

The School of Hard Sums

It is fair to say Dara O'Briain gets about. Whether he is hosting *Mock the Week*, or working alongside Brian Cox on *Stargazing*, or teaming up for *Three Men in a Boat*, we don't find ourselves saying 'If only Dara weren't so underexposed.' And thank God for that – I am a huge fan. His *Live at the Theatre Royal* stand-up DVD has pride of place in our collection; it's awesome in its relaxed virtuosity. So it was with mixed feelings that I heard Dara was taking on the lead in a popular maths show. How would this end? With one of my heroes raised yet one more step towards sainthood? Or with me tearing up the aforesaid DVD in pain and pity?

I gave the show a chance. *The School of Hard Sums* (a Dave production) is modelled on an Emmy-nominated Japanese show that tackles the same subject matter. Dara was initially dubious. 'But when they reminded me how many other stars had made their names in the past with Japanese Mathematics shows; people like Bruce Forsyth, Cilla Black and Sooty, who am I to argue with a list like that? So I said 'arigato!'"

The format is intriguing. Dara is the host-comedian-mathematician who has invited a friend-comedian-non-mathematician along for the ride. The equally ubiquitous Marcus de Sautoy gamely plays the setter-professor-explainer, while in the background are two bright young university maths students. Dara tackles a problem with his trusted mathematics, while the guest comedian, sometimes with the help of members of the public, uses a mixture of brute force, common sense and trial and error.

The problems are usually well-known to veteran puzzlers; it's hard to believe Dara has never seen any of them before. With three attempts at each, from Dara, his friend and the students, the chance of a solution is high. But the show does have a genuine and competitive feel to it. When Dara is beaten by fellow Irishman David O'Doherty, his petulance is obvious, as though he is within an inch of throwing down his pen and flouncing off, saying 'Well, I never liked maths anyway.'

The formula took a while to get going. The comedians are stretched by the challenge of riffing on maths – some are overawed by a subject they may have been daunted by years ago. Marcus de Sautoy tried initially to be the third comedian; bad idea. Dara's no-holds-barred one-liners left him looking uneasy, but he has gradually found his niche in the show. And there are nice touches, like Dara writing authoritatively onto a window, as all good mathematicians should. By the end of watching the second programme, I was convinced – this works.

Dara again: "It's not like the kids are going to go, 'Wow, what is that large bald fat man doing now that we should all do? He is the weathervane of cool!' I'm more interested in entertaining those who already enjoy the thing.' Well, thank you to Dave, Dara and the team – *The School of Hard Sums* does exactly that.

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