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# A Reality Check for 'Style Me'



Craig Blankenhorn

Rachel Hunter sorts through the realm of possibility.

By ERIC WILSON  
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THE fashion industry, with its camera-ready personalities and a seasonal pace that befits the genre, has provided ample fodder for reality television, spawning shows for women competing to become a top model and runway challenges for aspiring fashion designers. At this point the well has been tapped so dry that one might as well propose a show about button makers or Macy's salesmen. The latest entry, beginning Monday on WE: Women's Entertainment, is a showdown among would-be celebrity stylists.

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Styling- the art of picking out clothes and dressing starlets just so - would ideally be a behind-the-scenes profession. But for a small band of self-trained individuals, like Phillip Bloch and Jessica Paster, it has become a lucrative and high-profile profession (or at least justification to comment as a

style expert during awards shows).

Apparently the kids get this. WE was inundated with applications for the new show, "Style Me," in which Rachel Hunter, the supermodel and former reality television contestant, takes on the role of host. With cautionary earnest she explained the importance of stylists in the first episode: "Stylists not only dress you," she said, "they advise you and encourage you and can even save you from a fashion faux pas that can haunt you forever."

Geena Davis, she's talking to you.

The 12 contestants under Ms. Hunter's guidance, some so fabulous even their names are

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styled - Brittnie, Airic, Buick and Remeka among them - arrived in New York last September with suitcases packed with stilettos and dreams of making celebrities look better simply by inducing them to heed their advice.

Chris, an Elijah Wood look-alike from Anchorage, says, "I'm like the boy that's in Alaska at 12 reading Vogue, and they're like, 'What's Vogue?' " John, who describes himself as "an androgynous," appears to have styled himself as Ms. Hunter, with big, curly blond hair.

The painful reality is that few of them had a clue how to survive as a stylist, as Ms. Hunter offered candidly over tea the other day. In fact "Style Me" manages to reveal more about stereotypes of divalike behavior in the fashion business than about the power of accessorizing. But it also demonstrates that styling is surprisingly difficult.

Given the simplest of tasks at the outset - styling a little black dress on a mannequin with the Hell's Kitchen flea market at their disposal - the stylists-in-training managed to affront even Mr. Bloch. (He chided one contestant by reminding her of the old adage about too many accessories: Look in the mirror, he advised, then take one thing off. Except he attributed that maxim not to its originator, Coco Chanel, but rather to his client Ashley Judd.)

When Ms. Hunter asked Chris about his submission, he wept uncontrollably. And he was the winner of that challenge, having adorned the dull Laundry by Shelli Segal dress with an off-center metallic necklace.

"It was a little frightening, considering all the things that were in that flea market," Ms. Hunter recalled. "It was like watching paint dry."

MS. HUNTER, 36, began her modeling career in the mid-1980's, a period she acknowledged was characterized by fashion mistakes. Thinking back to her big hair days, she cringed. And though she suggested that she is more likely to be chided than applauded for her fashion choices, she learned long ago the value of a good stylist. Only in the last decade has the role of the stylist in creating a celebrity's look become fully recognized.

"A good stylist is unique, individual, adventurous and bold," Ms. Hunter said. "But the hardest thing for them to do is to see the person they are dressing differently than they see themselves. You don't really want to buy into the ones who dress you the same as they do. It's the ones who are constantly creating different looks that you want."

Ultimately she discovered that great styling is not something that can be taught or, in the case of "Style Me," corrected. That was a problem for many of the contestants. Ms. Hunter said she was taken aback by those who attempted to mold the subject to their own personal taste - gritty, rock 'n' roll or 40's classic.

Mostly, though, she was concerned because the winner, in addition to \$10,000 and a contract with a talent agency, gets a crack at styling her.

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