

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Sir Terry Wogan

**MY LONG AND HAPPY JOURNEY WITH THE
EUROVISION SONG CONTEST**

Eurovision TV Summit, 6 May 2009

My long and happy journey with the Eurovision Song Contest began in Dublin, in 1971. Probably before many of you here tonight were born. I had left Ireland, and Radio Telefis Eireann in late 1969, to begin a daily radio show for the BBC. I had been the Senior Announcer on RTE radio, but from 1966, worked occasionally for BBC Radio. Eventually, the DG of RTE called for me. I knocked on his door. "Come in! Ah, Wogan. Where the carpet starts, you stop!" I knew then that my future was elsewhere... Although when I began to work for BBC TV, I realised that attitudes to mere presenters were no different. We were as hobbledehoys, strolling players, who ought to be grateful for the work. My first contract offered me third class rail travel to the outside broadcast. The producer and his secretary travelled first class. I suspect that many executives in the BBC, and many of you here tonight wish that it was still so... Presenters, the talent, they've got too big for their boots! Take that damned Wogan, sending up and making fun of our Great Eurovision Song Contest every year. Who does he think he is? Why doesn't the BBC control him, tell him what to say, get rid of him? Well, I thought I'd leave, before they did....

Back in 1971, the Contest was staged in a small Dublin music hall, the Gaiety Theatre. For an ordinary play or show, it had seating for no more than a thousand people. For the Eurovision, with all the paraphernalia of cameras, sound, lighting, commentary booths, and an orchestra, there couldn't have been more than 4 to 5 hundred in the audience. About 15 countries took part, the presenters were confined to a box overlooking the stage. What a contrast to last year in Belgrade, or Athens, and Copenhagen in a football stadium, with 30,000 people, vodka shots being sold in the aisles, and the commentary positions so far away from the stage, I might as

well have done it from a monitor in London...Perhaps it might have been just as well if I had.... A Danish journalist had caught my commentary on BBC Prime, and it seemed that I had insulted Denmark's honour by not taking the production seriously, and referring to the two presenters as "Dr. Death and the Tooth Fairy". But they were like two characters from a fairy tale, making all their announcements in rhyming couplets. What commentator wouldn't see the silly side of that? Well, only me, apparently...Now, whenever I pass through Copenhagen Airport, I have to wear a paper bag over my head....Countries can be very sensitive about how they're seen on the Eurovision : A couple of years ago, the entry from Hungary had dancers cavorting round a campfire, and in passing, I commented "Play gypsy, play!" I was inundated within hours with insulted e-mails from Hungary, accusing me of calling all Hungarians "Gypsies". Several of them describing in lurid detail what would happen to me if I ever showed my face in Budapest...Dangerous work, commentating. I remember the Contest staged in Luxembourg, when the terrorist threat of Black September meant that the hall was ringed by armoured cars and heavily armed troops. Inside, just before the show started the floor manager announced : "Do not stand up to applaud during the show, or you may be shot by security". It had a slightly depressing effect on the show. .. There were moments of real history as well : That memorable evening in Stockholm in the 70's when the Portuguese entry came on stage with carnations in the barrels of guns, and signalled the revolution that overthrew Salazar...And the moments of high drama : In Jerusalem, the previous year's winner, Dana International, awarding the Grand Prix, tripped over his/her six-inch heels, and fell flat on the stage. Immediately three members of Mossad flung themselves on top of the unfortunate Dana, thinking it was an assassination attempt...I had presented the song contest from Birmingham, UK the year Dana International won, and I'm bound to say that I did laugh heartily, remembering how Dana had decided to change her dress when it was announced that she/he was the winner. Leaving me standing speechless in front of one hundred million viewers, while she changed...That was tough, particularly as I had not only presented the show, but after every announcement, had to jump off the stage and run round the back to do the commentary. I lost weight that evening...Presenting the Eurovision's a hard job, usually requiring more than three languages, and it's interesting to see how different nation's see the job: Was it Estonia where the two presenters sang into each others faces like Nelson Eddy and Jeanette McDonald, while pretending to fall in love ? Why, for goodness sake? It's not romance, it's not a musical comedy. The

only chemistry necessary between the two presenters ought to be pleasant good humour...It was Kiev where the female had an American accent and a voice that would strip paint, it was definitely Rome, Italy, where the male presenter, who had been behaving all evening as if he was auditioning for a part in a Quentin Tarantino movie, decided to argue from the stage with the invigilator, the great Franck Naef. Italy hasn't taken part since. Which is a shame for the home of opera, and the great San Remo festival, which I think was the inspiration for the Eurovision.... And it can only have been Sweden where the lady pretended that her skirt had been torn off by the scenery, as she announced the next song in her knickers... Ah, if only I could remember half the foolishness...And you ask me if I love the Eurovision? How could I not? The French entry last year had the singer coming on stage in a golf buggy, another, whose nationality escapes me, had washing hanging out on a line..Ireland's entry, a puppet turkey...surely nobody in their right mind can take deliberate silliness seriously...The interval acts, which over the years have ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous : Ireland's magnificent "Riverdance", which went on to be a hugely successful international show in it's own right. And then I remember a night, I think it was Malmo, Sweden, when an elaborate routine involving tubes and tunnels that took 10 minutes to set up, and was supposed to culminate, as in the legend of William Tell, with an arrow piercing an apple on a young boys head, culminated instead, after all the preparation and the flashing lights, with the arrow missing the apple...As to interval acts, could I make a plea on behalf of all radio commentators? Could you make sure that they're musical? Trying to commentate for fifteen minutes, on Mime acts, jugglers or clowns or any kind of silent performance, that the listeners can't see, is not easy, to say the least, and usually results in the radio commentator handing back to his home network for a selection of Eurosong hits...

I'm not here to criticise, I'm here to extol the virtues of the world's greatest international television event, but if I might make just one little professional point : Please, producers, don't try to be funnier than the Contest. I'm thinking particularly of the Green Room section of the show, when the votes are coming in. Every year, it's an unfunny, unmitigated disaster, as two other presenters try to inject a spirit of knockabout, spontaneous humour into the event. Look, the Eurovision is exciting, camp, foolish, spectacular fun. You can't top it. You can't top it with amateurish, unstructured, silliness. Just talk to the performers. Let their excitement and laughter speak for itself...

Because, ladies and gentlemen, that's what the Eurovision Song Contest is about : Fun. It's Light Entertainment, the biggest of its kind anywhere in the

world, and certainly over the last few years, the most brilliantly produced 3 and a half hours of live television ever seen...But, it's not about politics, it's not about asserting your place in the Community, it's not about national pride. It's not about flag-waving. It's not a war. It's a Song Contest. It's great to celebrate when your country's song wins. Just remember, the following day, every other country has forgotten about it. It's a marvellous, colourful occasion, but it's a one-night wonder, like all television programmes ; In one eye, and out the other, and what's new on the box tonight...It's not an opportunity to show your next door neighbour how much you love them, it's not an opportunity to show some more distant country how much you dislike them. It's about picking the best popular song in Europe, and having as much fun as we can in the process of doing it.

That's what I've tried to bring to the Contest that I love : A spirit of joy, the sheer fun of it. Through the many years I've been accused of not taking the contest seriously enough, of sending it up, of jeering it, of not showing enough respect. Wrong. I'm a friend of this Contest, possibly it's oldest friend. How do friends behave to each other ? Do they flatter each other, like lovers? Are they sycophantic ? Do they constantly tell each other what they want to hear? Do real friends pretend ? Do they tell each other little white lies?

No. Real friends tell each other the truth. They don't indulge in idle flattery. They send each other up, they make fun of each other. If a friend does something silly, you tell him so, and you laugh at him, just as he would at you. Friends may laugh at your expense, but never hurtfully. That's the spirit in which this Contest should take place every year, the spirit in which I've been presenting it since 1971. It's that spirit of unity and friendship among the nations of Europe that was behind the beginning of this great enterprise. You must never, no matter how big this Contest may become in the future, never forget what it's really about : Nations coming together in friendly, musical competition.... I'm immensely flattered that you have invited me to speak to you. It's a memory I will carry with me as warmly as my memories of all the Eurovisions that I was privileged to attend. I've already made my farewells to the great British public, and now I must make them to you.

Keep the flames of friendship and song burning. I'll be watching.....

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