

Marni Jameson

A Reality Check on Reality TV Shows

By Marni Jameson

“How do you do it?” I plead. I’m on the phone with Evan Farmer, host of TLC’s reality TV show “While You Were Out.” I’m torn between begging for advice and giving him a piece of my mind.

While some say these shows inspire people, I say they make women like me look bad. They make me feel inferior because the smallest home improvement at my house takes 10 times as long, costs 10 times as much, and is half as creative as the projects on these shows.

“You spent as much on our living room drapes as these guys spent on a whole living room,” my husband, Dan, will point up.

“Why did our bookcase take, like, half a year to finish?” My 11-year-old daughter wonders. “Theirs only took an afternoon?”

Besides the warped sense of time and money these shows portray, the flamboyance factor creates more problems: “Why can’t we cover my bedroom walls in feathers?” My eight-year-old wants to know. “Why don’t we make one wall of the den a climbing wall and our shower like a car wash?”

Hold me up to one of these shows and I come away looking like an unimaginative, disorganized spendthrift. They’re a disservice, I’m telling you.

Take the show I just watched. The “While You Were Out” crew completely redid this couple’s master bedroom. They tore out carpet, installed hardwood floors, added white wainscoting, sewed curtains and bedding, built and mounted shutters, beefed up moldings, painted the walls and trim, built a bed, refinished the armoire and dresser, and, oh, cooked up homemade spa products to adorn the master bath all in two days for under \$1,500.

That’s when I picked up the phone. (One of the perks of writing this column is access. I get outraged and -- in the name of American journalism -- I get reality TV talk show hosts on the line.)

“So, Evan,” I say, and launch into a tirade of questions.

“Well, we do have a few advantages the folks at home don’t,” he confesses.

“Cough them up.”

First, their designer gets a three-week lead to check out the room and design a solution. Then, the day before the shoot, the whole crew meets, sizes up the project and goes shopping. All that happens before the two-day clock starts ticking. At show time, a whole team of pros works at once. This kind of teamwork only happens on reality decorating shows and sometimes at NASA – I’m thinking of the Apollo 13 scene when all those rocket scientists brought Tom Hanks safely back to earth using only the supplies in the conference room. Anyway, real people like us have the electrician in, then wait two weeks for the carpenter, then wait two weeks for the tile guy, and two more weeks for the painter.

The TV crew is also organized. “Our truck is has every tool we need in easy reach, so there’s no three trips to the hardware store,” says Farmer. “Plus, we have a clean up crew.” At my place, we are the clean up crew.

So that’s how they save time, but how about money? The \$1,500 budget, Farmer insists, is real. Sort of. His team goes to Home Depot and pays the same price as anyone else, even though Home Depot is a show sponsor. Other companies, however, particularly fabric or accessory sources, do donate merchandise in exchange for the exposure on national television.

So they have pull. We don’t.

Big ticket items, like sofas or dining room sets, the show throws in as a quiz prize, which the couple wins if they correctly answer some obvious question like what’s your address. But the biggest savings is labor, which, according to industry experts, can account for 30% to 60% of a job’s cost, and which the show also doesn’t tally into the tab.

“I’m feeling better,” I tell Farmer as we wind up my peeve session. Then he gives me one more reassuring dose of reality. He’s remodeling his own place, he tells me, a 286-square foot apartment in New York City. “I have no budget. That’s the luxury of living in a closet. I’ve been at it a year and I’m still not done. I work you know.”

I do know. That’s reality.

Before we hang up, I get Farmer to share some redecorating rules he’s learned since he started hosting the show:

- The power of paint: Too many people are trapped inside white or beige walls. Nothing transforms a room more than paint. It’s cheap and easy.
- The 90/10 rule: The team always starts by taking everything out of a room. In the end, only 10% goes back. Most stuff doesn’t belong or is clutter.
- Focus: When the room is stripped, designers look for a focal point, such as a view window or fireplace, or they make one, such as a waterfall on the wall. They arrange the room around that.
- Cutting chaos: Before you demo any room, have your ducks in a row. Have the design complete, all your materials and tools in hand, any permits you’ll need, and the appropriate contractors chained to your property.

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