

“That Felt Real to Me”: When Reality Theatre and Reality Television Collide

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Résumé de l'article

Dans un épisode de son émission télé satirique Nathan for You, l'humoriste Nathan Fielder monte une production théâtrale inédite pour exploiter une clause qui permet de fumer dans les bars en toute légalité dans le cadre d'une performance. Au début, le spectacle ne doit avoir lieu qu'une seule fois et passer inaperçue, mais la chose a vite fait de se transformer en exploration des possibilités et des limites du théâtre du réel quand Fielder décide de mettre en scène le spectacle initial avec des comédiens de manière à ce qu'il puisse être reproduit et donc commercialisé en tant que produit homogène. Dans l'épisode « Smokers Allowed », les tentatives humoristiques par Fielder de reproduire les événements dans leurs moindres détails soulignent le ridicule inhérent aux performances axées sur la réalité. Cet épisode de Nathan for You regroupe deux approches à la performance—celle de la télé-réalité et du théâtre de la réalité—qui partagent un même souci de la réalité, mais dont le contenu et la réception tendent à diverger. Ce faisant, Fielder fait ressortir un double standard quant à la valorisation de la télé-réalité et du théâtre du réel qui, de manière ironique, s'appuie sur un discours anti-théâtral favorable aux formes télévisuelles. À une époque où l'on se soucie de plus en plus de ce qui compose la réalité et de la manière dont celle-ci est construite, la satire de Fielder soulève un certain nombre de questions urgentes relatives à la performance et à la réalité. Par exemple, comment une approche satirique et humoristique au théâtre du réel peut-elle nous aider à comprendre les omissions et les préjugés présents dans ce genre? Et comment le fait de reconnaître que toutes les formes d'art basées sur la réalité sont fondamentalement absurdes peut-il ouvrir ce champ à de nouvelles possibilités?

“That Felt Real to Me”: When Reality Theatre and Reality Television Collide

KIMBERLEY MCLEOD

In an episode of his satirical television show *Nathan for You*, comedian Nathan Fielder creates an original theatre production in order to exploit a legal loophole that allows smoking in bars if it is part of a performance. The project begins as a one-off invisible theatre performance but quickly morphs into an experiment in the possibilities and limits of theatre of the real when Fielder re-stages the initial event with actors so the production can be repeatable, and thus marketable as a consistent product. In the “Smokers Allowed” episode, Fielder’s comedic attempts to painstakingly recreate events highlight the inherent ridiculousness of reality-based performances.

This *Nathan for You* episode brings together two related approaches to performance—reality television and reality theatre—that are linked through their focus on reality, but which tend to diverge in content and reception. In doing so, he reveals a double standard in the cultural valuation of reality television and theatre of the real—one that ironically relies on an anti-theatrical bias towards televisual forms. At a time when there is heightened anxiety about what constitutes reality and an increasing concern that all realities are constructed, Fielder’s satire raises a number of pressing questions related to performance and the real, including: How might a satirical, comedic approach to theatre of the real help us understand omissions and biases within this form? How might acknowledging that all reality-based art forms are fundamentally absurd open up this field to new possibilities?

Dans un épisode de son émission télé satirique Nathan for You, l’humoriste Nathan Fielder monte une production théâtrale inédite pour exploiter une clause qui permet de fumer dans les bars en toute légalité dans le cadre d’une performance. Au début, le spectacle ne doit avoir lieu qu’une seule fois et passer inaperçue, mais la chose a vite fait de se transformer en exploration des possibilités et des limites du théâtre du réel quand Fielder décide de mettre en scène le spectacle initial avec des comédiens de manière à ce qu’il puisse être reproduit et donc commercialisé en tant que produit homogène. Dans l’épisode « Smokers Allowed », les tentatives humoristiques par Fielder de reproduire les événements dans leurs moindres détails soulignent le ridicule inhérent aux performances axées sur la réalité.

Cet épisode de Nathan for You regroupe deux approches à la performance—celle de la télé-réalité et du théâtre de la réalité—qui partagent un même souci de la réalité, mais dont le contenu et la réception tendent à diverger. Ce faisant, Fielder fait ressortir un double standard quant à la valorisation de la télé-réalité et du théâtre du réel qui, de manière ironique, s’appuie sur un discours anti-théâtral favorable aux formes télévisuelles. À une époque où l’on se soucie de plus en plus de ce qui compose la réalité et de la manière dont celle-ci est construite, la satire de Fielder soulève un certain nombre de questions urgentes relatives à la performance et à la réalité.

Par exemple, comment une approche satirique et humoristique au théâtre du réel peut-elle nous aider à comprendre les omissions et les préjugés présents dans ce genre? Et comment le fait de reconnaître que toutes les formes d'art basées sur la réalité sont fondamentalement absurdes peut-il ouvrir ce champ à de nouvelles possibilités?



Scene one. It looks like an average night in the 1881 Club in Pasadena. Some patrons sit at tables and others hover by the bar ordering drinks and chatting with Ellen, the bartender/owner. The room is dim and a bit aged, but also cheery, decorated with random smatterings of fairy lights. While most of the bar appears run-of-the-mill, two things stand out and reveal that this evening is far from typical. It's 2015—almost twenty years since the state of California first imposed a smoking ban in bars. Yet patrons freely light up and smoke without any inhibitions. In the corner two women sit without drinks. They are in plush theatre seats located behind a red curtain, which has been pulled back. The others drink and smoke, but the two women simply watch.

Scene two. We return to the 1881 Club. On the surface, everything appears as it does in Scene one. There is smoking. The exact same number of people sit at the tables and at the bar. The hair colour and body types of the patrons match those who were there before. But they are not the same people. Even Ellen has been replaced by a lookalike. The seating area off to the side remains, but now there are seven theatre seats instead of two. Seven observers watch the action, though their attention seems to wander and one even falls asleep.

These two scenes occur in the third season of Nathan Fielder's comedy series, *Nathan for You*. The show, which has been on the air since 2013, spoofs reality television programs that focus on business improvement. In the series, Fielder, who has an actual business degree from the University of Victoria, plays the role of a business guru who advises owners on how to make their establishments more appealing to customers. This shtick is not new to Fielder—from 2007-2009 he performed sketches mimicking consumer advocacy segments from local news programs on CBC's *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*.

Nathan for You has covered an array of businesses, from restaurants to pet cemeteries to gift shops, mostly in the Los Angeles area where the show is based. In each episode, Fielder proposes outlandish marketing stunts to increase the popularity of these small businesses. Two of his projects—"Dumb Starbucks" and "The Movement"—gained international media attention. In the first, Fielder created an exact replica of a Starbucks location, but added the word "dumb" in front of the store name and every product so the store was completely legal under parody law. The "Dumb Starbucks" episode was Fielder's most watched, with 800,000 viewers.

The "Smokers Allowed" episode has Fielder heading to Ellen Sancer's 1881 Club, which is struggling to attract bar patrons. Fielder discovers a legal loophole in California's smoking laws that allows smoking in bars if it is part of a performance. In order to exploit this loophole, he creates an elaborate theatre project inside the 1881 Club. The project begins as a form of invisible theatre with the bar patrons becoming unwitting performers in a theatre production for two seemingly engaged audience members. Surprised by the two audience members' enthusiasm for the piece, Fielder, or at least the persona he plays on the show,

becomes convinced that he has discovered an incredible, money-making idea. Rather than repeating the same exercise every night, which could lead to an unstable and less interesting product, he decides to re-create the initial event with actors. So, what begins as a one-off piece of invisible theatre morphs into a different form of repeatable “real” theatre: verbatim. As the project becomes increasingly removed from the initial motive of attracting new patrons, it grows into an experiment on the possibilities and limitations within theatre of the real—with Fielder’s attempts to painstakingly forge an exact recreation of the first night highlighting the ridiculousness and impossibility of the task.

This *Nathan for You* episode brings together two related approaches to performance that have experienced an upsurge in the past two decades: reality television and reality theatre. While linked through their focus on reality, these forms tend to diverge in their content and reception. Reality television is routinely mocked for its insincerity and vacuousness, while theatre of the real tends to be dominated by serious, socio-politically engaged topics and approaches. With the “Smokers Allowed” episode, Fielder folds theatre of the real into his larger project—an ongoing reality show that simultaneously confirms and disrupts dominant narratives about reality television. In doing so, he reveals a double standard in the cultural valuation of reality television and theatre of the real—one that ironically relies on an anti-theatrical bias towards televisual forms and reinvests in divisions between so-called low and high forms of cultural consumption.

In this article, I do not suggest that Fielder simply brings down reality-theatre while raising up reality television, or that the two forms do not have fundamental material distinctions from one another. Instead, I propose that by looking at ways reality television and reality theatre cross over, which includes their failure to ever fully recreate a particular reality, we might develop more nuanced understandings regarding our current obsession over all things “real.” At a time when there is heightened anxiety about what constitutes reality and an increasing concern that all realities are constructed, Fielder’s satire raises a number of pressing questions related to performance and the real, including: How might a satirical, comedic approach to theatre of the real help us understand omissions and biases within this form? How might acknowledging that all reality-based art forms are inherently absurd open up this field to new possibilities?

“The Television of Television”: Reality TV and Anti-Theatrical Biases

Reality programming abounds. For the Torontonians interested in reality-based theatre, the spring of 2017 held a number of options. You could head to Souleppper for Karen Hines’s autobiographical piece *Crawlspace*. Crow’s Theatre offered two different productions related to the real: Chris Abraham and Torquil Campbell’s *True Crime* and Emil Sher’s *The Boy in the Moon*. Canadian Stage presented two solo, autobiographical productions: Robert Lepage’s *887* and William Yang’s *blood links*. There were a number of other reality-based performances, including monthly or semi-regular storytelling events, such as Outside the March’s The Spoke, True Stories (Told Live) Toronto, and a storytelling event by Pressgang Theatre.

Yet for the reality television fan in Toronto the options were even more diverse. On the night of May 11 2017 alone, there were dozens of reality-based television shows to choose

from. You could watch the travel competition show *The Amazing Race* on CBS or find out about life after divorce with *Second Wives Club* on E!. Those interested in food could catch the cooking competition shows *Master Chef Junior* (Fox) and *Beat Bobby Flay* (Food). Over on HGTV the focus was on buying and selling homes with the programs *Flip or Flop Vegas*, *House Hunters*, and *House Hunters International*. Lifetime featured both *Married at First Sight* and its seemingly inevitable sequel *Married at First Sight: Second Chances*. Other reality programming included *Swamp People* (History), *My 600-lb Life* (TLC), *Skin Tight: Transformed* (TLC), and *Fire Island* (Logo). There were also a number of Canadian reality shows with *MasterChef Canada* (CTV), *Love it or List it Vancouver* (W), and *Big Brother Canada* (Global) all airing that night.

Clearly, no matter the format, contemporary audiences have an appetite for tuning into the lives of others. However, while both reality television and reality-based theatre are popular, these two approaches are hardly valued in the same way. Since reality television first emerged as a mainstream television format in the 1990s, critics have blamed the form for increasing shallowness and ignorance. In May 2011, *The New Yorker*'s Kelefa Sanneh attempted to unpack some of the biases against the form. He notes that, while scripted programming gained an esteemed status in the 2000s—leading us into the so-called “golden age of television”—reality television programming remains a disparaged form. Sanneh claims that “The same people who brag about having seen every episode of ‘Friday Night Lights’ will brag, too, that they have never laid eyes on ‘The Real Housewives of Atlanta.’ Reality television is the television of television” (“Reality”).

In media studies, definitions of reality television shed light on some of the ingrained animosity toward the form. Even when scholars attempt to recoup the form's reputation, in doing so they often acknowledge its many critics.¹ Media and cultural studies scholars Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette take a broad view of the form, noting it is “an unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real” (3). They go on to define reality programming by what it is not, situating it opposite what they call “sanctioned information formats” such as news programs and documentaries—formats that Murray and Ouellette believe descend from a “classic public service tradition” (4). An emphasis on entertainment over “public service” pervades a number of other definitions of the genre, including those by media and communication scholars Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday. Like Murray and Ouellette, Chandler and Munday place reality television as a recent, post-1990 phenomenon, but one that has roots in longstanding television forms like documentary programs and quiz shows.

Within media studies, the form most frequently compared to reality television is the observational documentary, which, though more commonly associated with cinema, has a long and complicated relationship with television. Ouellette notes how, in the 1980s, the deregulation of television and defunding of public networks led networks to move away from observational documentary programs as they sought out “more profitable forms of tabloid journalism” and “lighter documentary formats” (109–10). Media critic John Corner terms this trend “postdocumentary,” a label that marks both reality television's difference from and indebtedness to earlier documentary forms (46).

Within theatre criticism, several scholars trace links between upsurges in reality television programming and reality-based theatre in the past twenty years. Theatre of the real

scholars tend to acknowledge a zeitgeist that links the two forms—steeped in our ongoing obsession over increasingly blurred divisions between the real and the fake, the ordinary and the celebrity, the staged and the improvised. At the same time, theatre scholars and makers often support dismissals of the reality television form for its assumed inanity and lack of ethical credibility. Andy Lavender is a rare exception as he points out ways both formats allow for selection—that directors, producers, and writers hold power within these spaces as they edit or choose what to highlight (118-19). He also takes an empathetic stance towards reality television participants who put their actual lives and “bodies on the line” (40).

Carol Martin is known for coining the term “theatre of the real” which encompasses an extensive range of reality-based performance practices, such as “documentary theatre, verbatim theatre, reality-based theatre,” that “claim a relationship to reality” (*Theatre* 5). While focused on theatrical forms, this definition aligns with reality television, which also makes “claims” to reality. Elsewhere, when actively connecting theatre and reality television, Martin subtly reveals a bias against the latter. While she notes that reality shows remain popular precisely because they blur the real and fictional, she also states that they are “rigged. Producers seek unstable and fragile people and guide them through highly charged and very personal narratives that demand confrontation among characters” (13). On the other hand, Martin finds theatre of the real full of potential, as a form that can situate “theatre as an act of positive consequence” (“Dramaturgy” 4).

Like many other scholars and artists that disparage the reality television form, Martin’s separation here seems to center on the content of the work, rather than material differences in televisual and theatrical forms. But there are, of course, some fundamental differences in how these forms are created, disseminated, and marketed. One is performed for a camera and aimed at a mass audience, while another is performed for a local audience (often in a theatre space). Most reality television shows take place over months or years, with a number of episodes forming a larger season. Theatre, on the other hand, tends to be more contained as most reality-based theatre pieces can be performed in a single showing. Yet mentions of such material differences rarely emerge in conversations about the superiority of reality-based theatre over television—instead content and affect tend to loom large.

Other theatre scholars are more blatant in their aversion towards reality television, pitting reality theatre as the revitalizing inverse to reality television’s inherent baseness. For example, Johnny Saldaña claims that, though there are similarities between televisual and theatrical approaches to the real, “theatre is generally more honest in what it’s up to” (9) and that “Real people’s real stories, told in artistically crafted ways by a sensitive production company, are genres of storytelling that rise above the current popular trend of reality TV” (9). Saldaña’s use of the term “honesty” ironically establishes an anti-theatrical bias against a televisual, rather than theatrical, form. Jonas Barish argues that since its inception, the theatre has been the target of hostility because it relies on pretense. Barish notes how:

terms borrowed from the theater—*theatrical, operatic, melodramatic, stagey*, etc.—tend to be hostile or belittling. And so do a wide range of expressions drawn from theatrical activity expressly to convey disapproval: *acting, play acting, playing up to, putting on an act, putting on a performance, making a scene, making a spectacle of oneself, playing to the gallery*. (1)

In claiming reality-based theatre is more “honest,” Saldaña pigeonholes reality television in ways once reserved for theatre—reality television is now the derided, and potentially dangerous, space for spectacles and fabrication. Even though reality television relies on everyday people acting as themselves, while reality theatre frequently has actors playing a character based on a real-life person, the former is deemed to be more of a pretense. Again, Saldaña’s conclusion centers on content, which in theatre is “artistically crafted,” rather than form.

Dismissals of reality television are not limited to theatre scholars. Critics and theatre makers also display biases against the form, often as they simultaneously situate reality-based theatre as its antidote. In a glowing review of the National Theatre’s *London Road* (Alecky Blythe’s verbatim musical based on interviews with the neighbours of serial killer Steve Wright), the *Guardian*’s Gary Nunn argues “verbatim theatre is like (good) reality TV on stage: earthy, accessible, compelling.” Nunn goes on to praise Blythe for introducing audiences to the words of “those at the bottom”—something he sees as a rarity among contemporary British playwrights. This compliment reveals a fascinating class-based double standard, where the words of everyday people filtered through an established playwright holds educational value, but the words of the same kind of people on television are uncouth. In an article on reality-based theatre shows playing in Toronto in 2011, the *Toronto Star*’s Alison Broverman makes a similar judgement, claiming that “While reality TV tends to cheapen the human condition and exploit the foolish and fame-hungry, theatre practitioners can use similar techniques to do just the opposite.”

Broverman and Nunn’s comments reveal how a flip side of the dismissal of reality television programming is a celebration of theatre of the real and verbatim approaches in particular. Derek Paget first coined the term “verbatim theatre” in 1987 and saw it as a subgenre of documentary theatre. His understanding of the term is fairly narrow and focuses on the artistic process, which includes theatre makers interviewing “ordinary” people and then creating a text from the interviews (317). Key to Paget’s definition is a belief that a verbatim approach can do what forms of mass communication fail to do: to consider the stories and issues of marginalized communities. While working over a decade before reality television became ubiquitous, Paget’s approach to mass media prefigured the reality television/theatre divide.

In recent years, verbatim techniques have become more popular in North America and Europe, with an array of theatre makers and playwrights, including Blythe, Milo Rau, Robin Soans, Annabel Soutar, and Judith Thompson taking it up.² Even though Will Hammond and Dan Steward note that this technique can lead to radically different forms (9), the content of verbatim theatre has a marked tendency towards serious, politically engaged topics—a focus that contrasts with reality television’s general emphasis on wealth, romance, self-improvement, and competition. Following Paget’s belief, Jenn Stephenson notes that documentary/verbatim approaches take up a “journalistic void in an effort to give hearing to voices not usually raised in public and present insight direct from not-the-usual sources” (“Theatres”). Daniel Schulze also connects reality-based theatre to journalism, and to television journalism specifically, arguing that audiences often buy the “truth claim” of reality-based theatre because this form borrows practices popularized by news programs and documentary television, such as simple sets and situating actors as “talking heads” (204).

David Lane, Andy Lavender and Mary Luckhurst make similar claims to Stephenson, and tie the verbatim technique to the potential of theatre as a democratizing force in society.

Lane even argues verbatim theatre “performs a worldwide civic function of sorts, creating a democratic theatre that can [...] give an opportunity for people to talk, and be listened to” (66). Examples of this kind of civic and political engagement can be found in many examples already mentioned. For example, Soutar’s *Seeds* and *The Watershed* explore a Supreme Court of Canada case on biogenetics and federal water policies respectively, while Blythe’s *London Road* covers media sensationalism and gentrification. Even when reality-based theatre calls attention to the slippery nature of veracity (examples of which include James Long’s *Clark and I Somewhere in Connecticut* and Dennis Kelly’s *Taking Care of Baby*), critics tend to link it to universal and serious political goals. For example, Daniel Schulze believes *Taking Care of Baby* “exposes our craving for truth, closure and authenticity” (241).

So, while theatre scholars, critics, and makers point to the political impact and journalistic function of reality-based theatre, reality television is habitually scorned for its apparent lack of these traits—a division that mirrors how media critics divide reality television from more “serious” television documentary programming. One exception to this perspective is British playwright David Eldridge, who critiques verbatim theatre precisely because he sees links between a verbatim approach and reality television. He claims, echoing Sanneh, that verbatim is “like the reality television of the theatre, marketing its authenticity when actually such work is as subjectively edited and put together as any work of fiction” (qtd. in Taylor). This selection can lead to blind spots that impede on an assumed “worldwide civic function” for verbatim theatre. Blythe’s *London Road*, for instance, sidelines the narrative of Wright’s sex worker victims. While sex workers appear in one song, the bulk of the musical is a case study about Wright’s lower-middle-class neighbours, who build a sense of community with exclusion at the core.

Still, the dominant narrative situates reality television as baser than reality-based theatre. This division marks a return to assumed divisions between high and low culture Raymond Williams took on in his seminal 1974 article “On High and Popular Culture.” Williams points out two dangers in such an approach. First, these divisions rely on universalist readings that make assumptions about audiences and what they get out of different forms of media. Second, dismissals of what are believed to be lower cultural formats risk overlooking important areas of study and avoiding questions about who creates, controls, and circulates cultural materials. For Williams, the divide between high and low cultural forms is unstable, with each impacting the other in profound ways. By culturally separating reality television and theatre, critics and artists risk overlooking productive relationships between the two. Thus, it might be more useful to view them as part of an ecology rather than through a hierarchical lens in order to assess what the current “postdocumentary” moment looks like. As Murray points out when discussing reality and documentary television forms, “we may not, as Margaret Mead suggests, ‘need a new name for it.’ Instead, we might just need to look at why it’s so important for us to label it at all” (79).

Undoing Reality: Parody and Pretense in *Nathan for You*

In his Comedy Central series *Nathan for You*, which has been on the air since 2013 and completed its fourth season in the fall of 2017, Nathan Fielder plays with assumptions about reality-based forms. In Canada, the series has played on the Comedy Network and MUCH.

It is also now available on streaming services including Crave (in Canada) and Hulu (in the US). The series parodies the reality show format on two levels. First, the main premise mimics business improvement shows. This format (a popular example of which is Gordon Ramsay's *Kitchen Nightmares*) pairs a charismatic individual with a struggling business to help them re-brand or re-build to stay afloat. In *Nathan for You*, Fielder plays this main character, moving from business to business in the Los Angeles area. The people who work with Fielder are not told that he is primarily a comedian. Instead, they assume that they are taking part in a serious business improvement show. Second, *Nathan for You* delves into other reality programming formats through one-off projects that function as *mise en abymes*—reality shows within a reality show. For example, in one episode Fielder creates a parody of the popular dating show *The Bachelor* called *The Hunk* as an elaborate ruse to make himself more comfortable around women.

In the series, Fielder concocts business boosting scenarios that end up testing the limits of business owners and patrons' willingness to play along. For example, on one episode, he convinces a gas station owner to promise discounted gas to anyone who climbs a mountain just outside of Los Angeles. On another he has a souvenir shop owner agree to let him shoot a fake film in the store so that Fielder can dupe extras into buying souvenirs with their own money. When Fielder discovers he might have broken the law by tricking the extras, he finishes the film and creates an entire film festival to legitimize it as an award-winning piece of art. This is a fairly typical scenario for Fielder—what begins as a simple concept spirals and requires an increasingly large number of people to go along with the escape.

Throughout the series, Fielder's satirical approach often upholds an anti-theatrical bias towards reality television programming. In *Nathan for You*, reality programming becomes the target of satire as Fielder reveals how far reality show participants are willing to go while on camera and how much power the creators of such shows wield. This approach follows Amber Day and L.M. Bogad's understanding of embodied satire as tool for unmasking dominant structures. Key to this form of embodied irony is the use of a persona, who pranks and parodies expected norms. Throughout this article, I do not separate mentions of Fielder as persona and Fielder as comedian/satirist because the two intentionally blur. In fact, Fielder states that the "Nathan" character is an extension of himself, as he "[takes] a lot of vulnerabilities and insecurities that I had when I was younger, and I'm exaggerating them for the sake of comedy" (Teti). In *Nathan for You*, the tension between Fielder's power as the host/creator and his persona's ineptitude when it comes to social relations fuels much of the comedy. Even though the business owners and patrons are often put off by Fielder's behavior, they continue to participate, presumably because they are in it for the publicity. In this way, Fielder satirizes reality show participants' need to appear on camera. Alison Hearn notes that hoax reality shows "feature unwitting contestants who [...] [are] subject to an extended practical joke, which makes fun of their desire to be on TV and features their ongoing humiliation" (165). However, while there is some deception in *Nathan for You's* premise, the audience is directed to mostly laugh at Fielder's inability to read situations, rather than at the participants he engages with. At times the participants' quirkiness provides fodder for the show, but this is usually tangential to the main narrative and often appears to be a surprise to Fielder himself.

Another way that Fielder's work feeds into anti-theatrical biases is the show's emphasis on the constructed nature of reality television. Popular shows like *The Real Housewives* franchise and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* are plagued with accusations that they are scripted to keep the conflict flowing. Even business makeover shows are edited to highlight disagreements and personality conflicts. Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood label these "melodramatic moments" (94), which captivate audiences even though viewers know they are constructed (40). Skeggs and Wood argue that audiences are drawn to these moments because of the extreme physicality they provoke and, in expert-based shows, that they can lead to "moments of rebellion" in which participants disagree with the experts helping them out (95).

In *Nathan for You* these "moments of rebellion" become heightened, as his persona's constant need for validation leads to cringe worthy exchanges. Here Fielder's strategic use of awkwardness and embarrassment to unsettle his participants mirrors other reality shows' use of extreme measures, such as lack of sleep, pressure, and physical challenges, to manipulate participants into vulnerable and seemingly "real" situations. On the dating shows *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, contestants have access to unlimited alcohol, presumably to keep inhibitions low. Producers of the non-competition *Real Housewives* series have also been accused of plying the castmates with alcohol. On the series *The Amazing Race*, contestants frequently go days without sleeping in an actual bed. Such extreme measures lead to overly emotional contestants, who are then placed in high stakes situations in front of cameras.

Yet, while *Nathan for You's* parodic form often builds off of assumptions about reality programming's baseness, Fielder's satire can also have the surprising effect of showing the potential for reality television to move towards the "civic function" that reality-based theatre has become lauded for. In order to satirize reality programming, *Nathan for You* actually becomes the object it parodies: it is simultaneously both a comedy show and an actual reality show. And as a reality show, *Nathan for You* models alternative uses of this televisual form.

Key to *Nathan for You's* twofold function as both a critique and overhaul of the reality television form is the role that Fielder himself plays. Fielder creates a slippery, dual-purpose character—an expert comedian to television viewers in the know, but a loser, and sometimes creep, to those on the show. On one hand the persona's narcissism and social ineptitude highlight how participants will perform a role for the camera, even when placed in discomfiting situations. But these traits also work to unsettle participants so that they break out of acting for the camera. Fielder admits this is an intentional strategy, as the awkwardness exposes "charming and endearing" sides to the people he features on *Nathan for You*. He notes:

It's an interesting litmus test to see—to get a sense of a person. A lot of people come into a situation, especially when they're being filmed, where they have a certain idea of how they want to present themselves. And that part is usually the least interesting part of them because it's very controlled, and I'm trying to show who they really are in some little way—with very low stakes. (qtd. in Teti)

While Fielder works in a televisual, rather than theatrical, form, this unsettling follows Martin's belief that "Intrusions of the real into the theatrical [...] displays the closeness and the distance of the real and the theatrical" (*Theatre* 9). In moments of discomfort, Fielder at once makes fun of the artificiality of reality television and complicates assumptions about

what the format does. Participants often fail to act for the camera in an expected way when they are thrown by Fielder's surprising schemes or mannerisms. Jack Halberstam argues that failure can "[allow] us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior" (3). In the context of reality television, the failure to conform and play to script ironically makes the subjects seem relatable and *more* real.

By breaking his subjects out of manufactured and clearly scripted routines, Fielder unearths captivating moments of shared humanity, which have the potential to recondition our expectations about reality television. A poignant example of this occurs in "Gas Station/Caricature Artist," an episode that features an elaborate ruse that forces customers to climb a mountain if they want to claim a rebate for cheap gas. Three customers end up staying overnight on the mountain with Fielder and their camping adventure quickly shifts from a search for cheap gas to a group sharing session, with personal confessions and advice. The comedy is not lost, however, as one confession centers on a man's belief in the naturopathic benefits of drinking his own urine. While unsuspecting one-off participants feature most prominently on *Nathan for You*, Fielder has also amassed several recurring "characters" over the years, including Bill Gates impersonator Bill Heath, Fielder's production assistant Salomon Flores, and private investigator Brian Wolfe. Fielder's ongoing relationship with these individuals, and their awkward, contentious, but frequently touching friendships have become central to the show's narrative.

All the Bar's a Stage: Fusing Forms in "Smokers Allowed"

In his series Fielder begins to undo the first part of the binary logic that situates reality television as vapid and theatre of the real as nourishing, relevant art. In one particular episode, "Smokers Allowed," he also ruptures the latter. "Smokers Allowed" begins with Fielder meeting Ellen Sancer, proprietor of the 1881 Club in Pasadena. After discussing how Sancer's business has suffered due to smoking laws, he proposes they take advantage of the fact that smoking is allowed in California bars if "it happens to be part of a theatrical production where smoking is integral to the plot." Rather than creating a script-based piece, Fielder envisions having the entire bar as an invisible theatre space where every patron is an actor, and thus can smoke. As he notes, "most theatre is terrible [...] so who's to say a bar filled with smokers can't be a boundary-pushing theatrical experience [...] in the eyes of the law."

To frame it as a "theatrical production," Fielder convinces two women from "the theatre district" to be the first audience members. The resulting production, also entitled *Smokers Allowed*, is a form of environmental theatre where the bar patrons become the (unpaid) performers. A small, very inconspicuous sign informs them that by entering the bar, they consent to their participation in the production. Fielder places his audience in theatre seats in a corner of the bar behind a small red curtain, which he raises and lowers to mark the beginning and end of the performance. During the performance, the bar patrons appear to be unaware of the live audience or video camera, which shoots from the audience section.

At the end of the show, Fielder asks the two women what they thought of his production. When they claim it was "awesome," "so nothing in a way but incredibly profound," and

even suggestive of a Sam Shepard play, Fielder uses this praise to convince himself he has created a masterpiece. To test his theory about the play's value, Fielder takes a tape of the production to the chair of a local college theatre department, Jeanette Farr. When asked if the show has theatrical merit, Farr tells him that it is an important piece of "slice of life" theatre." Like the two audience members, Farr compares it to the work of a major playwright who works in relation to realism—this time it is John Patrick Shanley. The comedy here lies in the disconnect between what Farr tells Fielder and what the television audience has seen a portion of, which is just a mundane night at a bar. Again, this moment probably has something to do with the reality television form, as those on camera tend to tell Fielder what he wants to hear, rather than admitting to him that watching people go about their business in a bar for hours is actually extremely boring.

Yet, the two women and Farr are not alone in their assessment that performances of the mundane might have some potential to reconfigure understandings of the everyday. In *Theatres of the Everyday*, Jacob Gallagher-Ross discusses Ludwig Wittgenstein's "impossible theater of the everyday" (80) in which an unsuspecting person performs their everyday actions for an audience. Wittgenstein argues that, even though we see these activities in our daily lives, framing them as theatre:

would be like watching a chapter of biography with our own eyes—surely this would be uncanny and wonderful at the same time. We should be observing something more wonderful than anything a playwright could arrange to be acted or spoken on the stage: life itself. (qtd. in Gallagher-Ross 80)

As Gallagher-Ross points out, this theatre is "impossible," noting "What technologies of seeing or staging could possibly allow for this glimpse at the secret progress of an ordinary life?" (80). Here, Gallagher-Ross hints at the fact that every performance is mediated. And Fielder's work is doubly so—the *Smokers Allowed* performance is framed for both a live and a recorded audience. Yet, the women and Farr still seem to be pointing to its proximity to the real, and to the kind of "uncanny," "wonderful" effect this creates.

But for Fielder the aim is not simply the creation of a particular feeling or affect. His goal—per *Nathan for You's* narrative—is profit. And the warm reception swiftly makes Fielder believe his project has potential as a business venture. In fact, he states he could even "make millions" if he can recreate this successful event, and so he tries to figure out what makes *Smokers Allowed* so fascinating to Farr and the two women. Rather than considering that the evening might be remarkable ironically through its *lack* of remarkability, he decides the production's power centers on two climactic moments: one where a couple shares a kiss and another where a man shows off a new skateboard while a three-person selfie simultaneously takes place.

Fielder begins his process by hiring a team of transcribers to create a script from the recordings he took of the night. As the team has to track both verbal dialogue and a physical score, the resulting product is a comically massive text. Here, Fielder's satire extends to the labour behind reality theatre pieces, particularly those that work with verbatim texts. As Robin Bernstein notes:

live theatre is an extraordinarily labor-intensive form of art; theatre, by definition, almost could not possibly be worth it. It is that “almost” that enables theatre to exist—but that same “almost” installs the always-lurking, shameful suspicion that it might not be worth it, that the ratio of labor-to-reward is ridiculous, and makes all involved with theatre ridiculous. (219)

By involving a large group of workers (who seem to have no interest in or direct relation to theatre) to develop the script, Fielder points out how “ridiculous” the entire endeavor is. Once they have created the document, Fielder auditions actors to take on the various roles. While he initially considers having Sancer play herself, he decides “it wasn’t quite what I was looking for, for the role of female bar owner.” So, he hires an actress to play the part—a ludicrous step that highlights his manipulation of the supposed reality behind the work.

For this second go of *Smokers Allowed*, Fielder adds five more seats, sells branded merchandise, and increases the cost of drinks to ridiculously high amounts that “reflect theatre prices.” By upselling and branding his theatre of the real experience, Fielder denies a narrative around reality theatre that separates it from overtly commercial forms, like reality television. While the audience are unlikely to buy “Smokers Allowed” t-shirts and twenty-dollar glasses of wine, the inclusion of this extra-theatrical content satirizes how theatre of the real, though predominantly taken as solely serious and progressive art, often markets itself as simultaneously art and entertainment. For example, the lauded British production *You Me Bum Bum Train* (2004-2016), which controversially did not pay its performers, has an online shop where fans can buy branded t-shirts, mugs, neon signs, postcards, erasers, and even an asthma inhaler.³

The performance mimics the first night down to extreme detail. This repetition goes beyond verbal cues and includes what Jenn Stephenson terms “gestural verbatim” as the actors follow a physical score based on video recordings. As Stephenson notes, gestural verbatim is still “subject to the same vagaries of aesthetic interpretation” as oral verbatim (“Verbatim”). It is these very “vagaries”—or at least the hopeful *lack* of them—that become Fielder’s focus as he believes that the play’s success relies on how closely it copies the first iteration. Like Stephenson, many theatre and performance scholars note the impossibility, and even danger, of such a goal. Janelle Reinelt finds the term “verbatim” is a “narrow orthodoxy” that leads to the assumption “that what you will hear spoken are the authentic and unaltered words of various real-life agents” (13). She notes that this can “[risk] a perception of documentary failure, since it inevitably falls short of technical truth” (14). Here Fielder diverges from the main focus of many documentary theatre makers and critics. He is not searching for a deep truth or authenticity. It is not even clear if the audience, tucked away in a corner of the bar, can hear the conversations taking place amongst the actors. He merely wants the second iteration to look and sound identical to the first in order for the show to have the same effect—a ridiculous aspiration as direct imitation is always impossible.

In both versions of *Smokers Allowed*, Fielder’s satire does not center on any single artist or reality theatre production. Rather it works to exaggerate several reality theatre norms and techniques, such as verbatim methods that have actors closely mimic their source subjects. Instead of targeting a specific example, Fielder melds different understandings

of reality-based performance into one product. Robin Bernstein outlines how the Rude Mechanicals use a similar strategy in *The Method Gun*, a production that sends up Method acting techniques. Bernstein finds the production is not really about “a historically located set of acting techniques” but rather:

a mode of snickering at actors’ self-importance and self-decimation. The “method” [...] is a generalization in which the teachings of Stanislavski are identical to those of Lee Strasberg, which are, in turn, indistinguishable from those of Sanford Meisner—and in this vision, Stella Adler, who defined herself largely in opposition to method acting, is reabsorbed into it and even becomes its champion. (216)

Similarly, Fielder generalizes approaches to reality-based theatre, and particularly verbatim. Rather than focusing on a single issue-based production or artist approach, Fielder takes up what David Lane calls verbatim’s “promise to present the unmediated truth” (66). Like Gallagher-Ross’s assessment of Wittgenstein’s theatre of the everyday, Lane finds this premise impossible, noting it is “a promise that it cannot hope to achieve.”

In the end, Fielder believes the climactic moments occur exactly as they did in the first performance, but his audience is less enthused. They appear bored throughout, clearly uninterested in the replication of an average evening. This reaction is disheartening to Fielder, particularly because their disinterest makes the product he has created less commercially viable. The second version of *Smokers Allowed* shows how reality theatre can lack profundity. Again, Lane makes this point in his assessment of the limitations of verbatim. He notes that verbatim does not always make for good theatre as it “finds itself continually treading a treacherous fault line between the natural limitations of the material as performance text, and the demand for an effective drama” (76). Yet, while Fielder’s work is a failure for its live audience, the entire process makes for effective (though frequently discomfiting) comedy for its television audience because the goal of re-staging the real is inherently ridiculous and unattainable, regardless of medium.

While the entire episode works to align, rather than separate, reality theatre and reality television, two moments stand out. First, during the rehearsal process, Fielder claims he does not believe in the chemistry between the two romantic leads. In order to provoke “real” emotions, Fielder takes over for the male performer and conducts an acting exercise that evokes Stanford Meisner’s Word Repetition Game. In this exercise, two actors repeat the same phrase to one another back and forth. Over time the performers begin to add in their own points of view and build towards a conversation. According to Meisner, the exercise is about “listening to each other[.] That’s the connection. It’s a connection which comes from listening to each other” (22). In Fielder’s distortion of the exercise, it becomes one-directional. Fielder, a loser who has no luck with women, gets the actress, Victoria Hogan, to look into his eyes and say “I love you” on repeat. Fielder continually cues her by saying “again.” The comedy of the moment is that the exercise is fulfilling an emotional need for Fielder even though Hogan is just playing a part. This back and forth continues until eventually Hogan, herself overcome with emotion, breaks from the exercise to tell Fielder he has tears in his eyes. Fielder apologizes, saying “Oh, my God. Sorry. Um, okay. See, that, that felt real to me.”

Here Fielder highlights how the seemingly objective task of recreating exact motions is a subjective and selective activity that is tied into the creator's goals and positionality. He goes on to ask Hogan whether the scene felt "more real" with him than it did with her fellow actor who is standing right beside them. After trying to avoid answering, she says it did feel more "real" with Fielder, though her hesitation suggests she may just be telling Fielder what he wants to hear. Later, in voiceovers, Fielder proclaims the exercise a success because it feels real to him: "the chemistry between them was now all too real" and it "felt as genuine as the love that the real-life couple they were playing shared." Fielder's actions highlight how those with power—holding the camera, editing the text, asking the questions, framing the action—can easily manipulate the so-called "real" to be what they feel is correct, regardless of medium.

The second moment occurs at the end of the episode. Following the tepid audience response, Nathan claims he only cares what Ellen, his client, thinks of the show, but she tells him she found it "boring" and has no plans to continue to produce the play. So, Fielder goes to the actress who played Ellen, Amy Goddard, for some feedback. She tells him she found the play "brilliant" and would continue to host it in the bar. Then, in a repeat of the earlier acting exercise, Fielder has her continually tell him "I loved it" as he cues her by saying "again." Even when Fielder says he knows she is faking her response and is still acting a part, she claims "It's not fake. I loved it." When Goddard says the moment is "not fake" and that she "loved it," what she "loved" is not entirely clear. Is she speaking as the person who performed in the production? Or is she imagining herself seeing the show, as Sancer did? The episode ends after this exchange, with Fielder's voiceover stating "They say reality is what you make of it, so in a world that's cruel and hurtful, who's to say mine can't be nice."

Carol Martin notes that the reality-based actor "is both valorized as the vehicle of imitation and castigated as the teller of lies. An actor's performance can exist on a continuum from imitation to allusion to invention to parody" (10). And where one falls on the spectrum depends on audience reception. In the second moment, Fielder locates himself as audience for Goddard, and finds she is something even beyond Martin's continuum. She is not just imitating or inventing, but is *creating* a reality for him. The humour, of course, lies in the fact that the secondary audience (the television viewers) see that she is simply playing a part and lying to make Fielder happy. This disconnect, made all the more ridiculous through Fielder's serious tone, reveals the absurdity of the entire enterprise. Rather than modelling democratic values, here reality theatre becomes a vehicle for commercial gain and Fielder's ongoing egoistic search for validation.

The subjective, and arguably manipulated, reality Fielder seeks relates to questions about who gets to create and alter our realities, and anxieties about truth and fiction mingling together. While the possibility of a number of realities once nourished progressive performance theory—underpinning Elin Diamond's concept of a tactical "feminist mimesis" for example—now Liz Tomlin sees this as a potentially dangerous situation. She notes that we live surrounded by a "widespread cynicism of the real" (146) in which all narratives can be treated as equally true. On one hand, this state can lead to an imbalance of power, where those with resources can dominate what version of reality we focus on. On the other, skepticism towards all realities means that marginal perspectives can be easily dismissed. Jenn Stephenson notes how the latter results in a "theory of performative social realities [that] is

ethically neutral [...] the same idea that facilitated progressive liberal ideologies (especially around identity) also enables the primacy of feelings over facts” (“Theatres”). In this climate, Stephenson believes we need to look deeply at how realities are constituted and taken up as fact. In a twisted way, Fielder engages with this notion as he takes his television viewers through a step-by-step process wherein he manipulates theatrical and televisual “realities” (particularly with regards to women) to conform to his feelings.

Though Fielder’s satire shows the ridiculousness inherent in trying to mold reality to one’s worldview, his work is not simply cynical. Ulrike Garde and Meg Mumford argue that moments where:

fiction and reality meet or even become indistinguishable, and fiction can seem to put us more in contact with truth than facts do [...] can generate a “productive insecurity,” one that invites fresh ways of engaging with people and related phenomena that are unfamiliar. (148)

While Garde and Mumford focus on postdramatic reality theatre in developing the concept of “productive insecurity,” this idea can also help unpack how Fielder’s satire is simultaneously pessimistic and productive.

Embodied satire is a tricky genre, as the satirical performer often risks mimicking their target so closely that they become a version of the very thing under scrutiny. In these two moments, Fielder employs a tactic of cringe comedy, where viewers can simultaneously find humour in the repetition of the exercise but also may feel uncomfortable about his manipulation of the women. Is Fielder simply highlighting how men exploit women through reality-based forms, or does his satire cross over and *do* the very thing it critiques? What if these women really feel uncomfortable about these interactions with Fielder? Here the mix of reality and fiction, and comedy and discomfort, works to unsettle the viewer and reveal the potential for troubling gender dynamics in reality-based art.

At the same time, the “productive” side of this insecurity relates back to the commingling of the televisual and theatrical frames. Throughout “Smokers Allowed” Fielder shows that the divide between reality theatre and reality television is perhaps tenuous as both formats are open to manipulation, commercialism, and ridicule. His scene with Goddard is a particularly playful, though uncomfortable, blurring of the lines between these two forms, as the theatre actress becomes a television character. This melding of Goddard into Sancer means the play has spilled out of the theatrical frame and entered the televisual. In this seemingly serious—and for Fielder, profound—moment, the ridiculousness of Goddard playing this role becomes apparent. With the presumably low culture values of reality television applied to elements of the theatre, both come out looking absurd.

Fielder’s intervention shows how our perspective on reality-based theatre can become reoriented when presented through another medium, and hints that theatre of the real’s status as an inherently serious and politically efficacious form might be shakier than theatre artists and critics believe. By exploiting the tropes of both theatrical and televisual forms, Fielder reveals the tropes of theatre of the real to be no less clichéd than those of reality television. While perhaps this suggests we could now simply regard both as “low culture” forms, I believe this instead begs us to take a more careful approach to thinking about the

so-called “real,” whatever the medium. We now obsess, and are sometimes anxious, over all things “real,” but when does this drive actually become *productive* rather than self-serving? Fielder’s intervention implies that form might have less to do with productivity and political impact than critics think.

Notes

- 1 This statement covers attempts within media scholarship to determine the attributes and boundaries of the form. Media scholar Mark Andrejevic finds fault with such efforts and argues that reality television encompasses a field too broad to succinctly define (64).
- 2 Many contemporary verbatim theatre scholars point out the limits of Paget’s coinage, particularly as verbatim forms proliferate. For Will Hammond and Dan Steward the problem lies with definitions that consider verbatim a theatre “form.” They argue that it is actually a “technique” — “a means rather than an end” (9). For Hammond and Steward the technique involves theatre makers using the words of actual people—but (in line with Mary Luckhurst’s understanding of the term) these can be sourced from interviews theatre makers conduct themselves or from secondary sources.
- 3 Interestingly, Fielder fails to directly address labour issues in “Smokers Allowed.” Both documentary theatre and reality television often rely on free labour, which in the case of theatre can often go against the anti-neoliberal aims of its creators. While Fielder says he “hires” the transcribers and actors for the second version of *Smokers Allowed*, the first version relies on the unpaid labour of the bar patrons.

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