

The Weekly Log - 2/6/09

by Joe Mulder

I think I finally realized why I like reality TV so much; it hit me during the recent Hollywood Week episodes of "American Idol" (after Shark Week, Hollywood Week is the second most awesome week in television). The highest purpose of art is to put forth observations about the nature of the human condition and, in so doing, facilitate in the connoisseur the formation of ideas and insights he may not otherwise have had. Right? Well, "American Idol" and its reality TV cousins most certainly do that.

Now, I realize that reality TV shows aren't to be confused with something like Shakespeare plays or Dostoyevsky novels, but, consider for a moment the case of Bikini Girl. Bikini Girl is the nickname given to a young "American Idol" contestant named Katrina, who showed up at the "cattle call" auditions in Phoenix wearing high heels and a skimpy bikini. She had gorgeous legs, a phenomenal ass, and almost nothing else going for her whatsoever. She wasn't a terrible singer, but she certainly wasn't great (I'd guesstimate that if you walked into any given karaoke bar on any given Saturday night and stayed for three hours you would see, on average, about five singers per night who are better than she is).

During her initial audition Bikini Girl immediately alienated judges Kara (particularly) and Paula, while judges Simon and Randy put her through to the Hollywood round of the competition in an unmistakable attempt to ruffle the feathers of their two female counterparts. Oblivious to all of this, Bikini Girl left the room thinking she'd gotten the best of Kara.

Once the Hollywood auditions arrived and Bikini Girl was forced to work with three other young women to develop a brief group routine, it became clear that she was unable to do so. She immediately – almost instinctively – attempted to marginalize the "weakest" member of her group, a beautiful 17-year-old orphaned Idaho hippie named Rose who you could just about smell through the TV and whose inexperience and slight, thin voice made her the obvious target. And when it became clear that Bikini Girl's groupmates were not particularly impressed with her – they had probably all been the prettiest and most talented, too, before coming to Hollywood and running into a bunch of other pretty and talented people – she shut down and went to bed early. Then she slept in late, did a relatively uninspired audition during which judge Simon Cowell messed with her some more for the sole purpose of winding up the female judges, appeared almost determined to exhibit as little class as possible when all but one of her group was cut from the competition following their performance.

So, what does this all mean? Bikini Girl was just a needy young model who got her fifteen minutes of fame on a TV show and will never be heard from again, right? Well, she is

certainly that, but she is also an example of what makes reality TV so fascinating to me. After all, each of us at some point in our life will run into our own personal Bikini Girl, who will come with her own set of exhausting drama. How can having seen that behavior on TV *not* help us ruminate on, and even prepare for, such behavior in our real lives?

(if you don't believe me, check out the "American Idol" recaps on TelevisionWithoutPity.com, written these days by an angry, almost inhumanly perceptive flaming-gay genius – the nature of his work leads me to believe that he'd be flattered with that description, by the way – who goes by the name of Jacob. The recaps use "American Idol" as a jumping-off point for a weekly emotional tour de force during which you will probably learn more about the inner workings of the human psyche than you would during three years of grad school. And, without "American Idol," they don't happen)

And it's not just Bikini Girl; all of us will have our own run-ins with a David from "Real World: New Orleans," or a Rupert from "Survivor: Panama" or, God forbid, an Omarosa. Sure, these people are often playing caricatures of themselves for the TV cameras, and producers and editors chop up and distort things even more. But on the good shows, at least – shows like "Idol," "Big Brother," "Real World/Road Rules Challenge," etc. – the results serve as nothing short of valuable sociological lessons disguised as disposable, lowest-common-denominator entertainment.

Basically, it's the TV version of what it would be like if Cheetos were really, really good for you.

I used to be something of a stickler for grammar and usage; I'm becoming less so as I get older. I figure if I can tell somebody has a basic ability to express their thoughts clearly and cohesively in writing, then I can let a few minor mistakes slide. Not to brag, but, hopefully if you read my stuff you can tell that I'm probably the kind of guy who knows the difference between "too," "two" and "to;" yet, in my haste, I'll occasionally substitute one for the other and not catch it. Don't get me wrong: the mere thought of the sign at the fast food restaurant in my hometown that said "PUT CUP'S HERE" grates on my senses like nails on a chalkboard; that sort of thing is premeditated, willfully ignorant and, I remain convinced, set up by people who know it's wrong and are doing it just to aggravate me.

Still, certain expressions and colloquialisms have ceased to bother me entirely, especially as they become more popular. After all, I start to tell myself as I get older, isn't that how every word or phrase became a word or phrase in the first place? How widely used does a word or an expression have to become before we have little choice but to recognize it as part of the language?

POOP READING

All that is to say this: here are two words/phrases that I believe should be received immediately by the English language with open arms. And not as slang, either; as real, acceptable English. Come on; just let them in. Don't be such a stickler.

"A whole nother." I love it. People say it all the time, generally when the topic at hand is less than gravely serious; why not just count it? "The schedule said we were supposed to play the Lake Forest junior varsity on Friday, but we waited for like an hour and then a whole nother team showed up." The determining factor here is that, in the example I just used, there simply exists no better way to communicate precisely what happened (that goes double for the other term I'm about to mention, but we'll get to that later). "Another team" doesn't quite cover it; maybe that other team was the Lake Forest *varsity* squad; maybe some of the Lake Forest players made it, and some of the players were from somewhere else; maybe it was a different team altogether. "Another whole team" suggests that, in addition to the Lake Forest junior varsity, an *additional* team showed up. "A whole nother team showed up?" No grey area there; we now know exactly what happened (if not exactly why, but, that's not really "a whole nother's" job).

"Beed." As in the past tense of "to be." Granted, no one actually says this, but they really should. Example: "The teacher told us to be quiet or we'd get in big trouble, so we just sat there and beed quiet." Even more than with "a whole nother," we see an example in which only "beed" can possibly convey exactly what went on here. "We just sat there and were quiet?" That's far too passive; "were," in that instance, merely describes the condition in which the hypothetical speaker and his friends existed shortly after the teacher issued them her warning; they *were* quiet, in the sense that the old sofa you used to have *was* brown. "Beed," on the other hand, captures the nature of exactly what went on during the minutes that followed the teacher's admonition: the speaker and his pals actively "beed" quiet. The word was best used in real life, by the way, by PoopReading.com co-collaborator Jameson Simmons, who, in discussing George Clooney's performance in a particular movie (I forget which one), said that he wasn't bad, but it wasn't like the role required much of the actor: "He just showed up and beed George Clooney." If after that you're still not convinced we need "beed," then I just don't know what to tell you.

Not that we've got that out of the way, I feel like I should point out that we've still got a huge problem with "nonplussed." The verb "nonplus" is defined by Dictionary.com (and you can assume they know!) as "to render utterly perplexed; puzzle completely." Therefore, "nonplussed" means "rendered utterly perplexed; puzzled completely." The problem is that "nonplussed" has been showing up a lot lately, and far more than half the time it is used incorrectly. So incorrectly, in fact, that most writers who use it seem to think it means exactly the opposite of what it actually means. They use it incorrectly, like this:

Despite the intense, suffocating pressure of the situation, Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger was clearly nonplussed as he unleashed a perfect touchdown throw to Santonio Holmes...

...instead of using it correctly, like this:

After several hours of partying with Andy Dick, the college coed woke up far from home, pantsless and nonplussed.

So, be on the lookout for that.
