

THE FLY THAT CAN LIE

By Fred Hobbs

How many times have you wished you could be the proverbial “fly on the wall”, eavesdropping on conversations or observing scenes you are not supposed to hear or see? What fun that could be! So much fun, it turns out, that you actually can enjoy this sensation several times daily on your living room TV or those now ubiquitous handheld devices which initially merely received and sent telephone messages.

So-called “reality” shows now dominate the schedule of television offerings. These are unscripted and supposedly unrehearsed episodes featuring “ordinary” folks in a variety of situations, from attempting to “survive” on a remote island, to being sequestered in a house with strangers while “Big Brother,” (a phalanx of TV cameras) watches their every...well, almost every, move.

The truth is, however, that the fly on the wall can and does lie. A team of television producers and editors is busy at work on these shows selecting the most provocative, humorous or dramatic moments before they appear on your screen. The goal is to produce entertainment designed to obtain the highest possible ratings at the lowest possible cost.

The advent of “reality” shows can be traced to the “Golden Days of Radio” in the 1940s and 50s and to the fertile mind of a producer, writer and director named Allen Funt. His show was called “Candid Microphone.” Funt and his cohorts contrived a series of stunts, which involved unsuspecting “victims.” One of the most hilarious featured one of Funt’s stooges supposedly accidentally trapped in a freezer locker. A real-life locksmith was called to the scene and told that no one had a key to the door. A muffled cry of “Let me out, I’m freezing in here” greeted the locksmith. “How much will you charge me to get him out?,” Funt asked the lock and key expert. When the locksmith revealed his standard fee for such an undertaking, Funt feigned astonishment at the quoted figure and said he wouldn’t pay that much. The locksmith stood his ground, insisting his fee was fair, incredulous that Funt would be so callous.

The cries of anguish behind the locker door grew louder and more frantic. Funt continued attempts to bargain down the price as the locksmith expressed his disgust at the apparent disregard for the comfort and maybe even the life of the screaming man banging on the walls. When it appeared that the locksmith might bolt the scene instead of unbolting the door, Funt revealed his secretly hidden tape recorder and his accomplice strolled out of the faux locker. The locksmith’s comments thankfully were bleeped out of the tape.

“Candid Microphone”, of course, morphed into “Candid Camera”. “Big Brother” and “Survivor” are now joined by shows such as “The Bachelor” where the young stud gets to pick from two “foxy” ladies vying for his attention as a prospective groom. Daytime TV offers three or four versions of actual small claims court cases. And, what many folks agree is the lowest of the lowbrow “reality” offerings, the Jerry Springer Show and “Maury”(Povich.) Both serve up bickering, shouting, chair throwing domestic squabbles to be observed not only by that fly on the wall, but in full color and stereophonic sound, by thousands of voyeuristic viewers across the nation.