

Reality bites

Reality television, on the other hand, shows signs of improvement

Unlike the president, I can admit when I'm wrong. For years, I've been prejudiced against reality television because I rarely see anything remotely resembling reality on the small screen. Hmm, what will happen when *The Real World/The Surreal Life/Big Brother* moves a dozen volatile personalities into the same house? Let me guess—instant drama! No need to hire actors or writers, and the audience is guaranteed to grow from the inevitable water cooler buzz.

Television's influence is undeniably powerful—last year more people watched the Super Bowl than voted in the presidential election—so these shows, however lightweight, can make a huge difference in shaping perceptions of "average Americans."

The latest installment of the gay and lesbian newsmagazine *In the Life*, airing 11 p.m. July 18 on OPB, explores the evolution of reality television as it relates to queer representation. It reminded me that, for residents of red states in particular, these shows may provide one of their only experiences with people who are different from them.

Sometimes the results are eye-opening. Sometimes the results are defamatory.

Last year's *Seriously, Dude, I'm Gay* challenged two straight bigoted guys to pretend to be homo for a week—requiring each to come out to his friends and to go on a romantic date—with the one who "passes" best winning \$50,000. After the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation complained that the show made a mockery of queers, Fox pulled the plug.

ABC's *Welcome to the Neighborhood* suffered the same fate, but with better intentions. The show, which would've debuted July 10, took place in an upscale cul-de-sac in Austin, Texas, where three bigoted families were given the power to decide who gets to move in next door. The seven competing families came from diverse backgrounds—African American, Korean American, Latino and a gay couple raising an adopted son—and were voted off one by one each week. GLAAD was concerned that viewers who watched only the first couple of episodes could conclude that intolerance and discrimination are not that big of a deal, even though the homeowners apparently learned the value of diversity by the end of the series. Rather than repackaging the show, the network shelved it indefinitely.

Some shows, thankfully, get their message across more clearly.

The Feb. 9 episode of ABC's *Wife Swap* involved a lesbian mom, Kristine Luffey, trading families for two weeks with Kris Gillespie, a conservative Christian mother of three. Things turned ugly when Gillespie insinuated that she feared for the safety of her 12-year-old daughter because a dyke was in her home. She called Luffey and her partner "depraved" and said the couple were just "shacking up," not a real family. "You're taking a good thing and making it something terrible," Luffey replied, providing a blunt reality check for viewers who don't consider queer families legit.

Also admirable is FX's *30 Days*, created by Morgan Spurlock, who famously went on a monthlong McDonald's diet for the Oscar-nominated documentary *Super Size Me*. His new series puts people in similarly uncomfortable situations.

The July 6 episode took Ryan Hickmott, a straight, conservative, Christian Army reservist from Oxford Township, Mich., and plopped him in the gayest place on the planet:



Jim's Closet
by Jim Radosta

THE TOP SHELF

Even though I was never a big fan of his silky ballads, I was saddened to learn that Luther Vandross died July 1 as a result of a stroke he suffered two years ago. He was 54.

According to *The Advocate*, "His homosexuality was acknowledged within the industry, although the singer refused to discuss the topic, even when asked point-blank by an interviewer." Instead, he would give coy answers like: "What do you want to know? Am I bicoastal? Yeah, I have houses in Beverly Hills and New York."

It's hard to say goodbye to any talented and successful gay musician, but it's even harder knowing that he spent his entire life stuck in the closet—the stress of which likely contributed to his unhealthy weight fluctuation. *The Daily Telegraph* of London reported that Vandross claimed to be depressed by a lack of success with women, but we know better.

"I long to find the things I sing about," he once said. "Sometimes I even resent having to sing about it because it hasn't happened that way for me."

"It's like meeting the man of your dreams, and then meeting his beautiful...husband."

—Alanis Morissette, performing a gender-bending version of "Ironic" in concert July 8 at the Schnitz.

San Francisco's Castro district. He moves in with a gay roommate, joins a gay softball team, gets a job selling fancy cheeses to gays and attends the predominantly gay Metropolitan Community Church.

The 24-year-old simpleton immediately realizes that, for the first time in his life, he's the minority. Still, he is honest with everyone about his biblical interpretation that homosexuality is a sin.

After Hickmott tells a gay World War II veteran that queers don't belong in the military, you start to see clarity creep into his closed mind. He finally comes around at a PFLAG meeting when a loving father explains why his daughter deserves the same rights as his other children.

"I think I've matured a lot...it's made me a better person," Hickmott says on his last day in town. "I was making uninformed opinions about something that I didn't know about."

Hallelujah! Damn, this really is great television. Now all we need to do is deprogram the other 100 million evangelicals in the United States, and we might make some progress. ☐

Arts and Culture Editor JIM RADOSTA needs your feedback. Write to jim@justout.com.

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