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# 'Obnoxious Fiancé' takes reality shows to different level

The Fox program features a woman trying to convince her family she's marrying a slob so she can win money

**By Brian Lambert**

Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

Say what you will about Fox, when you're a TV network willing to try absolutely anything for a buck, you're bound to hit it big every few months.

Fox's latest reality show/practical joke, "My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiancé," debuted Monday night (immediately after the launch of the new "American Idol") for a six-week run. On the face of it, "Obnoxious Fiancé" is one of those "ripped from a sitcom" concepts that seem to hold great potential for both hilarity and ratings.

Reaching beyond the primary audience for reality television, "Obnoxious" will likely be a lot funnier to those who've been rolling their eyes and gagging at "The Bachelor," "Average Joe," "Married by America" and their various wedding spinoffs.

The set-up for "Obnoxious Fiancé" is simple enough to explain, but it quickly gets more and more convoluted.

Basically, the lucky bride-to-be, Randi, a 23-year-old grade-school teacher from Scottsdale, Ariz., wins a big cash prize, a half-million bucks, if she can put a huge joke over on her parents. If she can get "Steve," a beefy pig with worse manners than a frat-house party chairman, to the altar, she wins.

But the gag gets more complicated because Randi herself is being scammed by Fox. She thinks Steve is a real "reality" contestant putting the same prank over on his parents. But in real-real-"reality," fat, obnoxious "Steve" is an actor through and through, and so are all his equally obnoxious family and friends.

In other words, the bogus bogus fiancé ("Steve") and his bogus family are being paid to sabotage the bogus bride's bogus wedding ... thereby giving a whole new meaning to "reality."

It sounds funny. But it cuts across a lot of conventional wisdom regarding "reality TV." Namely, it risks alienating the large audience of viewers, mostly young and female, who invest real emotional interest in the dreams of other young women competing for the prize of a loving relationship.

"In its very short shelf life, reality TV

has already become postmodern, in that everything about the newest generation of shows is a variation on the originals, the 'Survivors' and 'Bachelors,'" says John Rash, director of broadcast negotiations for Campbell Mithun advertising in the Twin Cities.

The brilliance of the original "Joe Millionaire" was the twist of letting the audience in on the joke. But the second "Joe" bombed, because everyone knew what the joke was. Nevertheless, the basic direction was clear. Lacking a wholly original reality concept, producers can steal and recycle from previous series if they can improve on the "twist," which in this case is very much of the mocking-parody variety.

Therein lies the gamble of "Obnoxious Fiancé." How far can producers go essentially ridiculing the often extraordinary emotional investment reality TV's core audience makes in these programs?

All reality shows, from "Fear Factor" to "The Bachelorette," are watched by far more women than men. "The Bachelor" is watched by two times as many women as men among 18- to 49-year-olds, and even the macho exploits of "Fear Factor" attract 20 percent more women than men. "Average Joe" had twice as many women watching as men, and reality powerhouse "Survivor" pulls in nearly 25 percent more women.

Only Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie's "The Simple Life" came close to attracting equal numbers of female and male viewers. But the publicity surrounding Hilton's Internet sex tapes immediately prior to the show's launch may have more to do with the relatively slim 10 percent disparity among male and female viewers than the show's actual appeal to men.

So what comes next? If successful, "Obnoxious Fiancé" would seem to offer rich soil for other long-form, "Candid Camera"-style pranks. But reality TV is eminently disposable. Yesterday's hot fashion is today's Von Dutch apparel, passé before it even hits the shelves.

"The bar keeps getting raised in terms of the twist these shows require. Ultimately, the genre will have to change significantly," Rash says. "As time goes by, viewers bring more and more scar tissue to this type of programming."

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