



TV Review

The moment of truth

By Sandra Stanley

Fishing for True Confessions by Dangling a Pot of Gold

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In the annals of reality television, “The Moment of Truth” may be a milestone. Fox has come up with a cash-prize competition that is neither a game of chance nor a test of knowledge. It’s a pseudo-psychological trial by ordeal in which the contestants trade candor for dollars.

The set is similar to those used on “The Weakest Link” and “Deal or No Deal,” but the object of this game is to prod seemingly nice people to admit bad behavior. As family members and friends look on, the contestant is asked a series of embarrassing personal questions by the host. Truthful answers, as determined by a polygraph, are rewarded by cash, from \$10,000 for the first, relatively banal queries to \$500,000 for the marriage-busting kind.

The novelty of “The Moment of Truth” is not the lie detector. That was the conceit behind “Meet the Parents” (2000), the hit Ben Stiller comedy. NBC borrowed it for a short-lived dating show in 2002, “Meet My Folks,” in which suitors were interrogated by the parents of the date-seeking contestant.

What distinguishes the Fox series is that it blends the cooked-up psychodrama of behavioral reality shows like “Big Brother” on CBS and “The Real World” on MTV with the regimented good family fun of nighttime game shows like “American Gladiators” and “Deal or No Deal” on NBC and “Power of 10” on CBS.

All game shows are by definition mercenary, but producers go to great lengths to try to dress up contestants’ cupidity as altruism. A man wants the money to buy his wife the diamond engagement ring he could never afford. A young woman wants to help her ailing mother buy a home.

Other game shows use wives, parents and siblings as advisers or cheerleaders to add some human warmth and humor to a prosaic and not especially taxing contest. Before walking away with \$471,000 on “Deal or No Deal” Wednesday night, a contestant named Britney told the audience that her father was so nervous he placed Maxi Pads in his armpits.

“The Moment of Truth,” though, brings loved ones onstage to stir up hostility. On Wednesday’s premiere George, a racetrack marketing manager, was solemnly asked by the host, Mark L. Walberg, if he wears a hairpiece (yes), whether he had ever had a sexual fantasy while attending Mass (yes) and whether he has a gambling problem (yes) — as his boss, his girlfriend and his girlfriend’s uncle looked on.

Ty, a personal trainer, said yes when he was asked if he has delayed having children because he is not sure that Catia, his wife of two and a half years, would be his “lifelong partner.” After he replied, a disembodied female voice delivered the verdict. “The answer is — ” (long, dramatic beat) “true.” The camera panned to Catia, who stopped smiling and murmured, “I’m dying here.” Her friend April turned to her and asked in a semiwhisper, “Is it worth \$100,000 to learn that?”

As it turned out, Catia got nothing along with the information. When Ty replied no to the question of whether he had ever touched a female client more than was strictly necessary, the polygraph contradicted him, and he lost all his winnings. Ty ran to his wife and tried to hug her. Catia submitted to his embrace but turned her cheek away, pursing her lips in a foreboding moue of lip gloss and recrimination.

Fox is renowned for callous programming. It was the network that put forth "Who Wants to Marry a Multimillionaire?" and "Temptation Island." But unfortunately, this new series is not quite as innocently ill-intentioned.

The premiere and promos suggest that future episodes strip contestants down in order to build them up, like EST or Marine Corps basic training. The producers devise questions after interviewing friends and family members, and they are posed to the contestant separately with a polygraph machine before the taping. On camera, estranged children, deceived spouses and misunderstood parents are given a chance to confront the contestant, leading to tearful concessions and, in some cases, reconciliation: "Dr. Phil" interventions in which candor and catharsis have price tags attached.

The exhibitionism is not new or particularly arresting. Viewers have been awash in these shame-free displays for years. The hokeyness is also all too familiar: smoke and mirrors (literally), overwrought music and well-scrubbed, overly rehearsed contestants who cry and laugh on cue.

The Fox version is actually quite tame compared with some foreign adaptations. The show's creator, Howard Schultz, who was also the brain behind the plastic surgery edition of "Extreme Makeover," sold the rights in several countries, including Germany and Britain. The Colombian version was canceled in October after a woman confessed on the show that she had hired someone to kill her husband.

But, at least at first, "The Moment of Truth" is hypnotic, and not just because the questions are so humiliating. (George replied yes to the question "Have you ever stuffed your pants to look better endowed?" The camera obligingly panned his trousers.) It is unusual to see people spew these kinds of daytime talk show confessions for cold cash, sums designated on an ascending triangular billboard reminiscent of the quiz show "Pyramid."

And the consequences of truth are not as benign as they were on the old game show "Truth or Consequences." Ordinarily contestants stand to lose their winnings. Losers on "The Moment of Truth" don't go home merely empty-handed; they could return to a home filled with hate.