



## American Television, Reality Shows

by Nathan G. Tipton

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Richard Hatch, winner of the *Survivor* reality show in 2000.

Courtesy Richard Hatch.

In 2000, when self-described "fat naked fag" Richard Hatch emerged as the first-season winning contestant on the phenomenally popular network reality television show *Survivor*, he credited his survival success in large part to his homosexuality.

According to Hatch, growing up gay, being part of a minority community--and thus subject to scrutiny by others--inspired him to be both introspective and egocentric. These dual poles of introspection and egocentrism are, in fact, key elements in understanding the important roles gay men and lesbians play within the confines of reality television shows, even as they present interpretive quandaries for hetero- and homosexual viewers alike.

In a typical reality television show, particularly one with game-show trappings such as CBS's *Survivor* and *Big Brother*, or ABC's *The Mole*, cast members as well as viewers regard introspection as suspicious behavior. Surely, the viewers surmise, something is being hatched under that quiet façade, and usually this supposition is proved correct. For these shows' gay and lesbian participants, however, the conflation of introspection with cunning and plotting too easily becomes connected to the unfortunate stereotype that gay men and lesbians are inherently crafty, conniving, and untrustworthy.

Even in ostensibly less competitive shows such as Bravo's *Boy Meets Boy*, Fox's *Playing It Straight*, and even MTV's "docusoap"--Sam Brenton and Reuben Cohen's neologism for a television show that seamlessly combines elements of documentary realism with soap opera-style plotting--*The Real World*, introspection is often seen as a negative attribute, indicating moodiness, insecurity, or simmering hostility.

At the opposite end of the emotional spectrum, egocentrism in gay and lesbian cast members or competitors is almost universally viewed in stereotypical terms. Egocentrism rehearses the well-worn cliché that gay men and lesbians are self-absorbed, narcissistic, and desperate to be on display. However, a more recent trend in reality television, "make-over" or "make-better" shows such as NBC/Bravo's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and the Style Network's *The Brini Maxwell Show*, have effectively countered this stereotype.

Reality television continues to evolve, as do its gay and lesbian participants, who bring to these shows a powerful set of societal presuppositions. While too often the shows play directly into stereotyped expectations, gay men and lesbians have demonstrated repeatedly that these preconceptions can be overcome. In fact, reality television viewers have come increasingly to expect the appearance of gay men and lesbians in these shows because their presence helps further underscore the "reality" in Reality TV.

### Early Incarnations: Docudramas

The term "reality TV" properly entered the lexicon in the early 1990s with the rise of such gritty police and rescue programs as *Cops* and *Rescue 911*. However, the documentary-esque format of these shows, with their *cinéma vérité*, almost intrusive "slice of life" approach to observing, cataloging, and broadcasting

human interactions, actually originated in the 1970s with the groundbreaking PBS series *An American Family*.

The series, broadcast initially in 1973 and rebroadcast in 1991, documented the real-life dysfunctional doings of the Loud family of Santa Barbara, California. In addition to showcasing bitter family arguments and revealing salacious family secrets such as a philandering husband and a crumbling marriage, *An American Family* was also groundbreaking in no small part because of eldest son Lance's on-screen coming out.

David Horowitz notes that, with his blue lipstick, dyed rooster-red hair, red eye shadow, and wildly exaggerated swish, Lance Loud (1952-2002) shocked television viewers of the 1970s by publicly proclaiming his homosexuality. Loud, who went on to become a regular columnist for the gay magazine *The Advocate* before succumbing to AIDS at age 50, explained that while he thought the open declaration of his homosexuality would mark him as "incredibly unique," he realized quickly that he would forever be remembered only as "a famous fag."

In spite of their prominently displayed dysfunctionality and unraveling family dynamic, *An American Family* ensured the Louds a lasting place in the pop-culture vocabulary and an important part in the history of homosexuals on television. In 2002 PBS eulogized Lance Loud in the retrospective documentary *Lance Loud! A Death in an American Family*, and filmmakers Susan and Alan Raymond remarked that the broadcast history of on-screen gay men and lesbians can be traced directly back to Loud, noting that before *An American Family* there was not an accessible gay character on American television. Yet despite the fertile groundwork laid by Lance Loud and his American family, almost twenty years would elapse before gay men and lesbians would reappear in real life situations played out on the small screen.

### **"This Is the True Story...": MTV's Real Cool World**

When viewers tuned in to MTV in 1992, they were introduced to seven strangers chosen to share a house together for three months, who had their lives taped nonstop, with the end result of their communal experience broadcast to a nationwide audience in a series of thirteen episodes. This was the premise of MTV's runaway hit show and soon-to-be cultural icon *The Real World*.

The show's cast of seven strangers was diverse; it comprised three women and four men, two African Americans and five Caucasians, six heterosexuals and one homosexual, Norman Korpi. Korpi's presence in MTV's SoHo loft was not, however, greeted with the shock that Americans felt in response to Lance Loud's overt homosexuality. Instead, Korpi presented himself as a gay role model: politically active, intellectually astute, and perhaps most importantly, in the words of fellow cast member Julie, just everyday people.

MTV's decision to cast Korpi in the premiere season of *The Real World* set a precedent that MTV would adhere to closely, the conscious inclusion of gay men and lesbians in the "seven strangers" formula. Almost invariably the gay or lesbian cast members come across as the most "normal" of the seven cast mates, and very often they are the most involved in political causes.

In the New York season, for instance, Korpi cajoled other cast members into joining him at the March for Reproductive Rights in Washington, D. C. In 1993, Los Angeles "Real Worlder" Beth Anthony campaigned for gay marriage; and, shortly after taping ended for the season, she married her girlfriend Becky. *Real World* New Orleans (2000) featured Danny Roberts who, by announcing that his lover was in the military, brought to MTV viewers the debate over the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, dramatizing in richly human terms the cost such a policy exacts of those who are directly affected by it.

But the *Real World* cast member who left perhaps the most lasting, politically charged, and poignant impression on MTV audiences was Pedro Zamora (1972-1994), a resident in the 1994 San Francisco season. Zamora, an AIDS activist, was HIV-positive during the show's taping, and he used his appearance on the

show to educate MTV viewers and the public at large about both the dangers of HIV/AIDS and the rights and dignity of PWAs (People Living with AIDS). Zamora died of AIDS complications on November 11, 1994, and was eulogized by President Bill Clinton.

This is not, however, to say, that all queer MTV *Real World* cast members have been laudable. Indeed, during its 27-season (and counting) run, the series has featured more than a few problematic characters.

For instance, in the "Davis vs. Tyrie" installment (air date December 6, 2006) of the *Real World* Denver, "straight acting gay guy" Davis Mallory engaged in a drunken and heated confrontation with African-American cast member Tyrie Ballard that culminated with Mallory using a racial epithet in reference to Ballard. Mallory subsequently apologized to Ballard and, after his tenure on the show ended, began touring college campuses to discuss his formerly conflicted religious beliefs about homosexuality, as well as his experience living with Stephen Nichols, his homophobic Christian roommate on the *Real World* Denver.

More notorious was MTV's conscious overlooking in 2011 of *Real World* Las Vegas cast member Dustin Zito's gay porn star past. According to blogger Andy Dehnart, Zito performed as Spencer on *Fratpad*, a site that features ostensibly straight men living together in a house where they are often naked and sometimes having sex with each other. As Michael Jensen of *AfterElton* has pointed out, Zito attempted to explain away his gay porn past by at once claiming that he was "100% straight" and had no desire to do anything sexual with guys, while also stating that he was comfortable enough with himself to do something with another guy for money.

Although MTV's *The Real World* has received criticism for becoming formulaic, it continues to lure viewers into the lives of randomly chosen strangers every year. In fact, every new season brings with it the promise of a new gay or lesbian character that viewers will come to know, and with whom many can readily identify. However, viewers also found themselves lured to more competitive, money-driven Reality Contest shows such as *Survivor* and *The Amazing Race* as a suitable antidote to *The Real World*'s increasingly predictable format.

### **Game-Show Reality: Outwit, Outlast, Out There!**

While the appearance of gay men and lesbians on Reality Contest shows has been sporadic, there remains no shortage of queer contestants who vie for these shows' top prizes. In fact, one of the most noticeable and notorious queer contestants, Richard Hatch, was also the first winner of the popular *Survivor* series on CBS.

When Richard Hatch walked away with the \$1 million prize for being the last *Survivor* standing, American television viewers sat up and took notice. Here was a hirsute, paunchy gay man seen by millions of Americans winning a test of raw physicality and brilliant cunning and being handsomely rewarded by a jury of his reality game-show peers.

Hatch was, of course, no one's idea of a gay role model (indeed, in 2006, he would be convicted of tax evasion and sentenced to 51 months in prison), much less a network superstar, but according to *Advocate* columnist Erik Meers, his soap-operatic connivings were the best thing for CBS's ratings since the 1980s prime time soap-opera cliffhanger *Who Shot J. R. Ewing?* In fact, Hatch's popularity owed far more to his scheming than to his being openly gay, a fact that as the show progressed became incidental.

Since Hatch's appearance, the *Survivor* franchise has regularly featured competitors such as flamboyant Brandon Quinton (2001), castaway John Carroll (2002), Ami Cusack and Dr. Scout Cloud Lee (2004), and lesbian Marine sergeant Shannon "Shambo" Waters (2009). In its 2001 premiere season, ABC's show *The Mole* showcased two queer cast members, Jim Morrison and Jennifer Biondi, while the 2008 season featured gay restaurant manager Bobby O'Donnell.

In addition to queer cast members on *Survivor* and *The Mole*, arguably one of the biggest boosts for visibly gay and lesbian persons on television was the triumph by Reichen Lehmkuhl and Chip Arndt on CBS's Emmy Award-winning series *The Amazing Race*. Like Richard Hatch, Lehmkuhl and Arndt garnered a \$1 million prize for besting their competitors, and they did so by insisting that CBS caption them as "married" for the duration of the show.

*Advocate* writer Jon Barrett notes wryly that in a summer saturated with queer eyes and boys meeting boys, this "married" couple stole the show, won more than a few hearts, and took home the million-dollar prize. And they did it all the while looking so hot that even the straight guys on the show were flirting with them. Although Lehmkuhl and Arndt dissolved their relationship soon after the show ended, they remain close and still consider themselves a "team."

In fact, other gay men and lesbians have also been seen regularly as competitors on *The Amazing Race*, with gay couple Alex Ali and Lynn Warren (season seven, 2005), former girlfriends Carol Rosenfeld and Brandy Snow (season 16, 2010), and gay brothers Sam and Dan McMillen (season 15, 2010) all vying for the show's prize monies. The series' fourteenth installment in 2009 featured the largest retinue of gay and lesbian competitors, including openly gay woman of color Kisha Hoffman, deaf gay man Luke Adams, and the father-son team of noted gay activist Mel White and his bisexual son, actor Mike White.

According to

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