

Dramatically Disappointing Drama: RTÉ's 'lack of vision' and 'dysfunctional mediocrity' fulfilling Lenny Abrahamson's condemnation

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Abstract: *In 2017, director Lenny Abrahamson claimed that Irish television drama was characterised by 'lack of vision' and 'dysfunctional mediocrity'. Now, a number of years on, it seems RTÉ drama has only worked to fulfil this prophecy, with the height of in-house creativity being variations of romanticised drug lord laments. Television Drama has long been recognised as a powerful medium for social discourse, and notably, National Television Broadcasters have an added opportunity to speak on national issues. With Ireland having no shortage of social issues to explore, it is worth asking why RTÉ fail to make meaningful, diverse content. The following article offers an analysis of RTÉ television drama through the lens of Abrahamson's condemnation, using the Danish Broadcasting Corporation as a benchmark for the role of a national television broadcaster and television drama.*

Keywords: *Television drama, public service broadcasting, Raidió Teilifís Éireann, Lenny Abrahamson, social realism*

Introduction

Television drama has historically been an opportunity for social discourse and debate, with many critically acclaimed television shows providing insightful observations on society (Brennan, 2000). You would think given the fact that Ireland has no shortage of social issues for discussion that RTÉ would have an abundance of inspiration for poignant television drama, but this has not been the case. Accomplished Irish director Lenny Abrahamson has claimed that Irish television drama is characterised by a "lack of vision" and "dysfunctional mediocrity." The following essay will look to argue in favour of this view, highlighting that the lack of vision in RTÉ is rooted in insufficient leadership, unambitious production aims, lack of diverse content, and exportation of Irish talent, which combined are creating dysfunctional mediocre content.

Discussion

When looking to investigate the current landscape of Irish television drama the key player up for analysis is RTÉ. Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) is Ireland's national public broadcaster and is responsible for the production of native Irish television drama. While it is often highlighted that RTÉ currently operates with a fraction of the production budget of broadcasters such as the BBC or streaming platforms such as Netflix (Free, 2020) there are comparable broadcasters such as the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, who have made a globally recognised impact through their television drama production. Throughout the following essay, the Danish Broadcasting Corporation will be used as a benchmark for RTÉ's television drama production.

The general academic discourse surrounding Irish television drama is one of disappointment (Sweeney, 2016). Whereas we historically saw a golden age of television in both the UK and the US, Ireland it seems has never built any momentum (ibid). Instead, there have been once-off shows that have received critical acclaim from academics such as "Family" by Roddy Doyle, or Lenny Abrahamson's 'Prosperity' which saw for a brief period the influence of British social realism on Irish television drama (ibid). While there are a number of successful dramas that have been produced in the past decade with Irish writers, producers, and actors behind them, such as "Normal People" or

“Derry Girls”, these shows were not produced by an Irish broadcaster. This highlights an integral issue within RTÉ’s drama department, which is sitting back as much of our Irish talent goes abroad in search of funding.

When looking to understand the current vision for Television drama in RTÉ the first step is to see who is overseeing its production. The Head of Drama would be the individual responsible for overseeing RTÉ’s drama production, as they are typically “responsible for the creative strategy” and production of drama within the television broadcaster (Televisual, 2019). Currently, there is no dedicated Head of Drama in RTÉ, with David Crean being the current acting Head of Drama (RTÉ, 2023b). The very fact that RTÉ has not hired a new Head of Drama means that they are not prioritising the department and given that nobody is leading the department this in turn has led to a lack of vision. According to the Danish Broadcasting Corporation model, one of the key elements of high-quality television drama is what they refer to as “one vision” (Redvall 2013). “One vision” refers to the importance of having a clear creative approach and vision across all production departments when creating television drama (ibid). This approach was spearheaded by DR’s Heads of Drama in the 1990s, in particular Rumle Hammerich, highlighting the importance and impact that a leader can have on a broadcaster’s vision (ibid). RTÉ is inherently missing this creative voice and direction as they do not have a dedicated Head of Drama to create and lead a vision for RTÉ drama.

Looking to gain a deeper understanding of RTÉ’s internal vision for television drama, the following section will look to analyse their publicly available aims and criteria for television drama. According to their site, “RTÉ’s drama strategy is dual purpose: to showcase Irish talent to Irish audiences; to develop Irish writers and producers and grow Irish owned IP” (RTÉ, 2023b). Additionally, they state that “Our approach is not only to build on the success of our recent drama, but to increase the volume of drama offered, and provide a range of shows with variety and tone that truly reflects the diversity of contemporary Ireland” (ibid). In order to better understand RTÉ’s proposed vision it is worth analysing some of these statements in detail. Firstly, RTÉ states that it has two main aims when creating drama productions, the first of which is to “showcase Irish talent to Irish audiences”. The issue with this statement however is it does not define a vision for RTÉ’s drama content but rather an aim from a casting and audience perspective. Additionally stating that you are showing Irish talent to your majority Irish audience is not necessarily an aim as an Irish television broadcaster, as your audience is going to be predominantly made up of the Irish public by default.

Their second aim according to RTÉ is “to develop Irish writers and producers and grow Irish-owned IP”. This is perhaps a more honourable aim as Ireland’s public service broadcaster as they try to increase their in-house productions rather than predominantly importing their drama content. RTÉ goes on to add some specifications for their content stating, “Our approach is not only to build on the success of our recent drama, but to increase the volume of drama offered, and provide a range of shows with variety and tone that truly reflects the diversity of contemporary Ireland”. It is expected that a broadcaster, much like any company, would look to build on their current successes and look to further increase production, this point merely stating that they wish to continue to grow their drama production. Some sort of vision finally becomes apparent with their aim to provide a range of diverse shows that cater to the diverse Irish population. While this could be seen as a broad vision for RTÉ’s drama, it is also reminiscent of the generic obligations of a public service broadcaster. Additionally, as we will see later on, this aim to reflect a diverse Ireland is more of a pipeline dream than an aim. Either way with no Head of Drama, even if they had a vision, who would ensure it was being brought to fruition?

When we compare RTÉ’s aims to that of other public service broadcasters such as the BBC and Channel 4, it highlights the lack of vision and ambition at RTÉ. The BBC for example states that they are looking to capture the hearts of viewers with “bold, British storytelling that reflects real life

without shying away from social issues like domestic violence, alcoholism and knife crime” while ensuring their shows have a “diverse agenda” (BBC, 2023). With a history of pushing boundaries in broadcasting, Channel 4 states that its mission is to “innovate and keep our titles fresh” while they “strive to push creative and technical boundaries” (Channel 4,2023). While the BBC and Channel 4 bring their missions to fruition through the creation of diverse dramas such as “I May Destroy You”, “Normal People” and “Ackley Bridge”, RTÉ’s drama output does not live up to their proposed “aims”. The following section will look at their output of Irish television drama in more detail and the existing academic response to Irish television drama.

Currently, RTÉ has not published an Independent Productions Annual Report for 2022, therefore the following data is from their 2021 report. In 2021 RTÉ had two independently produced dramas, which were “Kin” and “Hidden Assets”. Both of these shows were crime dramas, “Kin” following a Kinsella family operating within the Dublin underground drug world, and “Hidden Assets” “a six-part international crime thriller shot on location in Limerick and Antwerp” (RTÉ, 2021). More recently RTÉ has broadcast “The Dry” and “Smother” as well as a new season of “Kin” (RTÉ,2023a). It is worth noting that both “Smother” and “The Dry” were not purely RTÉ productions but rather co-productions with other production companies such as the BBC and ITV Studies (IMDb, 2023a/IMDb, 2023b). When it comes to upcoming drama in production RTÉ is currently working on a number of original dramas due to go out later this year such as “Clean Sweep”, “The Gone”, “Obituary”, and “Hidden Assets 2” (RTÉ, 2023a).

One of the key issues with the current output of Irish television drama is the lack of diverse genres. According to RTÉ, they are currently looking for fresh content, as they request screenplay applicants to “avoid following trends or mimicking what others have done”, RTÉ apparently set on creating their own trends (RTÉ, 2023b). However, RTÉ seem to be doing the exact opposite, many of their newer shows being oddly similar to their previous shows. If you take a look at RTÉ’s recent productions a substantial proportion of them are either crime dramas or thrillers. When looking at one of their recent headline series “Kin” you cannot help but notice the almost identical themes and topics to that of their popular 2010 series “Love/Hate” not to mention the recurring casting of Aidan Gillen. “Love/Hate” was RTÉ’s most commercially successful series, running for 6 seasons (Ging, 2017). It seems not only are RTÉ sticking to the same genres, but they are not even doing those genres justice.

While “Love/Hate” received some positive responses from critics who compared it to the television drama benchmark, “The Wire”, it did receive a high level of criticism from critics and academics (O’Toole, 2013). One of the main criticisms of “Love/Hate” was its lack of social commentary and inability to transcend genre (O’Toole, 2013). High-quality television drama has the capacity to embody what Mills refers to as the ‘sociological imagination’, sparking conversation about concerns about problems in society through the personal experience of its characters (Brennan, 2000). According to the dogmas that guide the highly successful Danish Broadcasting Corporation, ensuring television drama has “double storytelling”, serving both an entertainment function and a broader sociological and philosophical message, is an integral element of high-quality television drama (Redvall 2013). Historically there have been shows that have on the service been crime dramas such as “The Sopranos” but that look to transcend genre and provide the audience with a broader social commentary. While on the surface “The Sopranos” is a gangster show the series was not limited by this genre but rather transcended it by focusing on the female characters and additionally providing social commentary through a focus on politics (O’Toole, 2013).

This is where “Love/Hate” fell short of high-quality television drama, fulfilling Abrahamson’s prognosis of ‘dysfunctional mediocrity’. While the show provided us with an engaging plotline surrounding crime, drugs, and gangs in Dublin, it did not go any deeper (McGuirk cited by Ging, 2017). “Love/Hate” lacked any sort of social commentary past that of the luxurious, dangerous lives of male

drug dealers (O'Toole, 2013). Some academics go as far as to argue that the show actually reinforces misogynistic masculinity, with the female characters being complicit and underdeveloped (Nagle cited by Ging, 2017/O'Toole, 2013).

It seems that RTÉ's only vision when it comes to these television dramas such as "Love/Hate" and "Kin" is ensuring they are applicable for sale to overseas broadcasters and streaming services (Sweeney, 2020). "Love/Hate" for example was bought by Netflix and exported to markets in Brazil, Singapore, Israel, Australia, South Korea, and New Zealand and has been aired in the UK and US (Ging, 2017). "Kin" has similarly been championed by RTÉ due to its overseas sales to territories including North America, the UK, and Australia (RTÉ, 2021).

This focus on exportability is highlighted in Irish drama's generalities of place, with many Irish crime and thriller series being a vague amalgamation of themes and styles. An example of such is RTÉ's crime series "Dublin Murders" which despite its title was predominantly filmed in Newry and Belfast, creating a loose sense of place (Sweeney, 2020). Ironically, many Irish-based dramas, such as "Derry Girls", have been a phenomenal success while being unapologetically Irish and specific about their location, accents, and historical period (ibid). Creating content such as this however requires courage, something which seems to be lacking in RTÉ, "Derry Girls" being produced by Channel 4 even with its inherent Irish roots. While a generic location is perfect for crime show algorithms and a global appeal on Netflix or Hulu it says a lot about RTÉ's vision as a public service broadcaster that they are more concerned with their customer's algorithms than telling an authentic Irish story (Sweeney, 2020).

Finally, while RTÉ is focusing so intently on creating content that can be exported to the larger streaming market, they are allowing some of Ireland's most valuable screenplays to leave the country and be funded and produced externally by broadcast corporations such as the BBC and Channel 4. Take Aisling Bea's series "This Way Up" for example. This 2019 comedy-drama follows the life of an Irish woman living in London who is recovering from severe mental health problems. Interestingly the themes of this show are similar to that of "The Dry", which is only now being co-funded by RTÉ, the broadcaster being slow to catch up with the type of content that is popular with Irish audiences. This show is just one of many high-quality, Irish-focused, television dramas which have been produced abroad rather than natively and then bought by RTÉ. The depressing reality is that RTÉ is currently creating generic Irish television dramas to export, only to import the high-quality work of Irish talent that they were not willing to fund.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Lenny Abrahamson's critics of Irish television drama appear to be playing out right before our eyes following the 9 o'clock news on a Sunday evening. RTÉ need to be braver. They need to shake off the trauma of their past catholic guilt and take on stories that resonate with people other than those who like to marvel at the drug lords of Dublin. With pressing issues such as climate change, homelessness, and a cost-of-living crisis they are not short of social issues to speak about in Ireland, they simply need to have the guts to choose one.

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