

FINNIGAN'S WAKE

As Richard and Judy get ready to quit daytime TV for a trendy late-night C4 slot, Christian Koch remembers their finest moments

It was the greying M&S bra that did it. When Judy Finnigan's velvet dress slipped open at a TV award show last year, Richard and Judy's status as national icons was confirmed. Judy, Queen of Daytime TV: the only woman in the UK who can bare her tits to 12 million people and walk away with her dignity, if not her dress, intact.

Since October 3, 1988, Richard and Judy have dispensed their homely wisdom to housewives, students and jobseekers. *This Morning* may have been responsible for five of the Most Embarrassing TV Moments Ever in a recent Channel 4 poll, but the show has found a place in the public conscience, becoming a demographic-straddling institution. Now, after 13 years, the couple have announced that they are defecting to late-night C4.

The show will be missed for so many reasons. Not least for the off-kilter chemistry between flicky-haired Madeley and his puffy wife. They are the weirdest couple in the history of television. She is eight years older, 'blancmange in a bikini' as a 1993 tabloid headline had it, and suffers a terrible short-term memory deficit ('What was the name of your murdered daughter?'). Richard has matinee-idol sheen and is prone to coming up with Alan Partridge-style ideas, like *This Morning Stars In Their Eyes Special!* and the house band – featuring him, naturally, on Fender Stratocaster. He's never really come to terms with being a man trapped in the feminised medium of daytime TV. When Richard went public about his vasectomy, he made sure that everyone knew that it was down to Judy's irregular ovulations.

The pair are good at empathising for a living, true. Compared to their holiday cover – the sycophantic John Leslie and mumsy Fern Britton – Richard and Judy seem like Jeremy Paxman and Kirsty Wark. Whenever they've attempted something weighty, however, they've messed up. When Tony Blair decided to grace *This Morning's* sofa in February 1999, he was quizzed on such heavy topics as

'should Deirdre Rachid be freed from jail?'

The show has engaged with youth culture like no other mainstream programme, introducing notions of 'cool' to an audience of mothers and pensioners. In 1992 it featured grunge tips for housewives. In 1995 it brokered Britpop bands. Björk, Orbital and Dom Joly have appeared as guests, and earlier this year two scruffbags were given 'Hoxton chic' style makeovers. The *pièce de résistance*, though, was Richard's risible appearance as Ali G last year, replete with chains, tracksuit and Tommy Hilfiger hat.

But if *This Morning* has made one outstanding contribution to the social fabric of New Britain, it has been its incongruously tolerant social attitudes. When the show started in 1988, the government was battling Aids with ads featuring portentous icebergs. Nine years later, Dr Chris Steele examined a man's bollocks on live TV as part of a campaign to get men to check for testicular cancer. 'Have you shaved them?' queried Judy. 'Er...yes,' the crimson-faced model mumbled, as he stood grasping his stem.

Since then, *This Morning* has hosted the first-ever televised gay wedding. They've road-tested Viagra and female orgasm creams, and a galaxy of streakers and murderers have dropped by.

Richard and Judy have always taken the piss out of the conventions of daytime TV – be it slagging off the autocue script or guffawing at the stupidity of the competition questions. Watching *This Morning* is, of course, an ironic exercise. You laugh with your flatmates about the frosty chemistry between Richard and Judy, or make witty remarks during 'Midday Money' (sample question: 'In which month is Christmas celebrated?'). Yet irony has proved to be the pair's undoing. The couple emerged in the era of Eighties US-style faux-compassion and their success was propelled by the same wave of mid-Nineties irony that turned Des Lynam and Rolf Harris into student union icons. Now, 13 years on, they've got the joke. Even Alistair McGowan's spoof of Madeley seems pointless, because Richard knowingly does it better himself.

Richard and Judy have become too aware of their own status as postmodern icons and their desire to cultivate an educated audience probably pre-empted their move to C4, home of alternative broadcasting. This is why the



Madeley-for-TV: debonair Richard comes to Judy's rescue at the National Television Awards, Oct 2000

new 'topical entertainment show', starting in October, is going to be a *Priory*-style failure. They'll be nothing more than a sad parody of their ITV selves. The show will no longer work on two levels, as they'll be passing themselves off as human punchlines for the benefit of C4's trendy viewers. Meanwhile, their core constituency of blue-rinse grannies and bored mothers will just switch off.

This Morning has died a tragic death, snuffed out as it entered its teens. Agony Aunt Denise will be deluged with letters. A 24-hour helpline should be set up; or a factsheet made available, at least. We're losing an institution, and there's no one to talk it through with. Richard and Judy, we salute you ■