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Joan Rivers Swishes Channels

BY **REBECCA DANA** | AUGUST 20, 2006 | TAGS: MEDIA AARON CAPPS ASHLEE SIMPSON BEN RUSSELL JOAN RIVERS

The first round of auditions for Joan Rivers' untitled Bravo talk show occurred during the second week of July in a steamy studio space on West 54th Street, near the former Studio 54 and "one door down from Gold's Gym," said Ben Russell, one of the aspirants. "Very strategic."

Mr. Russell works in fashion and wore a pair of jeans and a pink Polo shirt for the occasion. Ms. Rivers is seeking male co-hosts for her new project—and by all appearances, a particular kind of male.

The star and the network declined to discuss of the program, but the would-be co-hosts were clear on the concept: "It was as if they took all the notable gays in the city and brought them in," said one auditioner.

The throaty and petite Ms. Rivers did not turn out for the first round of auditions.

The hopefuls—"a hallway full of Carson Kressleys," said V.P. Walling, a film producer; "a bunch of queens in jeans and flip-flops, and I was like, 'God, am I the only one who got dressed up?'" said blogger Bradford Shellhammer—were asked to pose for a Polaroid and fill out an application form. The form asked what three things the auditioner could not live without. Mr. Russell listed "food, water, iPod."

"I didn't want to buy into the whole gay thing and be like, you know, 'my protein shakes and my Vanity Fair,'" he said. He did not receive a callback.

(At least one straight man came too. "I thought maybe he was a decoy," Mr. Russell said.)

Bravo has not committed to a full season of the show and is trying valiantly to keep the project under wraps. Still, it's not impossible to envision what a talk show starring Joan Rivers and three carefully chosen, diverse gay men might look like if and when it appears on a cable network that has molded its prime-time lineup to the id of your Bumble and Bumble stylist. Bravo has demonstrated that gay people can tackle fashion, decorating, personal grooming, party planning and physical fitness. Now let's see what they can do with pop culture!

The list of auditioners, not exactly the most discreet gaggle in Manhattan, includes familiar magazine editors and newspaper columnists, the tattooed Johnny Hardesty of MTV, a TV weatherman from Connecticut, a few Los Angeles reality-show regulars who brought along their agents, an ESPN on-air personality, some prominent Log Cabin Republicans (someone needs to take the counterpoint on gay marriage), at least a handful of bloggers and, according to an Aug. 14 Page Six item, former New Jersey Governor Jim McGreevey.

It is worth noting that no one involved in the production has come right out and said this is a gay show. But from the available evidence, one can extrapolate. "Everybody appeared to be gay," said Aaron Capps, an actor. "I mean, not overtly gay necessarily, but you could tell. You knew exactly what they were trying to put together. I met a few guys there. Some were in publishing. Some were writers. One guy—I had no idea what he was doing there. He was this guy—oh God, what was his name? Topher. He decided to call himself Topher. This guy decides to use the name Topher, and I was just like, 'You know, that's great.'" Topher spent the whole time "talking about how pain is fashion and fashion is pain. He wore these cowboy boots that really weren't cowboy boots. They were like Aldo specials."

Ms. Rivers appeared for the second round of auditions, at Chelsea Studios, on July 18

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and 19. The third and final round occurred during the second week of August. She and the producers winnowed the hundreds of auditioners down to a dozen, and they are expected to select three for the show, tentatively titled *Can We Dish?* They will be paid \$3,000 to film the pilot and have been asked to sign documents that included a nondisclosure agreement.

Ms. Rivers and a Bravo spokesperson declined to comment further on the project. "It's premature," Ms. Rivers said, through a personal publicist.

This will not be Ms. Rivers' first foray into late-night television or camp icon-dom. Born in Brooklyn, raised in Westchester, reinvigorated perennially by the finest doctors and stylists on both coasts, Ms. Rivers got her start in television making appearances in the 1960's on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and, later, *The Tonight Show*. In 1986, she hosted *The Late Show Starring Joan Rivers* for Fox, which lasted a year. Between 1989 and 1993, she hosted *The Joan Rivers Show*, a daytime talk show. She has also nobly patrolled the red carpet of every major entertainment-industry award show with daughter Melissa, the Plato to her Socrates, the Proenza to her Schouler. Melissa has no explicit role in *Can We Dish?*, but one can assume that her spirit will infuse the production.

"Joan's wonderful," said Mr. Shellhammer, a Parsons graduate student and Design Within Reach sales specialist, who called in sick at work to attend the second audition. "She's totally not scary-looking in person."

"She's the one nobody took seriously at all," said Mr. Capps, "and they still kind of don't. But she's made her own little niche, and she's the only one who fits in there. Her and Kathy Griffin."

To the first round, Mr. Shellhammer wore pants dotted with little skulls and crossbones, a black jacket, a pink dress shirt and a black tie, also dotted with little skulls and crossbones, all made by Ralph Lauren. To the second round he wore a "pea-green button-up coat—actually, I would say sea foam," a blue gingham shirt, blue seersucker tie and white pants. "I was going for the colorful American dandy look," he said. Ms. Rivers loved his sneakers.

Mr. Shellhammer did not make it past the second round. "I think I got cut because I declared my love for Oprah," he said. "Apparently, that wasn't a very popular thing in the room. Everyone thought she was despicable and the devil."

All three rounds of interviews included a roundtable, during which multiple auditioners sat before a group of producers in a room with a two-way mirror and fielded pop-culture questions. Topics of discussion included Anderson Cooper, Nicole Richie, Star Jones Reynolds, Paris Hilton, Lance Bass, Vaughniston, Afghanistan, the midterm elections and so on.

Mr. Russell was asked about the TomKat newborn. "We'll know it's Tom Cruise's baby because it'll be the Suri with the fringe on top," he said, to blank stares all around.

"I was like, 'What, you're trying to do a reality show about gays and Joan Rivers and you don't know Oklahoma?'" he said afterward.

"The questions they asked were like, 'Ashlee Simpson, discuss,'" said one auditioner, a member of the media, who took himself out of the process after the first round. "I was sitting next to three pretty queeny guys, and they just started twittering, being like 'la la la la la' and touching each other's knees and stuff."

"Somebody slipped a question in there about Ashlee Simpson," Mr. Capps said: "Is she worth talking about?" Everyone at once was like, 'No!' But then someone said something about her getting a nose job and how he was disappointed, and we all kept talking about that.

"So apparently she was worth talking about."

"They made me sign a release form that said, 'We can use this footage in whatever way we want,'" said one auditioner, a media type and someone who knows better than to do such things. "I didn't want to be part of some sort of, like, American Idol reject clip. So I didn't sign it."

"What I thought about when I was there was how my parents would react," said another auditioner, yet another member of the media, who made it to the second round but not the finals. "What would they say to their friends: 'Of all the gays in the world, our son is the gayest'? I can literally imagine my mother saying that."

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