

Erica Rand
Talent-Based Reality Shows

Broken

I'm interested in what's broken, but isn't, in TV talent success stories. Consider hip hop dancer Joshua Allen, who recently won *So You Think You Can Dance* (SYTYCD), Season 4. During the Vegas Week tryouts, judges appeared to bust him, although he made the top 20 anyway, for sort of lying about his background. While he had described himself as all about "not knowing really what you're going to eat the next day," the judges, he was told by *Fame-ous* choreographer Debbie Allen, questioned his truthfulness after they spotted him doing a brisé, a ballet move (from French, "broken"), that betokened formal training. By the finale episodes two months later, the brisé bust was simultaneously neon and disappeared. His duet with fellow hip-hopper Twitch—a street-duel version of the Russian Trepak from the *Nutcracker* ballet—required ballet moves of him (only) that made the idea of being new to them laughable. Nonetheless Nigel Lithgow, producer and requisite British judge, told Joshua that he had raised the standard for all future contestants, who would have to think: "Joshua didn't get training and look at how brilliant he was" (6 August 2008). Judges fawned over his raw talent, further naturalized by comments about how the duet was "testosterone driven."

Convolutions yes, but they make sense according to the logics of talent-based reality shows. Hip hop dancers are "real," ballet dancers aren't, although they can inject each other with nature and culture respectively—Joshua is Julia Stiles from *Save the Last Dance* backwards). Hence the notion here that it is ballet that involves training. Hip hop is natural or street smarts, especially when people of color do it, especially if they are men, especially if those are manly. (However, *America's Best Dance Crew* (ABDC), which parses "real" in a much more complex way, has room for a queer real, too, at least according to Lil' Mama, the judge who defended Fanny Pak when Shane Sparks asked its male dancers to dance like men for a change.) Yet "trained" is not quite coextensive with white, nor with fake, which relics of other training denote: pageant smiles; or a certain splits-worthy leg extension which, if the dancer doesn't linger there for a breath, signals "dance team" instead of "lyrical."

Nor does training necessarily mean exactly what Joshua got. I put in the hedges “appeared to bust” and “sort of lying” above only partly to gesture to patently sketchy editing with Joshua, whose SYTYCD official web profile admitted to training all along (which message boards claim to include Debbie Allen’s summer programs!). I did so also because the claim to being untrained has a certain relative truth value in the current reality show context. People increasingly arrive with extensive training and experience: one *Top Design* contestant this season is already a senior style editor at *Martha Stewart Living*; *Top Chef* or *Project Runway* contestants may already have their own restaurants or clothing lines. It’s like the current context of sport and movement competitions where victory costs plenty. I see this close up as I figure skate, for fun and research, because the advancement of the kids practicing around me depends precisely on who has hundreds of dollars a week for coaching, ice time, cross-training, trips to training centers, elegant costumes, and more. What success requires then get amped up to meet what people will buy. Some weekly classes and a few summer scholarships don’t get you trained anymore. It is one effect of neoliberalism on standards and expectations, when financial assets don’t count as unfair performance enhancements like some substances do. Ask Dara Torres, who needed seven coaches, trainers, and body workers to show that a “mom over 40” can win Olympic medals. Ask anyone whose only hope is that Oprah will show up, *Bring it On*-style. Most likely she won’t.

Cash is one of the sticklers in representing, which talent-based reality is all about, too. Contestants increasingly choose or get chosen to represent: people of like race or ethnicity (a common theme); now and/or recently homeless (*SYTYCD*, *ABDC*, *America’s Got Talent (AGT)*); recently homeless *and* trans (*America’s Next Top Model (ANTM)*); middle-aged (*Dancing with the Stars*); adopted (*Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making the Team*); living with Asperger’s (*ANTM*); post-Katrina (*AGT*). But reality (shows) and representation collide. Rules and resources get in the way. Heather gets tossed off *ANTM* during a challenge virtually destined to knock off people with Asperger’s: *ANTM*’s standard go-see challenge in which models race to find locations in an unfamiliar city. Anthony doesn’t make the top 20 of *SYTYCD* in Season One, when Nigel said he danced too feminine, or in Season Four, when he comes back

butched out in camouflage. This time, we are told, he failed to show the spark of personality. No kidding. Nothing and everything is broken.