

Television

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MARIE-JOELLE PARENT/SUN MEDIA

"They nicknamed me Buff Geek because I had a good body but an unattractive face," says Jason Prager (above) of Beauty and the Geek-fame. Prager credits the New York Reality TV School, founded by Robert Galinsky (right), with getting him started in the business.



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GET Real

Dreaming of stardom? Well, school is in for all you reality TV wannabes

NEW YORK — Ten years after *Big Brother*, there's no end in sight to the reality TV phenomenon. In case you needed proof, New York now boasts the world's first reality TV school. You could call it Getting On The Show 101.

About 40 students, as diverse as you'd find on a New York City subway car, packed a studio on 8th Ave. right next to Madison Square Garden recently.

A \$139 fee gets you a 3½-hour workshop at the New York Reality TV School.

You can also opt for a five-week seminar for \$299. Some, like entrepreneur Leo Fernekas, are here to learn

how to be a better public speaker. Others, like barman Nicholas Rolon, are aspiring movie actors. The group forms a circle. There are several cameras rolling courtesy of some Japanese journalists and a documentary team from Columbia University.

The school has garnered media attention from as far away as Australia since it opened last June. The school's founder, 43-year-old Robert Galinsky, enters the room. This acting coach got the idea to create the program a year ago. He also created the website findmyaudition.com.

"You have to make your mark in 30 seconds, so the idea isn't to be eccentric, but authentic," he said. "Dance like there's no tomorrow," he added abruptly.

All of a sudden, a Biggie Smalls song started playing and the studio was turned into an instant nightclub. Dancing under neon lights surrounded by strangers is definitely one way to break the ice.

The presentations came right afterward. "For a casting director to remember you after seeing thousands of other people, you have to learn to tell your story in two minutes," Galinsky said. Then he asked the group to reveal an intimate secret and opened up a whole Pandora's Box of weirdness.

"I was raped when I was 17," one young woman said to the shocked "ohhhhs" of the class. One guy said he'd eaten his own excrement, and further disgusted the room

by adding, "and I'd do it again." A woman talked about surviving cancer and another said she had an abortion at age 14. The guy next to her admitted to smoking pot before class. The girl next to him revealed her weakness for elderly Jewish men.

An Asian student told the group he's bisexual. Another said he hates his parents.

"It's not necessarily a good idea to tell a sex-themed story, that's not what interests us," said Lisa Tanania, a casting director on hand to give advice and do some recruiting. "All you need is one sentence that the casting director will remember."

"People will do anything to get on TV. You see it all, transvestites, transsexuals, people who get undressed. There's nothing I haven't seen," said Robert Russell, a casting director talent scouting for *Big Brother 11*. "One girl took the plane from Iowa just to meet me."

But he doesn't seem to have found that ever-elusive diamond in the rough tonight. So what does it take to impress? "I'm looking for the X-factor; it's instantaneous. I



Marie-Joelle Parent
IN NEW YORK



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The so-called D-Listers, who have worked on reality TV shows including *Bachelor UK*, *The Mole*, Animal Planet's *Groomer Has It* and *Survivor*, offer encouragement.

see it right away," he said.

At that point it was time for the Perp Walk portion of the evening. The students made a line that everyone has to cross, one by one, while being showered with insults. Galinsky offered some examples to inspire the troops. "This girl just killed her mother," he said. The insults come fast and furious for the first person up.

"This is to build an emotional immunity. Some shows are really hard and you have to be ready to be attacked," he explained.

Next item on the schedule was a talk from some D-list celebrities such as Jason Prager of *Beauty and the Geek*-fame. "They nicknamed me Buff Geek because I had a good body but an unattractive face," he said. What did he get out of the experience? "My revenge," he said. "The girls who laughed at me all through my teenage years want to be my friend on Facebook."

Next to him was Marshana Ritchie, who bragged about being the first African-

American to be chosen for *Bachelor UK*. Paul Grassi, the blue-collar guy who was on the show *The Mole*, said it got him an independent movie contract.

There's also the school's protege, Jorge Bendersky, a 36-year-old dog groomer with a strong Latino accent and arms covered in tattoos. His dream was getting chosen for the Animal Planet show, *Groomer Has It*. He finished third thanks to Galinsky's tips.

Since June, hundreds of students have gone through the school and its founder is even thinking of expanding to Canada before long. Some of his students have managed to secure spots on shows such as *America's Got Talent* and *Survivor*, contracts worth an average of \$30,000.

But it's no easy job prolonging reality TV celebrity long-term. Billy Garcia, a *Survivor* alumnus from two seasons ago, is still reliving his 15 minutes of fame even though he was cut after the second show. He speaks to groups and does autograph



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Big Apple barman Nicholas Rolon, an aspiring movie actor, hopes he has finally found his ticket to fame and fortune.

sessions that he says can pay up to \$17,000. He even managed to get sponsored by his favourite clothing label by wearing their T-shirt on the show. And for some extra cash, there's always famousphone.com, the website where people pay between \$50 and \$100 to have a phone conversation with obscure reality TV celebrities.

There are still a few success stories in the mix. Jennifer Hudson's Oscar win quickly erased all memory of her *American Idol* letdown. Who remembers that Elizabeth Hasselbeck was eating maggots on *Survivor* back in 2001? She's now one of the most opinionated hosts of *The View* and a star supporter of the Republican Party.

Even though reality television had its U.S. debut in 1973 with *An American Family* on PBS, it was MTV's *The Real World* in 1992 that blasted the concept into orbit. "It's going to continue," said Russell. "People are obsessed and it will never disappear. Reality TV has changed the face of popular culture forever."

"The reality TV craze goes hand in hand with the Internet," added Galinsky. "It's democracy expressing itself." Recently, however, the fever pitch has hit some new highs. The audition for *America's Next Top Model* caused panic last weekend in midtown Manhattan. Hundreds of girls started running after a bomb scare. Six women were injured. More dramatically, *British Big Brother* participant Jade Goody learned she had cancer during a taping last August. She's now living out her final days with the cameras rolling around her. A morbid show, yes, but for Russell and others in the business, "it makes good TV."

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REALITY TV: YA GOTTA LOVE IT

Three reasons to love reality TV, according to New York Reality TV School founder Robert Galinsky:

1. It gives visibility to minorities ignored up until now by the television industry: Overweight people, anyone with acne and the physically disabled.
2. It allows debate other than from official points of view. These are ordinary people expressing themselves.
3. Everyone has the right to leave their mark on the world. The public can more easily identify with stars of reality TV.

TEN COMMANDMENTS OF REALITY TV

1. When you speak, use "I" at all times. Never say that you're an actor. Everything you say must be candid.
2. Answer the question asked.
3. Maximize all opportunities to market, network and publicize yourself.
4. Don't walk in with a wall. Keep the sensitive material on the surface.
5. Say yes as often as possible.
6. Maintain a daily drama diary.
7. Show confidence, not cockiness.
8. Don't overdo it.
9. Don't sell your personal agenda.
10. Practice your story and do some soul-searching.

— Marie-Joelle Parent