team member that Glenda Gilson and James Kavanagh were waiting for me on the set of *Ireland’s Got Mór Talent*.

Despite having had a fairly pleasant interview with them that morning, I told the producer that I didn’t wish to take part. I remember saying, ‘What’s the point?’ The production team member made an exasperated expression and walked away talking into her headset. Naturally, I assumed that in declining this interview I was forfeiting my “opportunity” to appear on the program. That, however, was an incorrect assumption. On 17 March 2018, portions of my audition and pre-show interview were aired with no mention of the fact that I declined the post-audition feedback session. As far as I am concerned – and from my perspective – my televised appearance was all better for the missing interview.

Additionally, it is important to note the collusive role of audiences in these performances. Film and Media Studies theorist Richard Kilborn notes – citing film studies theorist Jane Roscoe’s 2001 paper ‘Real Entertainment: New Factual Hybrid Television’ – that programs such as *Big Brother* ‘speak to an audience which is acutely aware of the constructed nature of the “reality” on offer, and which is prepared to join in the performance of the real.’<sup>20</sup> Greer, likewise, observes that ‘although the people who volunteer for reality shows may all be exhibitionists, someone who is careful to remain unwatched is pulling their strings. The contestants may say what they please, but someone else will decide who, if anyone, can hear.’<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Kilborn, Richard. *Staging the Real*. 2003. p. 81.

<sup>21</sup> Greer, Germaine. ‘Watch with Brother.’ *The Guardian*. 24 Jun 2001.

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