Episode Book

EPISODE #5687

The Speech Scientist Behind Teletubbies

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SYNOPSIS

What if the strangest preschool show ever made was actually the most rigorously researched? Teletubbies turns out to be the work of Andrew Davenport — a trained speech scientist and experimental performance artist — who built the show around how toddlers actually acquire language rather than how adults think they should be taught. This episode traces that thesis through the show's design choices, from the astronaut-derived body proportions to the tummy screens that existed only because the BBC required real children on camera. Then it widens the lens: Fred Rogers, an ordained minister who entered television because he hated it, spent thirty years applying child psychology to preschoolers' inner lives — including an episode about Robert Kennedy's assassination that aired two days after the shooting. The weirdness, it turns out, was load-bearing all along.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

There's a moment in the mailbag that we didn't plan for, which was the Teletubbies episode refusing to die. People kept sending it back.



Herman

The follow-ups outnumbered the original, which almost never happens.



Corn

So Daniel came back with a second one, and it's bigger than the first. His argument is that the weirdness was never the point. The point was that behind the weirdness sat a real idea about how adults should relate to children — about finding a language that meets them where they are instead of forcing our adult preconceptions onto people who learn language in a much more natural way.



Herman

That's the whole thing, right there.



Corn

He says what the show actually proved is that there's more to the Teletubbies than meets the eye, and that it was heartening to learn the people making this kind of media come to it from genuine passion. Then he tells us one of his own creative aspirations is an AI-generated children's show.



Herman

I wondered if that was coming.



Corn

And his framing for it — I want to get this right — is that the world of children is a kind of pure magic, and that when adults create for it, they get renewed by it. Almost symbiotic. Children believe in their own purity, and that purity refreshes the jaded world grown-ups live in.



Herman

Symbiotic is the right word for it. I've been chewing on that since he sent it.



Corn

So the ask is this. Find other artists who made content for children and were also pushing boundaries, even when the surface read as ordinary kids' programming. So let's start with the man who wrote the gibberish — because he wasn't guessing.



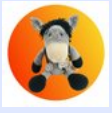
Herman

He absolutely was not guessing. Andrew Davenport studied speech sciences at University College London, nineteen eighty-three to eighty-seven. Vocational training for speech therapy. He went in intending to be a speech therapist.



Corn

And then didn't.



Herman

Then didn't. From eighty-eight to ninety-four he was working in experimental theatre and performance art. He worked with the conceptual performance artist Gary Stevens. He performed at the ICA, the Serpentine, the Hayward, the National Review of Live Art. He modelled for Gilbert and George's nineteen ninety-two piece Eyes.



Corn

So the man who wrote Eh-oh was a trained speech scientist and a performance artist.



Herman

That combination is the entire thesis of this episode. Everything strange about that show comes out of those two facts.



Corn

Anne Wood is the other half of it, and her path is different but just as unlikely. Trained as a teacher, then a children's book editor — she founded Books for Your Children magazine in nineteen sixty-five, the Federation of Children's Book Groups in sixty-nine, won the Eleanor Farjeon Award the same year. Founded Ragdoll Productions in eighty-four. Rosie and Jim, Tots TV, Brum, Boohbah, In the Night Garden.



Herman

All of which are strange in their own registers.



Corn

Teletubbies premieres the thirty-first of March, nineteen ninety-seven, on BBC2. And the reason his background matters is that it explains every strange choice the show made.



Herman

Start with his own account of why he built it the way he did. From a UCL alumni interview, and I'm going to give this close to verbatim because it's the clearest statement of the idea Daniel is reaching for. He says: "There was a tendency for makers of children's TV to come from a teaching background, and the accepted form often involved a presenter or teacher leading a group of puppets or children in learning things. It seemed to me to portray a situation alien to the culture of the younger preschool child."



Corn

Alien.



Herman

"They learn by self-motivated experimentation, establishing connections and patterns, by gradually assimilating rules and adapting them to accommodate new experiences. Television seemed uniquely well-equipped to address these processes."



Corn

That's a man in the mid-nineties saying the entire grammar of preschool television is wrong. The teacher at the front, the puppets as pupils, the lesson structure. He's saying that's not how a three-year-old experiences the world, so why are we building shows around it?



Herman

And he didn't just complain about it. He built the alternative. He described the show's rationale as developmental rather than educational. That's his phrase.



Corn

Which sounds like a small distinction and isn't.



Herman

It isn't, because it changes what you're allowed to put on screen. If the goal is education, you need to demonstrate something. You need A to lead to B. If the goal is development, you're modelling the conditions under which a child's own learning machinery runs. Repetition. Pattern. Anticipation and payoff. Cause and effect at the scale a toddler actually operates.



Corn

So the gibberish isn't gibberish.



Herman

The gibberish is the language. Eh-oh and uh-oh are phonetically simple, they're repeated constantly, they're tied to consistent events. That's exactly the structure of early language acquisition. He took what he knew about how children acquire sounds and rules and built a show out of it instead of building a show that taught those things explicitly.



Corn

The toddler proportions are the same move.



Herman

Same move. And here's the detail that always gets me. He got the characters from astronauts.



Corn

Say that again.



Herman

He was watching the Apollo eleven footage, and he noticed that in a bulky suit, with the helmet and the inflated body, a grown man has roughly the proportions of a toddler. Big head, short limbs, wide body. And the way they move in low gravity — bouncing, slow, deliberate, slightly clumsy — reads like how a very small child moves.



Corn

So he's watching the most important technological event of the century and what he takes from it is a body plan for a preschool character.



Herman

That's the mind you're dealing with. He's not cribbing from other children's shows. He's pulling from the Moon landing and from speech science and from performance art, and it all lands in the same design.



Corn

The tummy screens.



Herman

Great example of a constraint turning into an identity. The BBC required real children to appear on the show. But the Teletubbies are monster-sized relative to a child. You can't put a three-year-old next to a seven-foot creature and have anything read naturally. So the belly screens solve it. The children appear on film, inside the Teletubby, at a scale that works.



Corn

And that becomes the single most recognisable image from the show.



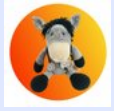
Herman

The thing people remember. And it exists because of a commissioning requirement. He didn't fight the constraint, he used it.



Corn

How seriously are we supposed to take his writing, though? Because it's easy to be charmed by the astronaut thing and the speech science and still file all of it under clever gimmickry.



Herman

Russell T Davies — who ran Doctor Who, who has written for the BBC for decades — has said he rates Davenport's writing alongside Tom Stoppard and Samuel Beckett.



Corn

Beckett.



Herman

Stoppard and Beckett. That's not a man being polite about a preschool show.



Corn

There's a reason that comparison isn't as mad as it sounds. Beckett is the great writer of repetition — of two people in a bare space, doing the same thing again, with the language pared down to almost nothing and the meaning carried by the pattern rather than the words. That's the Teletubbies.



Herman

And the industry recognised it too. In twenty fourteen it took the Prix Jeunesse award for Most Edgy Programme of the Last Fifty Years.



Corn

Most edgy.



Herman

Fifty years. That's a category covering everything anyone made for children in half a century, and they gave it to the show with the giggling vacuum cleaner.



Corn

What did the critics say at the time?



Herman

Variety's Ray Richmond called it plenty surrealistic, loaded with bizarre Peter Max-style imagery. The New York Times — Caryn James — said it was a appealing combination: cute and slightly surreal. It picked up a cult following among university students for exactly those psychedelic qualities.



Corn

Which is not a demographic anyone plans for.



Herman

No. But it's the tell. When adults watch a preschool show voluntarily and don't have a child in the room, something in the construction is doing more than the surface says.



Corn

Then there's the controversy, and I'd argue the controversy is evidence rather than noise.



Herman

Strong evidence. The Daily Mirror reported parents objecting to the goo-goo style, worried the babbling would damage their children's language development. Which, given Davenport's training, is a lovely inversion — the one man in British television who actually studied language acquisition is being told by the paper that he's wrecking it.



Corn

The Lion and Bear sketch.



Herman

A magical event sequence judged too unsettling, and banned in several countries. Still the strangest thing in a show that is nothing but strange things.



Corn

And then Jerry Falwell, nineteen ninety-nine.



Herman

Claims Tinky Winky is a gay role model. Because he's purple and his antenna is a triangle.



Corn

The BBC's response is one of my favourite sentences in the history of broadcasting.



Herman

"Tinky Winky is simply a sweet, technological baby with a magic bag." Which is a remarkable amount of dignity under fire.



Corn

The gay community embraced the character off the back of it. WildBrain later launched a Teletubbies Pride Collection supporting GLAAD.



Herman

So the show that critics said would harm children's language became a flashpoint in a culture war, and then, twenty-odd years on, a Pride campaign. That's a lot of second-order life for a show about four creatures eating toast.



Corn

Scale, for context.



Herman

Aired in over a hundred and twenty countries, forty-five languages. The single "Teletubbies say Eh-oh" hit number one in the UK in December ninety-seven, stayed in the Top Seventy-five for thirty-two weeks, sold over a million copies. Over a billion pounds in merchandise by two thousand.



Corn

A billion pounds.



Herman

From a speech sciences graduate who wanted to be a therapist.



Corn

So here's where I land on the whole thing. The weirdness was the surface, and the developmental theory was the substance, and the audience — including all those university students — responded to the substance without necessarily knowing it was there.



Herman

That's the mechanism. The weirdness was load-bearing.



Corn

Davenport is one instance of a pattern. And Daniel asked for the others.



Herman

He asked for it, so let's give him the others. Fred Rogers is the first name and arguably the most radical, and the reason people undersell him is that the surface is so gentle they assume there's nothing underneath.



Corn

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, sixty-eight to two thousand one.



Herman

He was an ordained Presbyterian minister who went into television because, in his words, "I hated it so, and I thought there's some way of using this fabulous instrument to nurture those who would watch and listen."



Corn

He hated television, so he went to work in it.



Herman

He studied child development at Pittsburgh and started a thirty-year collaboration with a child psychologist named Margaret McFarland, who shaped how he thought about children for the rest of his life. That's the equivalent of Davenport's speech sciences degree — a technical foundation nobody watching would guess at.



Corn

What did that foundation let him do?



Herman

It let him treat children's inner lives as serious. He did episodes on death, divorce, sibling rivalry, a new baby, moving house. And in June of sixty-eight, two days after Robert Kennedy was shot, he did a special about it. On air, for preschoolers, days after the event.



Corn

Two days.



Herman

Because he thought the alternative — saying nothing, letting children absorb it alone — was worse. That's a judgement about what children can handle that almost nobody was making at the time.



Corn

And the contrast with Sesame Street is the illuminating part.



Herman

Sesame Street is cognitive. Letters, numbers, school readiness. Mister Rogers is the psyche. Feelings, fear, anger, what to do with a thing you can't name. Same era, same medium, entirely different theory of what a child needs.



Corn

The Senate testimony.



Herman

Nineteen sixty-nine. He went before a Senate subcommittee that was about to cut funding for public broadcasting. He had the statement prepared. And instead of reading it, he recited the lyrics to one of his songs. "What do you do with the mad that you feel, when you feel so mad you could bite?"



Corn

He sang his way through a funding hearing.



Herman

Senator John Pastore, who had been openly impatient with the whole proceeding, said it gave him goosebumps. Congressional funding for public broadcasting went from nine million to twenty-two million.



Corn

Two days of testimony compressed into a song, and it more than doubled the budget.



Herman

Then the foot-bath. Nineteen sixty-nine. Rogers is soaking his feet in a wading pool on screen, and he invites Officer Clemmons, a Black police officer played by François Clemmons, to share the water. And Clemmons does, and then Rogers dries his feet with a towel.



Corn

In sixty-nine.



Herman

A white man and a Black man sharing a foot-bath on national children's television, in a year when that was a live fight in a lot of places. And François Clemmons was gay, which Rogers knew, and he kept him on the show for decades.



Corn

He answered every letter.



Herman

By hand. He called it a pastoral duty of sorts. And he described the space between the viewer and the television set as holy ground.



Corn

Holy ground.



Herman

Which is a minister's way of saying the screen is not a delivery mechanism. It's a place where something real happens between two people.



Corn

Now we go from holy ground to Paul Reubens, which is a jump.



Herman

It's a jump, and it's the clearest case anyone has of children's programming that was actually boundary-pushing art wearing a kids' show as a disguise. Pee-wee's Playhouse, eighty-six to ninety.



Corn

How did a Saturday morning kids' show get that much creative room?



Herman

Reubens got full creative control and a prime-time sitcom budget from CBS. Three hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars an episode. For Saturday morning. That number is the whole story — nobody had ever spent that on children's television, and the reason he got it is that he was a phenomenon and CBS wanted him badly enough to give away the keys.



Corn

And he spent it on underground artists.



Herman

The set and design were built by a troupe of punk and underground artists. Gary Panter, Wayne White, Ric Heitzman, Phil Trumbo. Aardman Animations did early work on it before Wallace and Gromit. Craig Bartlett, who later created Hey Arnold, worked on it.



Corn

Panter's line about it?



Herman

"This was like the hippie dream. It was a show made by artists. We put art history all over the show."



Corn

The music is the part that gets me.



Herman

Mark Mothersbaugh from Devo, Todd Rundgren, Danny Elfman, The Residents, Van Dyke Parks, Dweezil Zappa. And the theme song was sung by Cyndi Lauper under the pseudonym Ellen Shaw. Which is the single greatest piece of unnecessary secrecy in television.



Corn

Why the pseudonym?



Herman

Nobody's ever fully explained it. Which is why I love it.



Corn

And Reubens' own framing of what he was doing.



Herman

"I'm just trying to illustrate that it's okay to be different. Not that it's good, not that it's bad, but that it's all right. I'm trying to tell kids to have a good time and to encourage them to be creative and to question things."



Corn

The Bob Keeshan quote is the endorsement that matters, though, because Keeshan was Captain Kangaroo.



Herman

Decades of children's television behind him. And he said that with the possible exception of the Muppets, you can't find such creativity anywhere on TV.



Corn

Punk musicians, underground set designers, a prime-time budget, and it's read as a kids' show. Same pattern as Davenport, different ingredients.



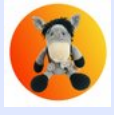
Herman

Then Yo Gabba Gabba, and this one is the most direct proof of Daniel's symbiosis idea, because the creators are exactly the people he's describing.



Corn

Two punk rockers from Southern California.



Herman

Christian Jacobs, who was the lead singer of The Aquabats, and Scott Schultz. Neither of them had ever worked in children's television. Neither had any background in education. They made a self-financed pilot and put it online, and Jared Hess — who directed Napoleon Dynamite — saw it and recommended it to Nickelodeon. That's the whole origin story.



Corn

And what they built was deliberately a dual-audience show.



Herman

Deliberately. The guest stars were indie and alternative music acts. Devo, The Flaming Lips, MGMT, The Shins, Weezer, My Chemical Romance, Erykah Badu, Biz Markie, Mark Mothersbaugh again, Weird Al Yankovic. The visual language came from eight-bit video games and H.R. Pufnstuf.



Corn

The title itself is a punk reference.



Herman

"Gabba gabba hey" is from the Ramones. They just put a Yo in front of it and made it a kids' show.



Corn

And it went to Coachella.



Herman

Two thousand ten, and again in twenty twenty-five. College audiences. James Poniewozik in Time said it will convince you someone slipped something into your Fruity Pebbles.



Corn

The learning model is the part I want to sit on.



Herman

They said the point was for parents and older siblings and younger children to watch together. Not to use the television as a babysitter. Which is, functionally, a statement about the family as a viewing unit rather than the child as an isolated consumer.



Corn

And it's still running. Yo Gabba GabbaLand on Apple TV Plus. First season August twenty twenty-four, second season January twenty twenty-six, with a twelve-year-old host now, Kammy Kam.



Herman

Which is its own interesting choice — aging the host up rather than down.



Corn

A few names worth a line each, because Daniel asked for a survey and we should give him one. Jim Henson. Oliver Postgate. The Krofft brothers. The Brothers Chaps.



Herman

Henson is the obvious one and doesn't need much — Sesame Street, The Muppet Show, Fraggle Rock. Puppetry as an art form rather than a delivery technology. TCA Award in nineteen ninety.



Corn

Postgate matters more here than people realise, because he's Davenport's absolute hero. Bagpuss, The Clangers, Ivor the Engine. Small, handmade, quietly strange British children's television made on almost nothing.



Herman

Sid and Marty Krofft — H.R. Pufnstuf, The Banana Splits. Psychedelic live-action puppet shows, and they're the direct visual ancestor of Yo Gabba Gabba. Jacobs and Schultz have said so.



Corn

And the Brothers Chaps — Homestar Runner — plus Julia Vickerman, later writers on Yo Gabba Gabba, bringing internet-native and indie-comics sensibilities into kids' TV.



Herman

Which is the bridge generation. That's the first wave of people whose formative creative education happened online, and they ended up writing for preschoolers.



Corn

Now, the symbiosis. Daniel's framing. And I want to actually test it rather than just admire it, because it's a big claim.



Herman

Test it, because I think it holds.



Corn

Pee-wee's Playhouse is the cleanest case. Adults making a kids' show that gave themselves and Gen X a creative outlet. Underground artists, punk musicians, comedians pouring their real aesthetic into children's programming — and adults watching it for the subversive energy of it, during the Reagan and Bush years.



Herman

That's not a side effect. That's the design. Reubens knew the adult audience was there and built for them.



Corn

Yo Gabba Gabba does the same thing with the Super Music Friends Show. That's not a watered-down kids' segment with a musician in it. It's a real creative platform. A band comes on and makes a genuine piece of work for toddlers.



Herman

And the bands took it seriously. That's the thing. Nobody phoned it in. You can hear it in the songs.



Corn

Rogers is the sacred version of the same idea. He framed the relationship as holy ground, and his words resurface every time there's a Sandy Hook, a Manchester, a Parkland. Adults go back to him for comfort. The show made for children becomes the thing adults reach for when the world breaks.



Herman

And Davenport is the purest version of it, because he's literal about it. He re-watches Oliver Postgate DVDs at the start of every project. His stated reason is to connect himself to the mind of the child he was when he first saw them.



Corn

A grown man putting on Bagpuss to get back to a way of seeing he lost.



Herman

That's the entire symbiosis argument in one habit. He's not making the show for the child. He's using the child he used to be to make the show. And then the show goes out and does the same thing to other adults.



Corn

Which is why the philosophy scales. In the Night Garden, two thousand seven to two thousand nine, built to give children a positive narrative around going to sleep. Two BAFTAs.



Herman

Moon and Me in twenty nineteen is where he gets almost absurd about it. He partnered with the University of Sheffield to run a study of children's play. They built a toy house with cameras and microphones in it and watched how kids actually played with it, and what came out was their real interests within small world play — stairs, doorbells, tea time.



Corn

Not what an adult would guess.



Herman

Not remotely. Nobody writing from an office would have put doorbells at the centre of anything.



Corn

And he won't use CGI.



Herman

Refuses it. Real objects, rod puppets, over five hundred miniature props, stop-motion filmed in camera. Every time. It costs him enormous amounts of time and money and he does it anyway.



Corn

Which is the point where Daniel's aspiration runs into something.



Herman

It does. And I want to be careful here because I think his instinct is good and the tension is real. His stated goal is an AI-generated children's show. Davenport's entire method is the opposite of what generative AI does by default.



Corn

Say more, because I think people will hear that and assume you're just being a purist about craft.



Herman

It's not purism. It's a claim about what actually communicates to a small child. Davenport rejects CGI and insists on handmade objects and in-camera filming because the materiality is the message. A puppet that exists has weight. It has imperfection. It has a person behind it whose hand you can almost feel. A very young child is reading all of that, even if they can't articulate any of it.



Corn

Tim Jonze in The Guardian credited his success to painstaking research and a slightly terrifying insight into these unknowable little minds.



Herman

Right. And the question for an AI-generated show is whether that insight can be produced without the research. I don't know. I'm not going to pretend I do.



Corn

There's also a safety dimension that isn't abstract.



Herman

There is. In twenty twenty-three, 404 Media published an investigation into an Andreessen Horowitz-funded AI image platform that found it had generated images that could be categorised as child sexual abuse material. That was discussed widely at the time.



Corn

Which is the thing traditional children's television spent decades building defences against.



Herman

Entirely. There's a safeguarding culture in that industry that outsiders don't see. Sets where visitors are blindfolded so they can't identify child performers, so the children can't be found later. Protocols layered on protocols. And AI children's media has no equivalent yet, because it's mostly individual developers working alone. Childbook, StoryBee, Zanki — these are small solo projects. Good-faith experiments, but there's no institutional machinery around them.



Corn

So the gap isn't the technology. It's the culture that grew up around the technology.



Herman

The culture is the part that took forty years to build. The models took eighteen months. That's the asymmetry.



Corn

One more current note to land on. In twenty twenty-five, Davenport and Anne Wood jointly received the J.M. Barrie Award for lifetime achievement in children's arts.



Herman

Twenty-eight years after Eh-oh. Still being honoured, still working, still the same philosophy.



Herman

The puppets were built heavier than they needed to be.



Corn

Sorry?



Herman

In a puppet workshop. I worked in one for a while, badly. They supplied rod puppets to a British children's production. And the puppets were always built slightly heavier than they had to be, on purpose.



Corn

Why heavier?



Herman

Because the performers wanted to feel the weight. A heavier puppet moves slower. Slower reads as more deliberate on camera. And the children watching read that deliberateness as care. That was the whole theory. Heavier puppet, slower movement, looks like it means it.



Corn

That's a design decision nobody would ever put in a document.



Herman

Nobody did. It was just known. You built them heavy because that's how they were built.



Corn

And the rejected ones?



Herman

There was a shelf of rejected heads in the workshop. Moulds that didn't make it. And nearly all of them had the same problem. They'd been made to look clever rather than to look like they were thinking.



Corn

Say that again.



Herman

A head made to look clever reads as clever. A head made to look like it's thinking reads as alive. The children can tell the difference. It was never written down anywhere. Everyone in the workshop knew it.



Corn

So the whole episode is on that shelf.



Herman

I'd say so. Everyone's talking about the writing and the theory and the awards, and that's all true. But the boundary-pushing was also in the objects. The props, the miniature furniture, the puppets. The reason he won't use CGI isn't nostalgia. It's that a real object has a real weight and a real imperfection, and a small child can tell the difference between a thing that was made and a thing that was generated.



Corn

So an AI children's show lives or dies on whether it can fake that weight.



Herman

It does. And I don't think it can. But I don't think that's a tragedy either. I think it means the show has to be about something else. There's more than one way to be honest with a child. That's all I've got. I'd like to get to the end of the shift.



Corn

The shelf of rejected heads. Heads made to look clever instead of made to look like they were thinking.



Herman

That's the tie on the whole thing. The boundary-pushing in children's media was never in the ambition. It was in the care. And care is material. It's weight and imperfection and a person deciding a puppet should be two ounces heavier than it needs to be.



Corn

Which leaves Daniel's question open. If the weight and imperfection of a handmade object is what speaks to a very young child, then what does an AI-generated children's show have to be about instead? Not less than that. Something else. And nobody knows yet what the something else is.



Herman

The J.M. Barrie Award in twenty twenty-five to Wood and Davenport is the note I'd end on. The work is still being honoured. The pattern is still live. Somebody's going to make the AI version, and the question is whether they've thought about the shelf of rejected heads.



Corn

If you've got a view on that, or a show we should have mentioned, write to us. Reviews help other people find the show. The producer of this program is Hilbert Flumingtop, who does not want to hear about any more puppets.



Herman

Not one more.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. We'll be back soon.