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Liam Fay: Science is no respecter of age as it seeks magical elixir

Despite its celebration of silver foxiness, the programme oozed distaste for elderly flesh and frailties, and seemed dazzled by the cult of youth

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**The
End
of**

Professor Rose Anne Kenny investigated the elixir of life

Ageing (RTE1, Sun), The Home (RTE1, Tues), Ireland's Greatest (RTE1, Mon)

The cryonics industry is predicated on the contention that you can put an old head on young shoulders. Ironically, however, the money-spinning success of this macabre racket actually proves that there's no fool like an old fool.

For decades, wealthy big-shots of a gullible and usually American disposition have paid fortunes

to have their brains frozen at the moment of death in readiness for thawing out on that distant day when a cure for the disease that killed them has been found. By that point, the theory goes, medical science will also have solved the logistical challenges involved in the creation of a healthy new body to house the reanimated brain. No self-respecting pursuer of eternal youth would be seen dead in anything else.

Cryonic suspension wasn't mentioned by name in *The End of Ageing* but, given the air of unreality that pervaded this absurdly fanciful documentary, a salute to the benefits of posthumous head relocation would not have seemed out of place. This, after all, was a would-be science film that veered wildly off-course into the territory of science fiction, arguing with a straight face that human immortality is a possibility within decades. In the wacky world of cryonics, by contrast, even the most zealous devotees concede it could be centuries before the first brains are ready for defrosting.

Presented by Professor Rose Anne Kenny, a Dublin-based expert on geriatric medicine, *The End of Ageing* was the curtain-raiser for the *Coming of Age* season, a series of RTE programmes exploring the perks and pains of senior citizenship. By any standards, it was a strange choice of opener for a strand of documentaries the stated aim of which was to emphasise that "ageing is part of life".

Despite its happy-clappy celebration of grey power and silver foxiness, the programme seemingly oozed distaste for elderly flesh and frailties, and seemed dazzled by the cult of youth. In its over-eagerness to trumpet the end of ageing, the documentary revealed more than a little impatience with those who have already aged.

The premise of Kenny's argument was uncontroversial to the point of banality: people throughout the world are living longer. Thanks to better food, hygiene and healthcare, most of us have a good shot at reaching our eighties or nineties and being fit enough to enjoy the fact that we got there. Moreover, half the baby girls born in Ireland this year will live to be over 100.

After some commonsense advice about the relationship between lifestyle and lifespan, however, Kenny began making disconcertingly gymnastic leaps of logic to justify the fatuously overblown claim in the programme's title. Juxtaposing developments in nanotechnology, pharmaceuticals, genetic medicine and tissue engineering with the musings of self-styled "longevity gurus", she essentially argued that the grim reaper will soon have his scythe decommissioned as human ingenuity finally triumphs over human biology. QED, apparently.

The End of Ageing was a state-of-the-art Irish TV documentary in ways that were simultaneously impressive and depressing. Directed with action-movie panache by Ruan Magan, the film moved at a breakneck clip, deftly interspersing talking eggheads with what the programme called "people of age". However, it also bombarded the viewer with information at a dizzying rate that rendered comprehension difficult, frequently mingling dubious scientific propositions with the more wholesome variety. Wishful thinking was repeatedly presented as informed speculation.

Ultimately, the programme's venture into futurology was reminiscent of one of those antique editions of *Tomorrow's World* from the 1970s in which some geeky whizz-kid confidently predicts that, by the year 2000, everyone will be travelling by jet-pack.

Kenny is an engaging TV boffin who delights in using obscure facts to startle and provoke her audience. Unfortunately, her theatrical enthusiasm for grabbing the viewer's attention with swaggeringly bold statements is also her greatest weakness. For no explained reason she appeared at one point wearing goggles and a lab coat, presumably to remind us of her scientific

background. As she addressed the camera, however, she was in danger of sounding more like a seller of snake-oil than a seeker of knowledge.

“Scientists are, literally, this far,” she said, holding thumb and forefinger a hair’s breadth apart, “from finding the mythical elixir of eternal life.” The search for something that can be described as a “mythical elixir” may be many things but science it ain’t.

The complex realities of old age were more movingly illuminated by *The Home*, the first episode of Alan Gilsean’s two-part documentary about life inside St Monica’s nursing home in north inner-city Dublin. Refreshingly free of the whimsy and condescension that marred many of the *Coming of Age* offerings, *The Home* is a clear-eyed masterclass in observational film-making, wherein the silences are often as revealing as the verbal contributions.

The documentary’s most heart-rending scenes involved visits to the nursing home by the partners of residents whose identities have been ravaged by dementia. With nothing left to say and not much of their relatives left to say it to, the visitors can only communicate by holding a hand or caressing a shoulder while both sit mutely, peering into the distance or maybe the distant past.

While the dementia patient is securely cared for within the nursing home’s enclosed world, however, it’s the partner on the outside who must, often alone, face the grief and trauma of the situation into which their family has been plunged. The grievous extent to which this pain is exacerbated by deepening cuts in health spending makes a nonsense of claims that, as a society, we’re only a few years away from ending misery, illness and death.

Anyway, isn’t that Bono’s job? In what must rank as the year’s most preposterous TV programme, the broadcaster Dave Fanning explained in exhaustive detail why his old friend, the tax-sheltering, guff-spouting, chest-beating U2 front man, deserves to be enshrined as Ireland’s Greatest. Babbling like a stoner at a student party, but making considerably less sense, Fanning seemed almost endearingly oblivious to the comedy gold he was delivering to a benighted nation. Nevertheless, adolescent narcissism is always an unsightly trait in a middle-aged man, whether it’s evident in the hypocritical sermonising of a pampered rock star or the star-struck sycophancy of his hero-worshipping acolyte.

Stories for boys, indeed. Both Bono and Fanning have found a unique way to bring an end to ageing: simply refusing to grow up.

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