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Getting Your Bloke On: Gender Issues in the Reality Competition 'I Will Survive'

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Getting Your Bloke On:
Gender Issues in the Reality Competition *I Will Survive*

Reality television has traditionally been a site of visibility for LGBTQ peoples, starting with the presence of Lance Loud at the genre's birth in 1973's *An American Family* and continuing through the casts of *The Real World*, *Survivor* and *The Amazing Race*. That visibility does not, however, always translate into positive images. With a few notable exceptions, many LGBTQ reality stars tend to be stereotyped, like Brandon Quinton on the third edition of *Survivor*, whose "stereotypical mannerisms," according to media scholar Kathleen LeBesco, "help to reinforce a limited and shopworn notion of gay masculinity as nonexistent."¹ This reflects a tendency of reality TV to appropriate queer images in the name of the dominant culture. Christopher Pullen likens the treatment of LGBTQ characters in reality television to John Clum's statements on mainstream realistic theatre in which "the homosexual is inevitable," but framed as "'the outlaw-intruder who threatens the security of characters, and by inference the audience'[:] the purging of the homosexual gives the play closure."²

The Australian reality show *I Will Survive* presents a curious example of this as 12 male performers compete for the title of "Australia's next triple threat"³ in a journey modeled on the bus trip in the 1994 film *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*. While sometimes presenting drag as a liberating force, with the contestants coming to a deeper understanding of themselves by putting on makeup, dresses and high heels to spread joy through the Outback, the Channel Ten series also perpetuates the dominant culture's negative views of queerness through some

¹ Kathleen LeBesco, "Got to Be Real: Mediating Gayness on *Survivor*" in Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellete, eds., *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2004), p. 280

² John Clum, *Still Acting Gay*, quoted in Christopher Pullen, "The Household, the Basement, and *The Real World*: Gay Identity in the Constructed Reality Environment," in Susan Holmes and Deborah Jermyn, eds., *Understanding Reality Television* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 229.

² John Clum, *Still Acting Gay*, quoted in Pullen, p. 226.

³ *I Will Survive*. Freemantle Media Australia, Channel Ten Australia, 1, August 21, 2012

of the ways in which drag and gender are framed during the series, particularly in the judging.

I Will Survive was planned as a reality competition in the same sub-genre as Great Britain's *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* and NBC's *Grease: You're the One that I Want*, in which the prize is a role in a major musical production. Originally, the series was designed to cast a six-month replacement role as Tick/Mitzi in the Broadway production of *Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*. When that production closed in June 2012 – halfway through the series' production schedule and two months before the first air date – the prize was quickly changed to cash, gifts and a role in an unspecified Broadway show.

Whether viewed as an extended audition or as a talent competition, the series views drag outside the context of gay culture. For real drag queens like the "girls" on *Ru Paul's Drag Race*, drag is a way of life that liberates performers who often don't fit prescribed notions of masculinity. *I Will Survive* instead uses drag as part of the stage musical's fictional narrative. Many of the show's contestants have achieved Western society's ideal of masculine form, as described by Jessica Strubel-Scheiner, "to be muscular and defined, lean and fat-free, and to maintain a mature successful look."⁴ For them, drag is just one aspect of a role in a play.

The promotional spot announcing *I Will Survive* reflects some of the series internal gender conflicts. Although the spot ends with an intriguing image of a sequined, high-heeled platform shoe as a male hand, clearly that of the wearer enters the screen to adjust the strap, none of the contestants are shown in drag. Rather, emphasis briefly falls on their masculine good looks as two women leaning against the back of a pick-up truck ogle contestant Stephen Mahy,

Once the show started airing, the possibilities for queerness grew even more muddled, partly because of the show's format. Like most reality competitions, *I Will Survive* has what Nick Couldry calls framing mechanisms, recurring elements that

⁴ Jessica Strubel-Scheiner, "Gender Performativity and Self-Perception: Drag as Masquerade," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2011, p. 14.

define the competition.⁵ Most weeks the contestants arrive in a different town along *Priscilla's* original route. Each stop opens with a flash mob drag performance in which the contestants lip-synch and dance. The weekly competition starts with a solo performance not done in drag. The three weakest soloists then have featured roles singing and dancing in the showstopper performance, a group drag number, after which the loser is "kicked off the bus."

In between these framing mechanisms are a series of mini-challenges and workshops that flesh out the episodes. These are not unlike the mini-competitions in most episodes of *Ru Paul's Drag Race*, except that rather than a focus on performing "femininities," to borrow a term from Eir-Anne Edgar, most of the mini-competitions in *I Will Survive* involve performing masculinities. Among these are playing rugby, working out in a boxing gym and trying to pick up a girl in 30 seconds. There is an attempt to frame these masculine activities as part of being a triple threat. When the contestants are sent to a shooting range, for example, host Hugh Sheridan says in voiceover, "There's more to being a triple threat than high heels and makeup. Like leading men Hugh Jackman and John Travolta, you sometimes have to know how to look tough around guns."⁶ Where the contestants on *Ru Paul's Drag Race* are, in Edgar's words "rewarded for overcoming their inherent masculinity,"⁷ the men of *I Will Survive* are constantly challenged to overcome the inherent femininity of their drag performances.

Within the show's first week, the contestants' identities are established within one of three groups. Introductory montages identify six of the 12 as "blokes," heterosexual men with wives and girlfriends waiting for them at home. These include auto mechanic Adrian Espulso, shown working on a car, and musical theatre performer Matt McFarlane, identified as a former professional rugby player. Although none of the other contestants mention male partners, former child actor Davin Griffith-Jones, theme-park performer Sean Perez and costume designer Jamie

⁵ Nick Couldry, cited in Eir-Anne Edgar, "*Xtravaganza!:* Drag Representation and Articulation in *RuPaul's Drag Race*," *Studies in Popular Culture* Fall 2011, p. 138.

⁶ *Survive*, 4, August 29, 2012.

⁷ Edgar: 139

Jewell soon out themselves. In the bar pick-up mini-challenge, for example, Jamie looks at the woman's shoes and squeals, "Oh my God, is that Ferragamo! I'd love to see the rest of your collection."⁸ That leaves three non-blokes: men who neither out themselves nor discuss heterosexual relationships.

Early on drag is framed as something unnatural. When required to do drag for their first group number the men react with shock and dismay. Davin looks at a pair of fake breasts and complains, "I don't know how these work" while former children's show star Nathan Folley, on trying to put on a bra, reassures the audience, "I know how to take one off more than I know how to put one on."⁹ Performance teacher Brendan Healey later mentions that his young sons were shocked to see him in drag, calling him "Fake freaky father."¹⁰

For some of the men, drag does indeed seem unnatural. Although Davin is surprised to realize how pretty he is when he's ready to go on in the first drag performance, others fail miserably in performing femininity. Dance teacher Mike Snell is the only man who decides to shave his body hair, but even without hair his male musculature seems out of place in the bustier he wears for one showstopper. Nor do most of the blokes do anything to disguise their male voices, leading guest judge Rachel Griffith to comment about one bloke up for elimination, "If we were doing *Oklahoma!* singing 'Oh, What a Beautiful Morning,' and his tall, dark, handsome, masculine strength, I think he'd maybe have more of a chance."¹¹

At times, performing masculinity seems to be the goal, as contestants are praised not just for singing well, but also for sex appeal. The first guest judge, Rachael Hunter, praises cabaret performer Tom Sharah for his "visceral kind of sexy edge."¹² Magda Szubanski praises Stephen's performance in the country/Western solo challenge with "You are that bit of gold people look for in the form of a blokey bloke...It's a blokey song and you went the bloke on it."¹³ Even Elliot sexualizes the

⁸ *Survive*, 2, August 22, 2012.

⁹ *Survive*, 1.

¹⁰ *Survive*, 6, September 5, 2012.

¹¹ *Survive*, 11, October 2, 2012

¹² *Survive*, 1.

¹³ *Survive*, 5, September 4, 2012.

contestants at times, saying of one of Adrian's solos, "I was just happy to see my puppy dog bring out a bit of pit bull."¹⁴

Some of the judging, particularly of Davin, reinforces this heterocentric view. From the start, Davin is framed as a stereotypical gay man, vain and bitchy. He brags about being the most convincing of the contestants in drag and is one of the few competitors to consistently make negative comments about the others. When they're learning line-dancing moves during week three, he complains that Mike has taken over their group of four when Davin feels he's clearly the better dancer. Although he does well in the country/Western challenge, he puts down Matt's highly praised performance of "Rhinestone Cowboy" as "really cheesy."¹⁵

Davin's gay image does not go unnoticed by the judges. After he sings "I Am What I Am" in the first solo performance, head judge Jason Donovan, who had played Tick/Mitzi in London, complains, "I just felt it was camp...We need to find someone who can...put that on."¹⁶ The following week, Donovan dismisses Davin's showy rendition of "Proud Mary," as "slightly sort of cabaret-ish."¹⁷ That lands Davin in the bottom three, and when Elliot praises Davin's ability to find a character in drag in the show-stopper performance, Donovan carps, "Except that's his comfort zone, and this is my problem. We haven't seen him be the versatile performer....Great singer, great dancer, but give him a monologue out of *Equus*, and what's he going to do?"¹⁸

Therein lies the problem with most of Davin's critiques. Even as the blokes are demonstrating their inability to pull off the drag numbers required to play Tick/Mitzi, a prize still on the table while Davin was part of the competition, his more convincing drag performances are overlooked. Donovan's critiques of Davin place the series in what Michael Warner calls "a stigmaphobe world...where

¹⁴ *Survive*, 9, September 18, 2012.

¹⁵ *Survive*, 5.

¹⁶ *Survive*, 1.

¹⁷ *Survive*, 3, August 28, 2012

¹⁸ *Survivor* 4, August 29, 2012

conformity is ensured through fear of stigma.¹⁹ (Warner: 43). To stay on the bus, the contestants must fit heterocentric views of manliness.

In week four, after Sean and Jamie's eliminations, Davin lands in the bottom three again. For the solo challenge, contestants are first charged with picking a song that tells a story, then given one hour to write and learn a character monologue leading into the song. Davin's monologue fails to impress the judges, with guest Toni Collette later dubbing him "a very limited actor."²⁰ In discussing that performance, Elliot comments on how Davin changed his appearance: "For the first time, he took the hair down....He keeps hiding behind his hair."²¹ In essence, Davin's big hair becomes the stigma branding him as gay, though even its temporary removal is not enough to save him from elimination. Despite flaws in the other performances by the bottom three -- Nathan still "looks like a man in a dress"²² according to choreographer Kelly Abbey, while performance teacher Brendan Healey continues to sing even his drag numbers in a booming bass voice -- Davin is the fourth contestant eliminated.

With the last of the clearly gay contestants gone, the competition's heterocentrism relaxes for a while, with the next four eliminations coming from the ranks of the blokes. With the series' final episode, however, heteronormativity comes back to the fore. The two finalists are non-blokes, Tom and Mike. Their final challenge is to create a four-minute cabaret performance that reflects their personal journey as entertainers. Both perform well, but the judges' comments would lead one to expect Tom to win. Mike earns praise for his abandon and the rawness of his emotional commitment, but the theme running throughout his critiques is that he's the weaker singer. By contrast, Tom's critiques offer nothing but praise. Donovan notes during the final deliberation "There are some people that just have something when they walk out on stage, and he has, I think he has that character." And Elliot

¹⁹ Michael Warner, *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 43.

²⁰ *Survive*, 7, September 11, 2012.

²¹ *Survive*, 7.

²² *Survive*, 7.

adds "He has something that you can't put your finger on, and that alone is worth its weight in gold."²³

And yet, it is Mike who wins. In terms of reality television conventions, Mike's victory can be explained as a time-honored trope in judged reality competitions. He won for being the most improved. That narrative starts in the third week of the competition. In week three, he's among the final three because the judges feel he's playing it safe. He survives the bottom three, but is the only person up for elimination to be told he was almost cut. In subsequent weeks, however, he's praised for following the judges' advice. After Mike's final performance, Elliot states, "The man I saw at the beginning of the show to the man I'm seeing now is a very different man. The heart coming out now is raw."²⁴ This is played against Tom's narrative, developed in the fifth week, as "the man to beat." Sinclair even states that "Tom has never been close to being in the final three,"²⁵ despite the fact that he has come close to landing in the bottom in weeks three and four.

Those reality conventions seem to be bolstered by the show's gender politics. Although not positioned as a gay contestant early on, Tom shows a distinctly effeminate side in later weeks. In a mini-competition in which he films a screen test with Griffith, Elliot's main note to him is to "Butch it up."²⁶ In the mini-challenge to learn street dancing in Los Angeles, Tom enthuses, "I'm loving the stuff we're doing. It really is...kind of like masculine. Yeah, a bit different for me, really."²⁷ For his final performance, he chooses to dress in a sequined tuxedo jacket. Physically, his lack of muscular definition and long hair, worn in a topknot during some off-stage moments, frame him as being outside societal norms of masculinity.

Mike, in contrast, though not given to the butch pronouncements of blokes like Matt or Stephen, at least fits the norms of masculine appearance. Not only is his hair shorter, but also he has a more defined, muscular body he shows off in the mini-

²³ *Survive*, 14, October 23, 2012.

²⁴ *Survive*, 14.

²⁵ *Survive*, 9.

²⁶ *Survive*, 11.

²⁷ *Survive*, 12, October 9, 2012

challenges and in a showstopper performance with the Chippendales in Las Vegas. And he does his final performance in a coat, white shirt and tie.

Gender in *I Will Survive*, then, is, to paraphrase Warner, made reasonable and obedient to the dictates of common sense.²⁸ As happened with the film's transition from the screen to the Broadway stage, something liberating and quirky has become just another attempt to connect consumers to a mass culture with no room for anything but the normal. Mitzi, Felicia and Bernadette would barely recognize it.

²⁸ Warner, 195.