

# I PARTICIPATE IN TV STUDIO AUDIENCES

by Kevin Collier

**T**he idea of being in a TV studio audience polarizes people. Either you think it sounds like a great way to spend a day—to see a TV show being filmed, live!—or it sounds precisely like Hell on Earth. The truth is actually somewhere in between.

I live in New York City and am underemployed, so I recently began attending every show I could find that was filmed in the city or nearby. (For reasons involving tax breaks, a number of shows have begun filming in Connecticut.) The first thing I learned was just how easy it is to become part of a studio audience. Anyone who's watched *Judge Judy*, for example, knows that the people who populate her courtroom are not chosen for their looks. The fact is, anyone can see any show. Tickets are always free, and usually require nothing more than filling out a form on the show's website.

The downside is that you have to arrive much earlier than the show starts, and once you do, you're subject to an existence sort of like that of a high-schooler at a pep rally. Clapping and cheering are welcomed, encouraged, and sometimes required, but otherwise, you do as you're told for as long as the audience coordinators say. Often you'll have to stay afterward for promos, where the show's host will film material that has no need of an audience and you must stay seated and silent, regardless of how much your butt's going numb.

Seeing shows live gives a human imprint to a medium that normally feels distant and disingenuous. In person, you see Howie Mandel between takes, chatting with the director or even the audience. On the other hand, it's a genuinely weird experience, stuck in a nether realm between seeing a live performance and watching the cleanly edited show at home. The existence of TV audiences feels antiquated, and several shows that have them have been canceled in the short time since I've been attending. But, judging by the four established shows (*Maury*, *Jerry Springer*, *The Steve Wilkos Show*, and *Deal or No Deal*) that recently committed to filming with audiences in Connecticut, it's not going to stop soon.

# MAURY

Studio location: 33rd Street at 7th Avenue, NYC  
(In May 2009, the studio moved to 307 Atlantic Street, Stamford, CT)

*Concept: Maury Povich uses boot camps, lie detectors, and makeovers to help some of America's most desperate families*



The first thing you notice going into *Maury* (formerly *The Maury Povich Show*) is how very little goes into the set.

When I went, it was located in the ninety-year-old Hotel Pennsylvania, near New York's Penn Station. The bathroom for guests was in the basement of the hotel, and is frequented by the homeless. The set itself looked shoddy, with faux-brick walls. We sat in stackable chairs on risers. An electronic remix of Rihanna's "Umbrella" played on a loop.

Maury comes out to adoring fanfare. Audience members run onstage to hug him, and he is happy to oblige. I get the impression that the people in his crowds come again and again.

He carries an ironic smile that implies he's in on the joke. He spits out aphorisms like "When times are good, I'll have a forty-ounce."

The episode's theme is a common one: Baby Mama Drama, known for the tagline "You are NOT the father!" A couple comes to Maury with a dispute or doubt about their child's parenthood, and airs their dirty laundry on the show in exchange for a free paternity test.

A woman named Forever struts onto the stage, dressed to impress. Maury introduces her. "I call her Forever. But she says it's 'Fo'Eva.'" She has three kids, two of whom, Eternity and Christopher, have joined her on previous episodes in unsuccessful attempts at identifying their biological fathers. Her youngest child is a boy named Cincere. This is, Maury points out, her sixth time on the show. Two of those prior times were to test a man named Terrence against her two older children; both tests came up negative. Terrence is on the show today, too, this time to test his DNA against Cincere.

Maury calls for Terrence, who comes out with arms spread triumphantly. The crowd loves him. He and Forever spar in the expected way:

T: *Get it through your head that there's no way I'm any of these babies' father! I'm never gonna get with your skanky ass!*

F: *As soon as we left the last show, you were all up in this coochie! You're messed up.*

T: *Your shoes are messed up!*

Audience: *Ooooh!*

According to Terrence, he and Forever didn't have sex anywhere near the time she would have gotten pregnant with Cincere, so Forever isn't on the show for truth and child support—only to smear him.

Maury stands back and lets them spar for a few minutes before interrupting with a manila envelope containing the paternity-test results. He waits a few suspenseful seconds. Terrence looks supremely confident, for good reason. "In the case of five-month-old Cincere," Maury roars, "Terrence, you are NOT the father!"

Terrence shoots out of his chair, grinning. He runs into the audience, high-fiving and hugging people. Meanwhile, Forever runs offstage. A camera follows her, and we watch on a monitor as she collapses in the hallway, sobbing. Maury cuts to commercial and begins chatting with the audience—"Can you believe she's had him on this show for three different kids?"—before noticing the booming sound coming from the monitors.



Forever's mic is apparently still clipped to her shirt, and she's sobbing directly into it. It's a good five seconds before someone cuts the sound. Maury excuses himself and goes to talk to her.

When he comes back, he introduces another young mother and the man she claims is her baby's daddy. It's essentially the same story. After it's announced, once again, that the man is not the father, the second woman runs into the hallway and collapses. She doesn't sob into her mic or get consoled by Maury, though, and so the monitor cuts the image of her and we move on.

Having wrapped enough material for an episode, Maury addresses us. "We've got a whole 'nother episode of Baby Mama Drama coming up next. But in the meantime, we're going to take you outside, feed you pizza, and bring you back in!" We cheer and line up to exit.

Staff members escort us out. A long line of new people, roughly enough to fill all the seats in the audience, stretches out the door. I ask a security guard if we have to get in the back of the line. "Yeah," he replies. "These people have been waiting. We can't promise you seats."

"Where's the free pizza?" I ask.

"What are you talking about? There's no food," he says. Then he closes the door in my face.

Maury, you slick bastard.

## PAULA'S PARTY

*Studio location: Chelsea Market, NYC*

*Concept: Southern grandma cooks with lots of love and butter*

*Paula's Party* host Paula Deen came from her native Georgia to New York to film a few episodes at a studio in New York City's Chelsea Market. I got tickets for her first taping. Paula is known for her sweet-but-sassy Southern-grandma manner, and for her buttery, fatty food. As we stood in line to get in, a production assistant made everyone sign a waiver that essentially said we wouldn't sue if we got sick after eating any food the show provided.

In sharp contrast to *Maury's* Spartan accommodations, the seating on Paula Deen's show is fantastic. It's set up like a dinner theater, with everyone in the audience sitting at small tables and snacks already provided. I've brought my girlfriend, and we're given a romantic table for two to the side—about ten feet away from Ms. Deen's stage kitchen. Though it's just Fritos and cornbread and lemonade, the fact that we can munch the whole show long—instead of salivating while watching Ms. Deen cook—is a very welcome gesture. A food- and drink-refilling attendant assures me the cornbread was baked that morning.

To warm up the audience, we're treated to the comedy stylings of an affable woman named Dena Blizzard, a mother of three and honest-to-God former Miss New Jersey. She tells jokes and chats with us while we munch our Fritos. Dena, bless her heart, is tireless in her efforts to keep us entertained. She does bits from her stand-up act. She calls for an impromptu dance party and asks the sound person to give her a groove. "Baby Got Back" blasts through the monitors, and a few middle-aged women come up to bump and grind with Dena. Her calls for more dancers go unheeded, though, and the dance doesn't last another song.

We've been there for about forty-five minutes and the show hasn't started. There are a flurry of assistants running back and forth with headsets, and this indicates pretty clearly that there are some kinks being worked out.

Meanwhile, Dena has to keep us entertained. We do Paula trivia. Dena asks us, "What does Paula's husband do for a living?" The answer is "He's a tugboat captain!" Dena sees the captain in the front row and walks up to him. With his white hair and beard and ruddy complexion, he's a dead ringer for pastry-chain mascot Beard Papa. He confirms that he is a tugboat captain.

Dena's running out of ideas. She looks tired. It's nearing 3 p.m. Including the time we waited outside the studio, we've been here for over two and a half hours. Dena sets up an open mic



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for “anyone who knows a joke.” My girlfriend’s contribution, “What was Beethoven’s favorite fruit?” to which she answers “Ba-na-na-na,” to the tune of the famous lick from his fifth symphony, goes criminally unappreciated.

Finally, when it seems possible we’ve passed into the next day without sleeping—time has ceased to have any meaning—Paula comes out. Music bursts from the speakers. Dena perks up. The audience goes wild. All is forgiven.

The day’s show is called “Rainy Day BBQ,” dedicated to grilled food one makes indoors. It quickly becomes apparent that Paula has little idea what is going on. She is extremely friendly and sweet, but seems to have trouble keeping the show moving once it begins, at least until she introduces her guest, Rosie O’Donnell.

Rosie comes in from stage right, smiles and waves at the crowd, and, because we are sitting halfway between Paula and offstage, makes a beeline for my girlfriend and hugs her. My girlfriend is flummoxed, but reciprocates. Then Rosie hugs Paula’s tugboat husband, and then she hugs Paula. (Rosie and my girlfriend had, I should note, never met. When I later ask my girlfriend, for the purpose of this article, what it felt like to hug Ms. O’Donnell, she replies “squishy.”)

Paula states at the outset that she and Rosie haven’t known each other long, but that they are extremely fond of one another. “I love you,” Paula says. “I love you too,” Rosie replies. “And I love your book!” Rosie has a commanding manner and seems to take instant control of the show.

They talk about *The View*, and Rosie admits she’s been depressed since leaving it. She speaks at length about how much she disliked the Bush administration and Donald Trump. Several times, Paula starts to address the recipe at hand, only to have Rosie change the subject, back to politics or Donald. Paula’s producer repeatedly makes a hurry-up gesture, and Paula takes note. “Rosie,” she says politely, “we’re getting this signal—I think we should move things along.” Rosie looks into the darkness, squinting for the producer. “I don’t think he likes me.”

Eventually they get around to cooking the day’s meal, Beer-in-the-Rear Chicken, which involves stuffing a chicken with a half-full can of beer before cooking it. Rosie frequently repeats things Paula says, mimicking her southern accent. They prepare the chicken, then cut to commercial. When they return, they pull out a second, fully cooked chicken. I knew they would do this—we assumed they do this on cooking shows—but still, I was kind of hoping they would actually cook the chicken.

Even though we’ve saved the hour of cooking, I’m getting restless. We’ve been here almost four hours,

and my fingers are greasy from so many Fritos. I scan the crowd for Paula’s husband, wondering how he deals with all this wasted time. He’s gone. Tugboat husband has bailed, so we bail, too.

## DEAL OR NO DEAL

Studio location: Sonalyst Studios, Waterford, CT



Concept: Correctly  
pick a case at random,  
win \$500,000

I’ll get the tedious logistics out of the way first: horrible traffic meant it took me seven hours to drive the 120 miles from New York City to *Deal or No Deal*’s studios in Waterford, CT.

Far too late to see the show, I sleep in a motel and arrive

early for the next morning’s taping, which I know to be overbooked. Fortunately, I run into a gregarious NBC employee traveling on a snazzy *Deal or No Deal* bicycle. (“It’s super eco-friendly,” he tells me. “Most of it’s made of recyclable parts. Plus, it’s a bike.”) He takes pity on me and sneaks me under the sun tent reserved for friends and family of contestants. They claim to have turned away forty ticket-holders, but somehow I’ve made it in.

Under the tent I strike up a conversation with a middle-aged man from Philadelphia who’s there to support his daughter, who lives in Boston. She applied to be a contestant on the show a year ago, passed several rounds of auditions, and was selected out of thousands of applicants to be on call, for a six-month period, to come to Connecticut for a few days to be on the show. They filmed three shows the day before, and his daughter has yet to get to compete. But she’s scheduled for two shows today. He’s bursting with pride.

In case you’re unfamiliar, *Deal or No Deal* is a game show that (in the U.S. daytime-TV version) features twenty people who have passed these auditions. Everyone is given a numbered briefcase that hides a dollar amount, ranging from one cent to \$500,000. The game begins when a model spins a roulette wheel to choose which of these people gets to bring down her briefcase, meet host Howie Mandel, and be the contestant for that episode. Then the contestant starts picking briefcases besides her own to open and invalidate, hoping to increase the odds that her briefcase has a high value. Periodically Howie gets a call from a mysterious “banker” in a darkened booth who considers the likelihood that the contestant holds a valuable case. The more likely it is that the contestant’s case holds a high figure, the more the banker will offer. The contestant can take the money



and stop playing (Deal) or refuse the offer and keep choosing briefcases (No Deal) in hopes that the banker will offer more money. It's kind of like scratching off a lottery ticket very slowly.

It takes us about two hours of standing around and being shuffled from one tent to another—the show's filmed on a big campus of studios—before we enter an enormous warehouse and are seated.

For reasons I'll never understand, I am deemed the right guy to put in the front row of the "pit" next to the stage where Howie stands and the contestant deliberates. Thus, viewers of the show this season will be treated to two whole episodes where I am the single most prominent member of the audience. This is problematic, because all my life I have been reluctant to loudly yell "Woo!" repeatedly for hours. Two times during the taping I am gently rebuked, by a concerned production assistant with massive tattooed forearms, to smile more and shout louder. Each time I tell him I will do better.

The audience warm-up guy plays off how much everyone there seems to adore Howie Mandel. He asks who loves Howie the most, and the crowd begins shrieking and woo-wooing. A high school girl seated near me woos the loudest, so the warm-up guy asks her what she wants to do with Howie. She giggles a lot and finally says "Take him." The crowd laughs. The warm-up guy gives us a lewd look, and then prods the girl to elaborate. "Take him how?" he asks. She explains that she'd keep him in her basement so people would come and pay her to take pictures with him.

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now tell us the rules of the show,  
but instead of saying them, he  
sings them.

The warm-up guy says he'll now tell us the rules of the show, but instead of saying them, he sings them. The song is very long and very thorough—clap high and often, don't chew gum, turn off all cell phones and pagers. He stresses that we are to act as if we are getting a cut of each contestant's money, and to be accordingly emotionally involved. His final interaction with the audience is to pick a woman near the front row of seats to be the designated sayer of a sassy "O-kay!" when a contestant makes a bold choice or a choice turns out to be a good one. She seems thrilled. "Don't overdo it," he says, and leaves.

We film two shows, each anchored by a female contestant who fails to bring home big bucks. The first is an extremely sympathetic law student who says she needs to pay off her debts. The banker offers her a sum the audience dislikes, convincing her to shout "No deal!" and guess away most of her potential

money. The second contestant is a widowed cattle farmer from Kentucky (this information draws laughs, for some reason) who says she's there to win money for a new tractor. She tells a meandering anecdote about getting her cows drunk. It's clear the story was better when she told it backstage, to one of the producers. Onstage, it doesn't go over.

After the show we stay to watch Howie do promos for numerous FOX affiliates around the country. He easily nails most. The few he misses, he peppers with little jokes. At one point he does the affiliate for Columbia, South Carolina, which he pretends to misread as Colombia; he makes a cocaine joke after every take. The promos are usually four or six seconds long. One is fifteen seconds, though, and it's an alliterative tongue-twister. I think the phrase "Diabolical deliciousness of *Deal or No Deal*" is used. Howie trips over it, laughs, and turns to his audience. "What the fuck was that?" he says. The audience roars.

Thinking the show is over, I'm ready to leave. But there's more work to do. It's time for audience-reaction shots—something I wasn't asked to do for Maury or Paula Deen. We're told the work will be repetitious, and it is. First we do polite applause. Then reactions to the 1¢ case being opened (good). Then reactions to the \$500,000 case being opened (bad). Then reactions to a contestant deciding to risk it all (Yay!). They change the lighting scheme and we're instructed to do the same series of reactions again. We do them to a third lighting scheme, and another, and another. We're asked to pretend the banker said something really insulting to the contestant, and we're indignant. We're told to imagine the contestant just made a bold move—we're surprised, and then thrilled. (I don't think we, as an audience, ever got that one in unison.) Then we have to act as if Howie said something really funny. This is particularly odd, because he didn't really joke during either episode.

Finally, the emcee has all the women moo and then mime chugging forties. This, presumably, is in reference to the widow from Kentucky, though I cannot fathom the scene the producers want to create—she tells her anecdote, then the women of the audience make this noise and do the chugging in unison, while the men sit motionless and silent? But what do I really know?

At long last, we're released outside, where we're shown to the bathrooms—Port-A-Potties set up in the parking lot, baking in the August heat. I catch up with the guy from Philly, whose daughter stood on stage and held a case but never got to compete. He wasn't mad. After six months of waiting, she got her chance, and that was that. He was remarkably upbeat. "What'd you think?" he asked. "Quite a show, huh?"

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