

New reality shows shackle, pummel or insult contestants

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If only the Marquis de Sade had lived another 200 years, he'd have made a perfect TV host.

UPN's "Chains of Love," which will premiere next week, shackles a single man or woman for four days to four strangers of the opposite sex, then has him or her release the chains one by one until only Ms. or Mr. Right remains.

Months ago, in fact, NBC brass announced plans to air an American version of "Chains of Love," then reconsidered, deciding it wouldn't do much to burnish the network's image.

The folks at UPN, home of "WWF Smackdown!," had no such reservations.

In February, a bright red press release went out to the media announcing the network's acquisition of the show, described as "four days of mental, emotional and physical anguish (culminating), hopefully, (in) a budding romance."

A hit in the Netherlands, where it originated, and in Germany, the show is a distinctly kinky variation on a chain gang. Among its trappings is The Locksmith - "a sizable figure lurking in the shadows" - who appears without warning to order each unlinking.

Brady Connell says he steers clear of that sort of gimmick. A producer whose previous credits include "Survivor" and "Eco-Challenge," Connell returned this week from a breathless world tour with CBS' as yet unscheduled "The Amazing Race."

The new show will send 11 teams around the globe in pursuit of a \$1 million prize. It's about people pushing themselves to excel, he says, not about manipulation or humiliation.

"I've had (participants) telling me, 'I can't believe I can do this! If I can do this, I can do anything!' " says Connell. "I've had tears in my eyes when I was interviewing some of them."

Looking for new hooks

Connell began working in reality TV long before it became a buzzword, starting with "Rescue 911" in the '80s. Along with partner Jim Jusko, he's also the executive producer of the WB's forthcoming "No Boundaries," which will have contestants trekking across rough terrain in the Pacific Northwest and Canada.

Jusko and Connell say that, in an increasingly overcrowded environment, it's getting harder to come up with new hooks that will make viewers want to watch. Even the more generous budgets that come with the genre's increasing popularity can be a mixed blessing: The networks demand bigger bangs for bigger bucks.

"It's like any other kind of TV," Jusko observes. "You have to raise the bar higher and higher.

"And how many live worms can you show people eating?" he adds, referring to a notorious "Survivor" episode last year that gave new meaning to the term "slugfest."

"Survivor: The Australian Outback" hasn't fed its players any slugs lately, but the food issue has taken on a different and somewhat disturbing twist.

In recent installments, a few of the players - who share a limited food supply provided to them at the beginning, supplemented by what little they catch in the bushes or ponds - have looked alarmingly gaunt. Last week, a food auction that offered small amounts of chips, chocolate and a couple of meager meals was especially grim; it seemed less like a game than like a bizarre and unfunny parody of emaciated prisoners bargaining with corrupt camp guards.

Connell says he doesn't believe in starvation as entertainment. Still, the USA Network's "Eco-Challenge Borneo," on which he worked recently,

didn't stint on close-ups of competitors with trench foot or shots of players covered with leeches. (For the record, Connell says he was spared the foot problems but endured the leeches along with the contestants.)

An earlier experience with the genre is one he swears he wouldn't repeat.

"Gonzo Games," a long-forgotten series on USA in the early '90s, was based on a Japanese hit called "Endurance." According to Connell, it involved such stunts as making contestants shimmy up chimneys while soot was poured on their heads until, finally, "they slipped into a bucket of whatever."

"It bordered on disrespect, but the contestants loved it," he recalls, with a guilty laugh.

And even at that, it wasn't as awful as the Japanese original. If Connell remembers correctly, at least once, "Endurance" participants were tied to tractors and dragged across rocks on their rear ends.

Is it only a matter of time until some American producer finds a tractor and runs with it?

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