

TELEVISION

Playing "Get the Guest"

Talk shows thrive on raucous confrontations, but are producers deceiving people to set them up for humiliation?

By GINIA BELLAFANTE

SHAUNA MILLER, A 28-YEAR-OLD wife and mother from Livermore, California, was intrigued by the prospect of appearing on the *Richard Bey* show. The producers had told her she would be reunited with someone from her past. Suspecting it might be an older brother whom she had never met, Miller agreed. But when she was brought onstage, Miller found herself confronting someone else: her younger brother's fiancé, Billi Burkett, with whom she had been feuding. Burkett—egged on, she says, by producers, who kept telling her, "You need to get angry"—began shouting at Miller. Among other things, she accused Miller of neglecting Burkett's daughter, who attended a day-care center Miller used to run. (Producers have since deleted that accusation from the segment, which will be broadcast this week.) "I couldn't believe what was happening," says Miller. "Looking at Bey walking up and down, I kept thinking, 'How can you sleep at night?'"

Many viewers are probably wondering the same thing about talk-show hosts in the wake of a much publicized tragedy. Three days after appearing as a guest on the *Jenny Jones* show, Scott Amedure, 32, was shot to death in front of his trailer at a mobile-home park in Michigan. His alleged killer is John Schmitz, who had appeared on the same *Jones* segment. Schmitz was told he would be confronted by a "secret admirer"; the shock of discovering that the person who had a crush on him was a man, Schmitz told police later, had "eaten away" at him. The show's producers insist that Schmitz was informed his admirer could be a man or a woman. Jones, in a statement before a taping of her show last week, expressed sympathy for the man's family but denied that the man himself had been misled. "As much as we all regret what happened," she said, "the fact is that this tragedy is about the actions of one individual."

The event, however, has turned the spotlight on the lengths to which talk

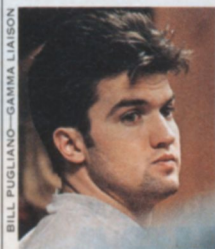
shows such as *Jones*, *Jerry Springer* and *Ricki Lake* will go to catch people off guard and encourage guest warfare. Reunite the callous beau with the pregnant welfare recipient he abandoned, and let the fun begin! Bring on the male stripper, and watch the prim housewife get red-faced! In raising the pitch, are



PEP TALK: Jerry Springer preps guests for a taping last week of a show dubbed "I Love Someone I Can't Have"

producers deceiving guests to set them up for on-camera humiliation?

A growing number of disgruntled guests have been humiliated enough to bring lawsuits. Yvonne Porter of Santa Clara, California, recently won a \$614,000 settlement from the producers of the *Montel Williams* show who she claims lured her on the program under false



TRAGIC SURPRISE: Schmitz's *Jenny Jones* trauma had "eaten away" at him



P. NATKIN—PHOTO RESERVE/OUTLINE

pretenses. Porter was invited believing she would be reunited with past loves. Instead Williams discussed on the air the abuse that Porter was allegedly suffering at the hands of her boyfriend. Then her sister appeared on the show to reveal that she was having an affair with Porter's boyfriend.

Even those who don't take legal action describe talk-show horror stories. Alan Klein, an independent publicist in New York City, got a call four years ago from a producer for 9 *Broadcast Plaza*, a now defunct local show. The producer, says Klein, was looking for "people with distinguished careers who had a little secret." Klein recommended a respected set designer who was gay. When the man arrived on the show, he found himself in unexpected company. The other guests included a 400-lb. Madonna impersonator in drag and a body-pierced couple dressed in leather. "When I found the segment producer and complained," recounts Klein, "she said, 'Sorry, we had to make some last-minute changes.'" His client left before the taping. Many other guests, who don't arrive with savvy publicists, remain and take the consequences.

Producers of these shows insist that they do not deceive guests about what is going to occur. "Guests are always given the parameters of a surprise," says host Jerry Springer. David Sittenfeld, executive producer of the *Richard Bey* show, describes the typical dialogue with a prospective guest who is going to be surprised: "We'll say, 'We want to reunite you with someone.' If they ask, 'Who is it?' we tell them we can't say because it wouldn't be a surprise. If they ask, 'Is it good?' our response is, 'It might be good, and it might be bad. We can't tell you. That's for you to decide. We don't know how you'll react.'"

Some press analysts point out that producers cannot be held responsible for the later actions of people who appear—voluntarily, after all—on these shows. "We're all responsible for what we do," says former CBS correspondent Marvin Kalb. "It becomes too much of a cop-out for anyone to claim that it was a television talk show that was principally responsible for a dreadful action." The question, however, is whether in their increasingly desperate quest for confrontation, these shows are making such dreadful actions ever more likely.

—Reported by Georgia Harbison and David E. Thigpen/
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