

Tom Green Works at Home (You Can Watch)



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By JOE RHODES

LOS ANGELES -- It was 8 p.m., time for Tom Green's live-on-the-internet talk show, the one he's been doing from his living room five nights a week, more or less, for the last 12 months and, as seems to happen more often than not, things were going horribly wrong.

The servers had been wonky all day, mostly likely the result of the ill-advised attempt at trying to install high-definition video players onto the website, tomgreen.com (or as Mr. Green prefers to call it, "The Channel."), just a couple of hours before show time. Rex Murphy, Mr. Green's bright-red and usually low-

key parrot, was agitated and screeching in a corner. His Siberian huskies, Steve and Annie, were friskier than usual and ordered to their beds in another room.

The audio feeds weren't working and the Video Toaster system, the heart of Mr. Green's mad scientist computer operation, was down, overloaded and forced to reboot. Worst of all, there was no guest. Norm MacDonald, big-time comedian, former Saturday Night Live news anchor and an old buddy from Mr. Green's Ottawa hometown, was supposed to be appearing that night. No one had heard from him. Also, the guest bathroom toilet was broken.

"I'm starting to think he's not coming," Mr. Green, said at 8:15, clearly flustered, and heading to his refrigerator (in which he's mounted a "fridge-cam" that turns on whenever the door is opened) for a second beer. "I can guarantee you that this is probably my fault somehow.

Most likely, yes. Because Mr. Green has set things up, intentionally, so that when things go slightly haywire, nightly malfunctions that tend to be more charming than cataclysmic, he has no one to blame but himself. It's the gamble he's taken by installing himself as a one-man band of talk show hosts, responsible not just for being funny, interviewing guests and sparring with callers, but for every single aspect of the show's production, up to and including last-minute toilet repairs

He has a talent booker and two full-time technical assistants, with plans to hire more, but it is Mr. Green who does the lion's share of the tinkering, tweaking and non-stop fretting that goes with getting a talk show, even one that's only available online, up and running. He has a switch under his desk which, when he flips it, turns on the lights, microphones, remote-control cameras and live broadband internet stream that, in addition to his nightly one-hour talk show, allow him to transmit live programming whenever he likes. Sometimes that means eating his breakfast live on the air. Or talking to his dogs in the middle of the night. He has managed to acquire that most sought-after of show business commodities – complete creative control. And the headaches that go with it.

“This not like a television show where you've got 150 people, writers, pre-scripted interviews and everything put together so that everything's guaranteed to go great,” he said, one eye on the clock. “It's turned out to be quite a technically complex thing. I never thought I'd know this much about computers. So it's an ongoing process. You figure out little thing along the way and, slowly, they start to work a little better.

“I know, if we go on tonight, I'm not gonna do a perfect show. But it'll be a little better than last night. And it's not like there are 10 million people watching. But we're trying to make this better for that day, maybe a year in the future, when there will be. And by that time, maybe we'll have figured things out.”

Mr. Green, who started broadcasting an Ottawa's public-access cable show in 1994, has been dabbling with computers and his own website since 1996, before the explosion of national attention that came with the arrival in 2000 of his MTV talk show that featured his intentionally-annoying man-on-the-street interview, and all manner of pre-Jackass pranks, many of which featured him getting thrown out and threatened by assorted security guards and store managers. The Tom Green Show, much of which was filled with re-packaging of his most outrageous Canadian bits – including putting livestock in his parent's living room and a cow's head in their bed while they slept – led to feature film deals, lucrative commercial spokesman gigs, a guest host appearance on Saturday Night Live, appearances with David Letterman, a short-lived and tabloid-covered marriage to Drew Barrymore and, in 2001, the film “Freddy Got Fingered,” which he wrote, directed and starred in. It also received some of most scorchingly bad reviews in movie history, largely because of scenes involving unnatural acts with assorted animals, living and dead.

He also endured a bout with testicular cancer, which he chronicled in an MTV special that Time Magazine lauded as one of the best television programs of 2000.

That was the year that Mr. Green moved to Los Angeles and, he admits, became somewhat overwhelmed by all the attention, not sure what to do with himself or his career. “I found myself trying to

work within the Los Angeles system. I had an agent and a manager, which I still do, and going to meetings with networks about game shows and reality shows and projects that weren't mine. It was fun, but it wasn't what I'd set out to do. I really missed what I'd done on Rogers Cable, which was shooting and editing all my own stuff. A nightly talk show is what I'd always wanted. And I'd kind of gotten sidetracked."

So he went back to concentrating on his website, posting lengthy on-line diaries and, as the technology improved, shooting short videos, mostly for his own amusement. He decided two years that, if it were technically feasible and economically viable, he'd be happiest doing his own show, no strings attached, from his living room.

"Basically, I went to William Morris and said, 'Let's find people right now who are able to do live technology. There must be somebody out there building a television network on the internet.'"

That turned out to be ManiaTV.com, a Denver-based broadband company looking to do exactly that. They made a deal with Mr. Green to essentially build a television studio in his home, installing more than \$100,000 worth of equipment, and provide him a broadband distribution network and sponsors. Mr. Green's show streams live on ManiaTV.com and TomGreen.com, and archived shows are available for viewing or download 24 hours a day, on the web or on

Itunes, not to mention the hundreds of shorter clips that end up on YouTube and embedded in fan-generated blogs. While there are rarely more than 10,000 viewers watching the nightly live feeds, the number of viewers after-the-fact, according to Mr. Green, are in the millions.

"Like any television network, we bring distribution, an audience, production resources and a marketing machine, all the things that Tom did not have," said Peter Clemente, ManiaTV's chief marketing officer. "We have the capacity to create high quality live television for roughly a thousand dollars an hour."

Although ManiaTV provided the initial funding and technical expertise and found the show's corporate sponsor, Bud Light, Mr. Green insists he still has complete autonomy and will eventually end up owning the equipment and the show. ManiaTV continues to add new programming, including a weekly live show with rock musician Dave Navarro, that is separate from Mr. Green.

Rather than rely on ManiaTV's technicians, Mr. Green has hired his own studio assistants and purchased additional equipment, including a teleprompter and extra cameras on his own. It's part of why there are so many technical glitches.

"If I had like 10 people working on the show full time, I'd be able to do what I really want to do," he said, adding that he hopes to

incorporate new sponsors and revenue sources when the show returns from a two-week hiatus in early September. “I don’t ever want it to look too slick, but I’d like it to look better than it does now. “

As it is, Mr. Green spends much of his on-air time complaining about things that go wrong, mics that don’t work, camera shots that are off-center, Skype video uplinks with callers – viewers who can appear on the show via their own webcams – that sputter out. It’s all become part of the show.

It makes it impossible to forget, even when there are network-worthy celebrity guests like Val Kilmer, Pamela Anderson or Andy Dick – whose only appearance after his much-publicized scuffle with Jon Lovitz was on Mr. Green’s show – that the program is essentially homemade, an uninterrupted hour of conversation coming from the host’s actual living room.

“I try to think of it as organized confusion,” he said. “I have the freedom to do anything I want. We could sit here in silence for an hour if we wanted. And it nice to know that no one can cancel me. Unless I cancel myself.”

At 8:20, Tom Green’s doorbell finally rang. It was Norm MacDonald, unaware that he was late. It took another 20 minutes before the Video Toaster was fixed but, finally, at 8:47 p.m., the show went live. To make up for the late start, they stayed on the air for an extra 30 minutes, drinking Bud Lights on camera the whole time.

“It seems like nobody know what this is gonna be, “Mr. MacDonald said later, clearly envious of his pal’s freedom to. “But I wan to do something like this way more than I want to do anything that’s been offered to me on television. Television just seems like vaudeville to me. Nobody I know ever watches a sitcom, ever. It’s a dead medium.

“So I don’t know where this is going,” he said, “but I love that Tommy’s just trying to figure it out. It’s cool to watch him try.”

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