

Springboard or crisis? The “talent show experience”

The first comprehensive study on how candidates, in hindsight, view their involvement, the show, and everything which followed after

In a cooperative study by the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) and the Media Authority of North Rhine-Westphalia (LfM), former participants from musical talent shows were asked for the first time how they felt about the “talent show experience” and how they had dealt with it psychologically. The results show that while participation is an outstanding opportunity for growth for some former candidates, for others it means years of mockery from those around them and a crisis which is hard to overcome.

Munich and Düsseldorf, 24 April 2013 – Musical talent shows such as *Popstars* or *Deutschland sucht den Superstar* (Germany seeks a superstar, the German version of Pop Idol) have been achieving top ratings for years, particularly among the young target groups of interest to advertisers. These formats are attractive for children and adolescents in particular, since they allow viewers to accompany young, inexperienced talents on their path to fame, or to criticize to their heart’s content. In order for the genre to work so well, “human material” is needed, inexperienced young talents who are correspondingly willing to be cast in a role. But how do the participants actually fare during the show and afterwards? Do they, looking back, see this as a big opportunity, or has it plunged them into a deep crisis?

In a cooperative study by the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) and the Media Authority of North Rhine-Westphalia (LfM), 59 former participants from musical talent shows were interviewed for the first time on how they felt about the “talent show experience” and how they had dealt with it psychologically.

From a professional springboard to a deep crisis

The qualitative study shows that around half of the respondents take a generally positive view of the “talent show experience” in retrospect, many have mixed feelings, and for some it was a distinctly negative experience. Seven typical patterns of experience were identified, ranging from an outstanding opportunity for growth to a self-endangering crisis.

Participating in talent shows is a very positive experience overall for, firstly, professionals who use the show as a springboard, such as *the Voice of Germany* participant Behnam Moghaddam, who received more enquiries about gigs for his band “Mokka Express” (type 1: **pros who use the show as a springboard**). The “talent show experience” was also positive for the “new discoveries” (type 2 : **the newcomer**), such as Jonathan Enns, who took 9th place in *DSDS (Deutschland sucht den Superstar)* at the age of 20. The challenge for him, after the media hype, was to understand “*that, after that period, you’re still the same Jonathan you were before.*”

Participation is rated far more ambivalently, in retrospect, by those who were at first portrayed positively, and then publicly presented in a very negative light by the show and the press, such as Annemarie Eilfeld. With hindsight she (type 3: **the degraded rising star**) says of this period: “*I was 18 years old and was unfamiliar with this kind of TV*

production. I always trusted everyone, and with hindsight that was naive and caused me and my family a lot of pain.”

For those who were cast as inept “freaks” within the talent show, three variations emerge: there are a few who collaborated in their exaggerated, stylized portrayal, as secret accomplices of the media system (type 4: **the secret accomplice**). They enjoyed the filming of the programme, but were not expecting the huge publicity after it was broadcast. Then there are those who are unaware of how they are being degraded, who reframe the humiliation and enjoy the public attention surrounding their person (type 5: **the one reframing the humiliation**).

Life after the broadcast becomes problematic for those who are exposed to ridicule (type 6: **the embarrassed**): they entered the process naively, believing in their own distinctiveness as humans. But – contrary to the expectations raised by feedback during filming – they were shown up as particularly incapable in the programme, and they now have to live with mockery from their social environment – in some cases years after the “talent show experience”. One former *DSDS* candidate, whose audition was repeated multiple times, for several years, and can also be viewed any time over the Internet, recounts how, every time, *“the whole shit starts all over again; everyone comes up and talks to you”*. With hindsight she realizes: *“I would never have applied if I’d known all the things they do to people there, just to make them look stupid, just to give people something to laugh about.”*

It was not only those obviously degraded by the media system, however, who experienced a crisis of the self. Some of the candidates were psychologically overwhelmed by what was demanded of them during and after production (type 7: **the mentally overstrained**). The “talent show experience” with its various crisis potentials plunged them into a long-term psychological crisis. One former *DSDS* candidate recounts: *“I was only 16 years old at the time and I couldn’t handle it, later I became depressed, and even now I can’t get my life sorted.”*

Feedback from the former candidates to the broadcasters, judges and production teams is correspondingly varied, ranging from:

“You were absolutely perfect as a coach. I learnt so much from you for my life.”
(to Rea Garvey, judge on *The Voice of Germany*)

to

“It was an experience that I never want to repeat. It was depressing, sad. I’m 16 years old, and I’m not yet able to cope with things like that. I thought the way you treated me was mean. I thought it was horrible the way you lied to me in front of the camera, and made me cry.” (to Detlef D! Soost, *Popstars*)

In the light of this inquiry, it is vital that those involved in production and youth protection become more aware of these issues, but there is also an urgent need for media literacy among children and adolescents, and for a more sophisticated public discourse.

The study will be presented at the LfM conference: “Sprungbrett oder Krise? – Erlebnis Castingshowteilnahme“ Kompetent beraten in Medienfragen! – SPEZIAL (“Springboard or crisis?

– the talent show experience”: Giving competent advice on media issues! – SPECIAL) on **30 April 2013 in Essen.**

The research report will also be published here: **Sprungbrett oder Krise? Das Erlebnis Castingshowteilnahme.** Eine Befragung von ehemaligen TeilnehmerInnen an Musik-Castingshows. (**Springboard or crisis: the talent show experience.** A study of former participants in musical talent shows). By Dr. Maya Götz, Dipl.-Soz. Christine Bulla, Caroline Mendel M.A. LfM-Dokumentation 2013. Band 48 (online from 30 April 2013)

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