

Self-Making as Public Spectacle: Bodies, Bodily Training and Reality TV

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Reality TV has exploded onto the entertainment scene in the last fifteen years, as millions of viewers tune in each week to watch the bodies, relationships and behaviors of supposedly “real” people in a variety of private, public, or competitive situations (Holmes and Jermyn, 2004; Hill, 2005: 31; Christenson and Ivancin, 2006: 3). Much has been written about how reality TV constructs stories that keep us as hooked as any TV drama, and of the genre’s complex negotiations among reality, authenticity and artifice (Holmes and Jermyn, 2004; Andrejevic, 2004; Biressi and Nunn, 2005; Murray and Ouellette, 2009). Current research suggests that while spectators, producers and critics recognize reality TV’s constructed nature, viewers remain keen to watch the exploits of the larger-than-life contestants chosen to be part of *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, *Pop Idol*, its US equivalent *American Idol*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, *The Biggest Loser*, *Extreme Makeover*, or their many franchises and imitators around the world (Murray and Ouellette, 2009: 8). This raises questions about why spectators become so caught up in a genre they know scripts its supposedly fly-on-the-wall sneak peeks at people, their bodies and behavior. For instance, there has been much controversy over what shows such as *Extreme Makeover*, *The Swan*, or more recently *Bridal Plasty*—in which participants undergo plastic surgery—say about attitudes toward the body and beauty (Christenson and Ivancin, 2006: 5). Nevertheless, such programs are still being produced and continue to attract audiences. Many spectators, it seems, enjoy being interpellated into the images of body, self and society these programs represent. Scholars have therefore sought new ways to analyze shows that blur television’s traditional aesthetic, cultural and economic categories and thus potentially create anxieties about how spectators read and respond to them (Holmes and Jermyn, 2004: 10, and 16).

In this article, I further explore reality TV’s relationship with the body by focusing specifically on the way it brings the techné, techniques and training of the body—historically undertaken in private spaces such as studios, schools, gyms and hospitals—into public view. In the 1990s and early 2000s, many reality TV programs focused on crime and the work of first responders such as the police and paramedics (Holmes and Jermyn 2004:3). However, reality TV has since evolved to include docu-soaps, games and grand events depicting the social and competitive behavior of a selected cast of people. Today, many reality TV programs focus on the training and transformation of human bodies

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(Palmer, 2004: 173; Bernstein and St. John, 2006: 25; Christenson and Ivancin, 2006: 7). In shows such as *Pop Idol*, *Dancing with the Stars*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, or *MasterChef* the usually private training of the body to sing, dance or cook in professional schools and studios is made public. Likewise, shows such as *Medical Miracles*, *The Miracle Worker* and *Embarrassing Bodies* make visible the usually private training of the body in hospitals. In *The Biggest Loser* and imitators such as *Weighing In* in the US and *Fat Club* in the UK, the usually private training of the body in gyms (and, in cases of morbid obesity, hospitals) is also on public view. In each program, a participant or contestant, sometimes a “real” person, sometimes a “real” minor celebrity, is “helped” to improve via a process that includes training, education, tasks, exercises and haranguing about the inadequacies of their body on national television.

As a scholar who has observed the self-production that typifies drama, theater and dance training for fifteen years, I have been fascinated by how private training practices are made public in reality TV. I have been perplexed by participants’ desires to submit to drills, chastisement and castigation in such a public context. In my experience, actors can become sensitive and emotionally distraught as they struggle with their bodies during training. Accordingly, actors are usually reluctant to have strangers present at such moments. This is not the case for reality TV participants, who seem happy for strangers and cameras to be present during such moments. This article focuses on one of the longest-running and most popular reality TV programs, *The Biggest Loser*, and the way theatrical accounts of training help us understand its central philosophy of private bodily training made public. [1] Applying theatrical terminology to studies of human bodies and behaviors is not new. From Erving Goffman to Judith Butler, twentieth-century critical theorists have increasingly drawn on discourses of theater, theatrical performance and performativity to describe the sometimes coercive (and often unconscious) social process by which culturally condoned “scripts” construct bodies and bodily behaviors. Terms such as script, performance, dramaturgy and dramaturgy of the self have entered the common critical vocabulary. However, such analyses do not always draw on detailed discipline-specific knowledge of theater, theater training and its processes. Moreover, such approaches have not been applied to reality TV shows such as *The Biggest Loser*. My contention here is that a theatrical theorization of the pre-performance techniques used to train the body in a show such as *The Biggest Loser* can add to the arsenal of analytic tools used to understand reality TV’s relationship with bodies. In particular, awareness of pre-performance techniques can help unpack the perverse sense of pleasure competitors on a program like *The Biggest Loser* seem to take in submitting their body to the disciplinary practice of training (that is, the way the show’s drilling, chastisement, surveillance and self-surveillance contribute to a satisfying experience of changes in competitors’ bodies). Theater training offers a cluster of terms and concepts to describe the construction of bodies and the bodily canvases best able to signify particular meanings. The approach taken herein

can thus be extremely useful in clarifying how reality TV shows that bring private bodily training into public view participate in the disciplining of competitors, spectators and society.

Training in the Theater

In any given culture, at any given time, there circulate a set of culturally constructed “scripts” or tropes that tell a body how to think, speak and move in socially serviceable and meaningful ways. In theater, as in other spheres of cultural practice, some ways of being are privileged because experts consider them most effective in enabling the body to express socially meaningful messages on stage—happiness, sadness, anger, morality, immorality, and so forth. These values find expression in the different terms, tropes and metaphors theater training systems use to teach a body how to signify physical, psychological or metaphysical states (Foster, 2003: 237). Naturally, these tropes differ across times, cultures and traditions. They can also be very difficult to put into words (or at least words meaningful to people outside that specific theatrical tradition). Tropes that tell a body how to behave are strongly codified in certain traditions such as French mask and mime, Asian theatrical forms such as Indian Kathakali or Japanese Noh, Kyogen and Kabuki. In other traditions (in Russian, French and English realist theater, for example), these tropes are looser, linked to the actor’s subjective yet still culturally constructed sense of what a particular emotional state should look like. Some traditions place emphasis on how the body looks from the outside in the eyes of a teacher or mirror. Others are concerned with how a body feels from the inside. Some traditions use specific metaphors for describing the body, its sensations or its movements—joints pulled by pieces of string, pelvises rotating around plates and planes, eyesight edging out through circles of attention, and so forth. Whatever the trope, the aim is always to bolster the actor’s presentational or representational capability and thus his or her ability to present a meaningful message about a happy, sad, conflicted, moral or corrupt person or relationship.

In most traditions, pre-performance training is conceived as a way of preparing the body to receive a new “script,” a new modality of speech or movement that signifies something—the right thing—to spectators. As European theater maker Eugenio Barba explains, such training disciplines the body “to accept a new form of culture which the brain has decided is the right one” (1986: 72). Differences in the training practices described above notwithstanding, the common feature of almost all theater training systems is the idea that training should begin by stripping the body of the “bad” techniques and “bad” scripts acquired throughout its life, returning it to a so-called “neutral” state. The term “neutral” has been traced to the work of French theater maker Jacques Copeau in the early twentieth century, though it has been integral to a broad spectrum of theater training techniques advocated before and after (Logie, 1995; Sandahl, 2005). Konstantin Stanislavki (Russia) used exercises to eliminate tension. Vselevod Meyerhold (Russia) used *études* to strip a body back to simple, mechanical

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patterns. Jacques Copeau, Etienne Decroux and Jacques Lecoq (France) used mask exercises to expose and eliminate a body's personal idiosyncrasies. The idea of neutrality even extends beyond the sphere of theater training and has been important in therapeutic techniques used by F. Mattias Alexander, Moshe Feldenkrais, and Joseph Pilates, amongst others.

This neutralizing process is based on the assumption that there is a natural, neutral body to which habits, skills and techniques have been added. Social habits added to date have left the actor's body distorted or deformed. Stripping these idiosyncrasies away during training leaves a blank slate for future signifiatory work. In this way, training builds a blank slate better able to signify things to spectators and society. According to a telling passage Carrie Sandahl pulls from Jean Sabatine's 1955 actor training text, the notion of neutralizing the body suggests a training regime should "try to restore the actor's body to the natural grace and ease it was intended to have before the body developed all the tics, slouches, slumps, and masks that social experience imposes on bone, tissue and emotions" (Sabatine, quoted in Sandahl, 2005: 256).

In theatrical training parlance, the neutral body is a "state from which any character can be built" (Sandahl, 2005: 256). However, this notion is problematic from a poststructuralist perspective. As Sandahl argues, a neutral body is not natural, nor is it the "damaged" body we deal with in daily life. Rather, a neutral body is a more malleable, controllable body that, Sandahl argues, emerged amid an emphasis on mechanistic efficiency and control in the industrial age. This body has been made strong, supple, balanced and amenable to the brain's voluntary control via training exercises. In effect, it has become what Michel Foucault (1979) describes as a "docile" body. Consequently, the neutralizing techniques common to theater training act as technologies of power in a Foucauldian sense. Instructors, fellow students, full-length mirrors and cameras survey the body's actions in space, time and in relation to other bodies, setting up precisely the scopic infrastructure of instruction, control and constraint Foucault identified as operative in other disciplinary institutions such as prisons, hospitals and schools. The architecture of the training space becomes a theater of culture, a theatricalized forum for disciplining bodies performing and watching into a new cultural form. In its docile state, the well-trained actor's body is unified, useful, malleable and able to make the right meanings because it can switch what it signifies at will. This body does not display lumps, limbs or tics unless portraying characters with these specific physical and psychological traits. This body is capable of self-surveillance to ensure it signifies correctly.

Training in Reality TV

As noted at the outset of this article, many reality TV programs today focus on the training and transformation of human bodies via education, exercises and in some cases haranguing and humiliation from experts. Ostensibly "real" people

with “real” bodies are taught to sing, dance, cook or simply be better—more beautiful, healthier and more productive in their home, workplace, or society. The popular reality TV program *The Biggest Loser* is a prime example of this phenomenon that, despite its popularity, is yet to receive the scholarly attention afforded shows such as *Big Brother* and *Survivor* (see Holmes and Jermyn, 2004).

The weight loss competition *The Biggest Loser* has run for multiple of seasons in several countries, including versions from the United States and Australia. Beth Bernstein and Matilda St. John argue that *The Biggest Loser* is theatrical in aesthetic, adopting what they describe as a three-act structure in which a weight loss competition is followed by a weigh-in and then a voting ceremony, culminating each week in the elimination of competitors (2006: 26). At the end of the series, the competitor that has survived the voting and lost the greatest percentage of body weight is crowned “The Biggest Loser” and wins a cash prize. As the seasons have progressed, the program has included individual competitors, couples, families and singles looking for love.

The program also adopts a theatricalized approach to training. Indeed, it is surprising how readily the analysis of theatrical training outlined above (and the attitudes to the body it embodies) maps onto the examples of private training made public in *The Biggest Loser*. Here, too, training is based on a preferred cultural “script” of how a body should think, speak and move, and an assumption that different bodies and behaviors signify different, more or less acceptable meanings. In *The Biggest Loser*, the preferences in play are related to the “war on obesity” that has become central to discourses about the body over the past decade in Westernized countries such as the US, UK and Australia (Bernstein and St. John, 2006: 26). In these discourses, the fat body signifies laziness, indulgence and corruption. Because it increases health-care costs, the fat body is also seen as socially unserviceable. Counter-discourses espoused on other reality TV shows such as *MasterChef* suggest that food is good, health-inducing and a source of happiness. However, the idea that obesity should be fought through rigorous attention to diet and exercise remains *The Biggest Loser’s* defining premise. In each episode there are references to competitors as fat people and assertions that their indolent lifestyles have left them “deserving” of the education, training and chastisement to which they are subjected (Bernstein and St. John, 2006: 25).

The basic premise of *The Biggest Loser*, then, is that contestants have fallen into bad habits, overeating and failing to exercise, that signify a character flaw. This flaw can be rectified by training processes that strip away bad habits, return the body to normalcy, and thus prepare it to adopt better habits and a better character. This happens via education, exercise and chastisement by experts as mechanisms that make contestants’ bodies more docile and ready to accept new habits. The majority of episodes in each season focus on the process of teaching the contestants about calorie and fat counting, exercise, emotions, what they

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should be doing and how this will improve their lives. Unlike shows such as *MasterChef*, where food is presented as a source of life, love and happiness, the trainers on *The Biggest Loser* tell contestants that food is “just fuel,” a phrase used at least once in every episode of the 2011 season of *The Biggest Loser—Families* in Australia.

In one early episode, for example, trainers are forced to live their contestants’ lifestyles for a week to learn more about their “harmful” relationships with food. Ninja trainer Tiffany joins her family the Duncans at a pub for a lunch of steak, chips, chicken parmigiana, pizza and other family favourites. Throughout the five-minute sequence, the family describes the food in terms that mock the TV chefs’ obsession with healthy oils, freshness and colour, insisting it would “go down well” and do Tiffany “a world of good.” Tight shots of the family laughing monstrously are inserted throughout the sequence to suggest they know they are debasing the trainer. These shots are cut together with close-ups of the meal and Tiffany trying to eat it to demonstrate how foreign this food is to her and how, as Tiffany says, a meal of this size would keep a world-class athlete “fuelled” for days. After lunch, the sequence cuts to shots of Tiffany in the pub’s bathroom, bloated, the button of her jeans unfastened, as her fingers push and pinch her belly to show how much damage this one meal has done. Commenting on the experience, Tiffany remarks that “I feel disgusting, and I can actually see the physical effects of having eaten all that crap.” This one meal’s harmful effects are underscored by an accompanying doleful soundtrack. Tiffany’s commentary suggests her ordeal had been going on forever. “I’ve got headaches, I feel thirsty from all the salt, I honestly feel like I am going to throw-up,” she moans. As she hunches over a sink and begrudges her lot, we get a sense that Tiffany is paying for the Duncans’ years of overindulgence. The scene then briefly returns to the pub’s tables, where the family offers Tiffany another tall glass of beer. “I always treat my body like a temple, you know,” Tiffany replies, as we cut to a close up of her tear-streaked face in bed later that night and she confesses, one-on-one to the camera, that “tonight I treated it like a nightclub.” Clearly, living like the Duncans has already become too much for Tiffany and the scene ends with another shot of her sobbing “I’m sorry body, I’m so sorry.” This sequence suggests that contestants owe their bodies a huge apology for succumbing to the temptation of treating food as fun rather than fuel and allowing themselves get into such a sorry state. The episode therefore sets up the coming season as one big apology to the better self contestants have been letting down for a long time.

The new terms, tropes and metaphors for food the contestants learn in *The Biggest Loser* are combined with exercises they must “not give up” on to claim “power” over their bodies. Indeed, in the 2011 Australian season, the metaphors underpinning the exercises were highly militaristic. One family of contestants, the Moons, was placed with a trainer called “The Commando.” As mentioned above, the Duncans were placed with a fifth-dan black belt who

encouraged them to become ninjas. All the families—the Moons, the Duncans and the other two participating families, the Westrens and Challenors—were pushed through obstacle courses that symbolized obstacles they must overcome in life to win the war on weight. In one memorable sequence, each family was asked to haul a large train toward a finishing line. The action was interspersed with images of trainers yelling at contestants if they fell or slowed, commentary from the trainers, and commentary from contestants about “not giving up.” The physical tests became more extreme as the series progressed, to the point where contestants were running marathons and sailing the route of the sometimes deadly Sydney-to-Hobart yacht race, all the while rehearsing the “do not give up” mantra.

The Biggest Loser not only uses education and exercise to indoctrinate contestants into a new language that, for the trainers, describes how a body ought to think, speak and move, but also emphasizes the importance of chastisement, surveillance and self-surveillance in disciplining the body “to accept a new form of culture which the brain has decided is the right one” (Barba, 1986: 72). As Bernstein and St. John note, “on *The Biggest Loser* these tasks are specifically tailored to shame the fat contestants about their bodies [under] the guise of saving them” (2006: 26). Each season features scenes in which contestants stand before a mirror in their underwear. As Gareth Palmer argues, any amount of abuse or shaming is acceptable if it serves the transformation agenda (2004: 182). The contestant is supposed to be horrified at how they have let themselves go, and this “real,” “revelatory,” and above all traumatic moment is designed to provide the necessary impetus for self improvement (Ibid.). In another regular segment called “Temptation,” contestants are encouraged to eat huge amounts of food to draw attention to this element of their habitual lifestyle. As in most seasons, the 2011 Australian series showed contestants eating so much that they threw up. These flab and feeding sequences are almost always combined with images of contestants’ struggling through mud, water, sand or obstacles to emphasize their lifestyle’s damaging effects. The performances improve over the season, as the contestants’ bodies are made over. In the concluding episode of each season, all contestants stand beside a photo of their formerly fat body and typically give it a shove to show they have cast this shameful version of themselves aside.

The problematic idea that there is a self, separate from the body, that can swap bad habits for good ones through willpower, is *The Biggest Loser’s* driving philosophy. In comments to camera describing their experiences and scenes in which they eat and exercise, contestants regularly state “I can’t believe I’ve done this to myself.” They are convinced they have damaged their bodies and need to strip the bad habits away, replacing them with better ones. According to the contestants, this shift in attitude is the only way to take control of the obstinate, messy material body holding them back. *The Biggest Loser* also upholds the equally problematic idea that the physical state of contestants’

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bodies somehow signifies their psychological weaknesses. The idea that a lumpy, limping, hunched or wart-covered body signifies character flaws has been common in Western cultures for centuries (Sandahl, 2005; Synder and Mitchell, 2000). In *The Biggest Loser*, contestants admit that what they have “done to themselves” physically is a sign of what they have “done to themselves” psychologically, making them bad parents, partners or friends. In this sense, as Bernstein and St. John note, a program such as *The Biggest Loser* differs from a show where contestants submit to shame, humiliation or punishment purely in pursuit of a cash prize. When exiting *The Biggest Loser*, “contestants voice the belief that they have somehow undergone a psychological and spiritual transformation” (2006: 27). In the 2011 Finale of the Australian version of *The Biggest Loser*, for example, host Hayley Lewis drew comments from contestants about the idea that “for you, this has been more than a physical transformation.” In one sequence, Joe from the Challenor family remarked that his psychological transformation helped him develop a more functional relationship with his nephew and fellow contestant Nathaniel. Not only had Joe rebuilt his body through training, he had rebuilt his family. As in almost all seasons, the 2011 contestants repeatedly thanked their personal trainers, dieticians and doctors and expressed pleasure at the changes training produced in their bodies. The contestants all stated confidently that they were now more serviceable and useful, and better expressed socially sanctioned meanings in their bodies and behavior. They had become, they said, better people.

Self-Making, Struggle, Shame and Pleasure

In *The Biggest Loser*, contestants are submitted to demanding tasks, shame, chastisement, surveillance and self-surveillance. This renders their bodies docile and ready to accept a new, preferred set of social “scripts.” As Anna McCarthy argues of reality TV more generally, *The Biggest Loser* is about far more than entertainment. The show is preoccupied with self-management, self-maintenance and the construction of good citizens via “a painful civic pedagogy, suffused with tears, rage, and insults and pushing the limits of the self to mental and physical extremes” (McCarthy, 2007: 19). Interestingly, in both theater training and *The Biggest Loser*, performers and competitors express gratitude, pleasure and joy in participating in the process. They are grateful that the so-called experts have taken them in hand, revealed their errors and shown them a better way (Christenson and Ivancin, 2006: 9). Though their bodies may be rendered docile, performers and contestants are happy because their bodies are now highly serviceable—they can walk, run, jump and, in *The Biggest Loser*, perform socially valuable tasks such as caring for families, having children or securing desired jobs. The methods of discipline, control and constraint that characterize the training, which are often humiliating with lots of verbal and physical prodding, have drilled their bodies into desired shape. With drilling, the tropes that describe the body, whether in theatrical or health training, have started to become the body (Foster, 2003: 237). This produces what dancer

Susan Leigh Foster describes as an ecstatic feeling of oneness with the body, a power and freedom that motivates performers and *The Biggest Loser* participants to continue their pursuit of perfection. The messy, material and obstinate body has been controlled. Training, though embarrassing, exhausting and even painful, thus produces satisfying, rewarding and even ecstatic experiences of the body. As Wendy Morgan argues in her analysis of theatrical training, docility is “experienced as control, power and pleasure” (1996: 37; see also Green, 2004: 39). Docility is thus preferred to the despairing experience of a disruptive body that gets in the way of a person’s freedom and expressive power. Many theater practitioners therefore claim that, as Jacques Lecoq puts it, “[t]he body must be disciplined in the service of play, constrained in order to attain freedom” (2001: 79). A similar sentiment is expressed by *The Biggest Loser* contestants, as they marvel at all they can now achieve thanks to their training.

The paradox here is that in both contexts ecstatic feelings of oneness with the self, power and pleasure occur through a training process that perpetuates a mind-body split. This “mind over matter” training process suggests that, with due will and discipline, proper habits can be laid over even the most intransigent body. This approach actually alienates performers and contestants from their bodies, leading them to forget the body when things are going well, blame the body when things are going badly, and lament the way the body “gets in the way” of things they want to do. As Bernstein and St John remark, this is why, despite their transformations, the “contestants appear to remain just as estranged from a conscious experience of their bodies as when they started” (2006: 26).

In the context of theater training, there has at least been some discussion among theorists and in the media of the way the phenomenon of pleasure through pain, or power through alienation, can produce problems for those who have undergone the training. For example, there have been articles and personal accounts of actors, performers and particularly dancers developing psychological, obsessive-compulsive and eating disorders as a result of training processes (Green, 2004). To date, there have been no similar analyses of how such impacts might be felt by participants on private-training-made-public reality TV programs such as *The Biggest Loser*. Many contestants remain in the media after the program. These participants become personalities on the program’s website (where the public are encouraged to sign up to the training themselves), on other weight loss programs or websites, or in TV commercials promoting weight loss foods and products. Some contestants have commented on their failure to keep up with post-program training. In 2009, for example, the winner of the third series of the American version of *The Biggest Loser*, Erik Choppin, appeared on *The Oprah Show* to “admit that he’s been lying to his friends, family and his fans,” because “[i]n the three years since his victory, Erik has gained back half the weight he lost” (*The Oprah Show*, 2009). Here,

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though, the discourse is still one of blame, the problem attributed, as Peter Christenson and Maria Ivancin put it, “to the failings of the individuals involved, who may be undisciplined or stubborn” (2006: 10). Indeed, Erik and Oprah discussed the way “he continued to use older photos on his MySpace and Facebook pages and even turned down an offer to appear on *The Oprah Show* with past *Biggest Loser* contestants” (*The Oprah Show*, 2009). Erik’s avoidance of television appearances were attempts to hide the problem and the sense he had let himself and others down through indiscipline and failure to continue his training.

In effect, *The Biggest Loser* enacts exactly the strange acts of self-governance through trauma that McCarthy (2007) has identified as a common feature of the reality TV format. On the one hand, the show is set up to exercise governance over the contestants’ intransigent, damaged or traumatised “fat” bodies. The series seeks to rehabilitate contestants and rehearse new ways of self-governance, enabling them to push past the trauma inflicted on themselves through their lifestyles or the tragic circumstances that caused them to become fat. On the other hand, this exercise is not enacted through civil conversation, care or “inculcation of virtue,” but rather through insults, scolding, shame and contempt as a mechanism of encouraging self-governance (McCarthy 2007: 18-21). The show exercises trauma to excise trauma and encourage a new, socially acceptable and socially useful form of self-management among contestants. In *The Biggest Loser*, trauma becomes both a barrier to and a means of transforming intransigent bodies (McCarthy 2007: 25). Yet, as contestants’ struggles during and after the show demonstrate, though efforts to establish systems of self-governance might be educative, for many the transformation remains incomplete, unrealisable and bound to be repeated (McCarthy 2007: 33). The process and the sometimes unattainable sense of bodily pleasure it positions as a goal for contestants seems, as McCarthy observes, “destined to cause more pain rather than alleviate it” (McCarthy 2007: 35).

Training in Real Life

As this article has shown, bringing private training processes into public view in reality TV raises questions about Western views of the body, the mind-body relationship, and experts’ roles in determining suitable bodily behavior. By making the training process visible and providing compelling accounts of how pleasurable *The Biggest Loser* contestants find the process, the program has a large impact in the public sphere. As Bernstein and St. John explain, “[t]hrough their repeatedly expressed gratitude for this change [in their bodies], the contestants not only participate in their own oppression, but also affirm it” (2006: 28). I would go one step further and suggest that contestants affirm how pleasurable the process is. It is this pleasure more than anything that encourages spectators to participate in similar private training made public. As Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (2009: 8) point out, there are strong indications that spectators do not believe reality TV is totally authentic.

Nevertheless, Christenson and Ivancin are right to suggest that spectators identify more readily with TV contestants than with characters in other TV genres (2006: 4). In this sense, a program like *The Biggest Loser* draws spectators into trajectories of identification and desire that encourage them to participate in the training process exemplified. This participation is undertaken to experience a similar sense of power, pleasure and control. The program thus interpellates both participants and spectators into specific attitudes toward bodies and embodiment. *The Biggest Loser* provides a concrete and—through editing techniques and the types of participants selected—emotionally engaging example of the sensations of pleasure this attitude to the body is presumed to bring. Consequently, the show is a prime example of the way reality TV, as Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn suggest, is “always in dialogue with reality as it is commonly understood and in doing so [helps] to produce current knowledge about what reality might consist of” (2005: 4). Reality TV is not, as Jack Bratich argues, just about representation (2006: 66). Rather, reality TV is in conversation with what people do in the real world and thus intervenes in negotiations about self, social relationships and society. As Annette Hill puts it, “When audiences watch reality TV, they are not only watching programmes for entertainment, they are also engaged in critical viewing of the attitudes and behaviors of ordinary people in the programs” (2005: 9). Spectators do not just watch *The Biggest Loser* for entertainment. Rather, they study the host’s, experts’ and contestants’ behaviors, assess how those relate to reality as they understand it, and make decisions about how to behave in their own lives. Audiences watch contestants submit themselves to surveillance and self-surveillance to lose weight and, in the program’s terms, become better people. Contestants’ willingness to help themselves, their families and the society that must otherwise bear their burden thus encourages viewers to think and act the same way (Murray and Ouellette, 2009: 9).

What is most worrying here is that in reality TV shows such as the *Biggest Loser*—arguably more than in drama, theater and dance—the training and its results are deemed achievable by all bodies with due will and discipline. After all, we are not watching masterful actors here. These are “real” people, and if they can achieve such pleasurable and empowering results, surely we can too? However, as Sandahl (2005) argues of training in theatrical contexts, the reality is that this discourse, premised on the belief that bad bodily habits can be stripped away with sufficient willpower, cannot be achieved by all. As Sandahl rightly observes, the implication that physical idiosyncrasies, including markers of gender, race or (dis)ability, are simply acquired habits, is one of the things that makes theater training inaccessible to people with disabilities. The same could be said of training advocated in shows such as *The Biggest Loser*, in which inability to stick to a diet, sprint up a hill or sail through an obstacle course is universally seen as controllable, curable and changeable with effort and expert help. In both contexts, training marginalizes bodies that cannot be cured or will not allow experts to cure them. The effect is akin to my experience with the Wii

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Your Shape: Fitness Focused on You program endorsed by Australian *Biggest Loser* trainer Michelle Bridges, in which the virtual trainer constantly berated me for an idiosyncratic leg movement and insisted I could do better. It would seem I, like contestant Erik Choppin, let the side down. Reading between the lines, I must therefore be undeserving of the pleasures those better at submitting to education, exercise and training experience. The concern, of course, is that all spectators bring a different body and history to shows such as *The Biggest Loser*. Despite an appreciation of the program's constructed nature, it seems unlikely that most spectators would recognise how it perpetuates Enlightenment ideas about the mind's ability to control the body and change its culture and the benefits of a socially serviceable body. The blurry boundaries between fact, fiction and fantasy in *The Biggest Loser*, as in much reality TV, thus raise anxieties about how audiences read the show and, in turn, how we should analyze their responses. This is particularly true of *The Biggest Loser*, since the program's makers do not reflect on its discourses and mechanisms, unlike many of the shows discussed in Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn's edited collection on reality TV (2004: 10-12). If some awareness of *The Biggest Loser's* staging and editing is in evidence, there is no acknowledgement of the epistemologies the show embodies.

In my work in the theater, I have encountered practices that harness the benefits of training regimes that provide participants with a sense of pleasure, power and utility in such paradoxically and potentially oppressive ways. For example, elsewhere I have written about the work of Not Yet It's Difficult (NYID), an Australian physical theater company that participates in rigorous theatrical training processes (Hadley, 2007). In shows such as *Training Squad* (1996) or *Scenes of the Beginning from the End* (1999), NYID work with what they call "actor-athletes" that embody the kind of physical perfection valorized in Western culture. However, NYID also positions other facets of the show's textual and technological landscape in counterpoint to these bodies. NYID therefore recognizes and takes advantage of, but also problematizes, the ways performers' bodies and the personae they take on are colonized by the disciplinary processes of theater, sport or other cultural practices.

To date I have not encountered a reality TV show that both co-opts and challenges theatrical training methods in the same way. Lamentably, Bernstein and St. John correctly predicted that *The Biggest Loser* would not be criticized because it so accurately reflects Western attitudes to obesity (2006). Advertisements for the Australian government's obesity control initiatives run during *The Biggest Loser's* 2011 season seem to affirm Bernstein and St John's view. Indeed, policy makers have recognized that reality TV can intervene in (rather than simply represent) social realities captured in private-training-made-public shows such as *The Biggest Loser*.

Notes

[1] In this article, my comments relate primarily to the several series of *The Biggest Loser* produced in Australia and in the US, as these are the ones that have been aired in my own country, Australia.

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