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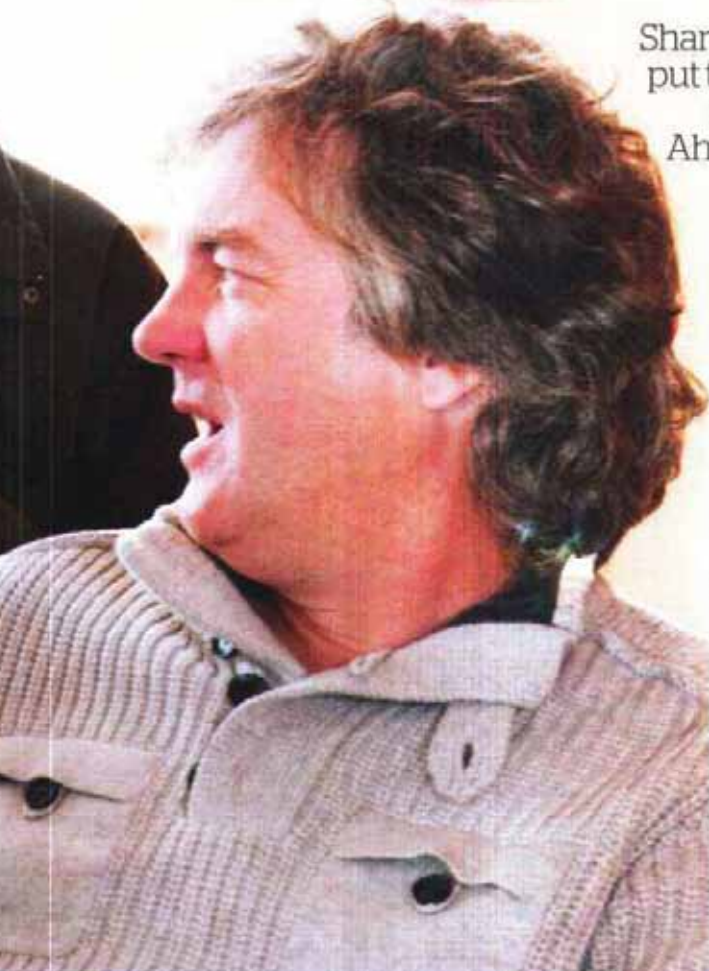
All throw up!

TopGear Live

Shane Jacobson's nerves are put to rest before hosting his first TopGear Live show. Ah, with friends like these...

Words: Andy Enright

Photography: Justin Leighton



SHANE JACOBSON ISN'T often lost for words, but the gravity of what he's committed to is just sinking in. He stands quietly with his hands in his pockets, gazing out at row upon row of empty seats at Dublin's Citywest Arena. Seats that will be filled in a couple of hours by thousands of expectant faces when he co-hosts his first TopGear Live, a prelude to taking the show's day-long festival format to Australia in March. I need to find out what Shane's thoughts are, but right now he looks like he could use some quiet contemplation. Jeremy Clarkson has other ideas.

"Wankers!" he shouts. It's a novel microphone check, but it serves its purpose. Hammond and May appear, dwarfed by the vast floorspace and clamber into vehicles built solely from white goods. Clarkson is at the wheel of an eight-metre-long dragster powered by 12 food blenders, supercharged by two microwave ovens and steered haphazardly by a Dyson vacuum cleaner ball at the front. May is squeaking along in a contraption built from tumble dryers while Hammond is driving an ironing board. And winning, much to Clarkson's disgust.

I would expect the full heft of the BBC's legal team to descend upon me if the video I shot ever made it to YouTube, but in terms of imaginative swearing, Clarkson is almost up there with the Irish.

Citywest is a bilingually ironic venue for the Irish leg of TopGear Live. With the country recently humiliated by a cap-in-hand economic bailout by the European Union, it seems apt to >

be hosting the event at a place that has just gone bust to the tune of €170m (AU\$224m). Vast halls contain nothing but carpet and the odd plastic chair. There are huge concrete eagles out front, but the glass doesn't fit in the atrium windows and likely never will. The money has run out, but Shane doesn't seem too bothered. Not when there's evidence of the last knockings of Ireland's decadent times backstage as the show's supercars turn up.

Car jockeys, cleaners, mechanics, and the ubiquitous bloke with clipboard and earpiece are double parking Lamborghinis, Ferraris, McLarens and Aston Martins cheek by jowl with the show's stunt motors and Reliant Robin football cars. "I've got six cars, four of which are Holdens, but I love all of this stuff," Shane grins, trying to slip between a Countach and a 458 Italia as a Jag XJ220 is reversed towards us.

A professional golfer has loaned his 520kW BMW M3 for the show's parade, and his chaperone is standing next to Shane as it's driven into the hall for the pre-show rehearsal. Clarkson's opinion comes booming backstage. "This will be driven by a bald, friendless, talentless waste of blood and organs. An utter wanker with a massive Mont Blanc pen, shiny teeth and Oakley sunglasses on his way to do a deal with a bank that has no money."

The golfer goes pale: "Is he going to say that in the show?" A PR girl manages to convince him that Clarkson was talking about another car.

Before the rehearsals, I manage to grab a few minutes with Shane, Hammond and May, with a film crew from *A Current Affair* in tow. The festival format is being carried over to the shows in Brisbane and Melbourne, and it's a very different gig than before. The Dublin leg is three days of time-attack racing, drifting, show and shines, big-rig trucks, stunt displays and the chance to ride in the supercars.

Shane blags his way into a World Rally Corolla for a run round the Sprint course while I try to interview a bunch of Irish drift boys, but can't understand a word they're saying. My translator informs me that they reckon it's a massive improvement on a static car show before we're drowned out by a 1970s F1 car at full chat. It seems Dublin has some very liberal municipal noise ordinances. After we left, it snowed and they still ran the F1 car for the crowd. That's commitment.

While Shane has fronted up more than a few live gigs, I can tell by his bullishness that he doesn't quite know how these TopGear Live shows run. Hammond fortunately has some sage advice. "When you've done two or three shows in a day, the best way to prepare for the next day's shows is to go out with all the people making the show and drink. Drink lots."

"Ideally until the next show starts," adds May. "And you'll be standing there feeling shit," continues Hammond. "You might throw up. You'll do that once and you *know* it the next day. TopGear Live falls foul of trade descriptions with the Live bit when sometimes I'm only half alive, which pushes the definition a bit. TopGear Praying For Death sometimes."

Clarkson arrives, gives Shane a clap on the shoulder, tells him he's lost weight and sits behind him, the pair of them looking like the world's most inept kayaking team. "What have

we covered in terms of what you've got to do? Have you covered the being sick on stage?" says Clarkson.

"Yes, we've done that," May notes. "Have we done the one where you're sitting in the car backstage and you can hear the voice of God saying, 'Ladies and gentlemen, would you please welcome your host for this evening...' and you're sitting there thinking, 'I physically *cannot* do this.' Because you have so much to drink the night before that you are in such a terrible state that you think, 'I can't.' Your face is green. I'm only referring now to Birmingham because there isn't anywhere else in the world that's quite so bad."

By now, Shane is looking bewildered as the conversation starts to unravel. "It's my home town," adds Hammond by way of sheepish explanation.

Clarkson is on a roll now. "Yes. His home town. And everyone in the audience is like him. Diminutive. Stupid. And you think, 'I can't do it. I can't do it. I can't do it,' and suddenly your feet move, you get out of the car and you go, 'Hello Birmingham!' and you've got an out-of-body experience. You're performing and you don't know why and then it finishes and you go into a massive slump and the black dog bites you."

Shane now looks a little uneasy. The prospect of performing with a hungover manic depressive is one thing. More advice is forthcoming, this time from Hammond.

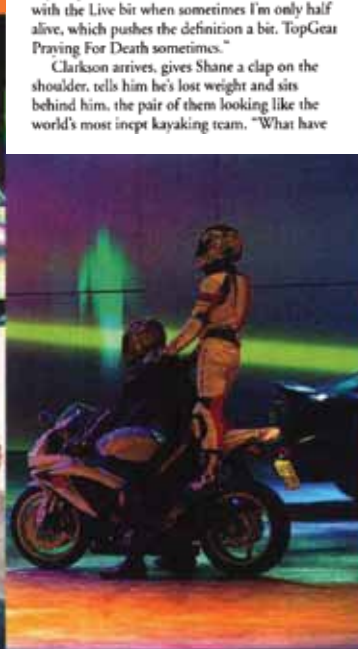
"This is very important and it will happen, but at some point in the show one of these two – or indeed you – will forget what they're doing next."

Clarkson takes up the thread. "You see the look. >

"No, no, no...
I paid for a plain
beige respray"



"Okay, free punch.
Just don't touch
the face"

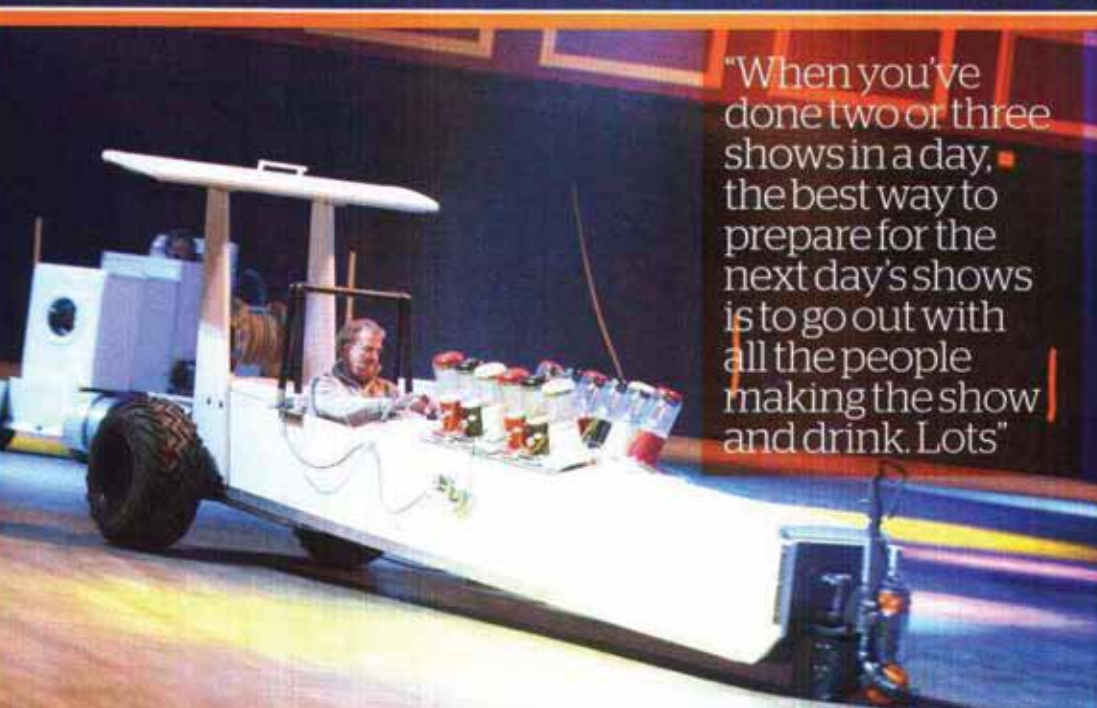


“There is a high likelihood you’ll be killed or maimed. I have yet to finish a show without some kind of injury. I always have blood coming out of me at the end of every show”





Noose fitted
Hammond's
execution could
finally begin



"When you've done two or three shows in a day, the best way to prepare for the next day's shows is to go out with all the people making the show and drink. Lots"



That panicked look in the eyes. If I'm feeling kind I'll pick up the line and nobody will ever notice. What we normally do is go (crosses arms and grins smugly). You'll see the arms crossed, we'll look right into your eyes and you'll just go AAAAGGGHH!"

Surely May can bring some calming advice? "It comes to the point when none of us can remember what's next." That'll be a no, then.

Jeremy explains how the current show works. "There are obviously massive stunts, cars catching fire, a girl with petrol pumps on the end of her arms, really dramatic stuff, Stig driving a car that becomes see-through. And people think this is incredible, this is what the show's about, but that's not strictly true.

"Each one of those segments is designed to last the exact length of a Marlboro Light. We go backstage, have a cigarette and then come back on stage and if you look carefully, if you're in the audience, all three of us are exhaling the last breath, and then you come off stage at the end and there will be someone in a high-visibility jacket reminding you that you're in a no-smoking country. To which we point out that there might be other crimes they want to look into."

Wind Jeremy up and you can't stop him. "Here's another one which we can't actually transmit on the television program. We're miked-up so we can hear each other, >

okay, but the audience can't hear. We can only hear each other. As we drove out in South Africa last year, Hammond's coming towards me and I can't remember what he's done wrong, but I actually said, 'Hammond, you silly c***.' What I hadn't heard was the producer say: 'And your mikes are up in 3, 2, 1...' So the audience hear, 'Please welcome your hosts, Jeremy Clarkson and Richard Hammond. C***.' Not silly c***. C*** was the first word they got. You get the moment where there's a different sound, an echo in your earpiece. And it was in South Africa where there are lots of children. If it was Australia, it would have been fine.

"I think Shane was chosen because he's exactly like Richard Hammond in every way," muses May.

"An irritating little c***?" asks Jeremy. I look over to the film crew's director who has his head in his hands.

Hammond tries to bring things back on track with more sensible advice for Shane. "There is a high likelihood that you'll be killed or maimed," he says.

"I have yet to complete a show without some kind of injury. I always have blood coming out of me at the end of every show," notes Clarkson. "Have you been to one of the shows before?"

"This is my first one," Shane says sheepishly. "You've never seen it?"

"No."
"Have you played car football?"
"No."

By now, Shane Jacobson looks like, like... "A victim!" cries Clarkson triumphantly. "Victim?"

Hammond is enjoying this. "Yep. You're going to be a victim. You'll think it's just

a game at first, but we get really upright about it and really want to win."

"I really enjoy it because I don't take part. I just stand there and watch people. I'm the ref," adds Clarkson.

"He spends most of his time looking at pretty girls in the crowd," May snoots.

"In Australia it'll be different because I'll be concentrating on the game. Most of the people who come in Australia are men. Australia is the only audience in the world where it's 95 per cent male. South Africa is 60 per cent women. England is a lot of children. Australia is entirely different so you've just got to be a man. Doesn't matter, though. The format works virtually anywhere."

Shane brings the conversation back to the TV show: "The best advice I got about presenting was, 'Have fun. If you're given a good car, thrash it. If you're given a bad car, thrash it. If you're given one in between, steal it. It's not your insurance. It's not your concern.'"

This clearly resonates with the Brits. Hammond adds: "More broadly, never expect to be invited back anywhere."

"We've never been invited back anywhere," muses May.

"Leave quickly. At night. In a discreet car," Hammond instructs.

Shane sees the home straight. "Well, it's been a pleasure to be on board and a privilege. Big shoes to fill. These people are the Jesus of the format."

"You may have overstepped it now," frowns Hammond.

"Have I? With the Jesus thing?" □

Worship at the altar of cocking about in cars when TopGear Live arrives at Brisbane Entertainment Centre, March 3-6, 2011, and Melbourne Showgrounds, Mar 11-14, 2011

American tourist attempted his first parallel park

