

DATING GAMES: 'Boy Meets Boy' may irk some gays—it's already angered its own star. The new reality show is part groundbreaking social experiment, part practical joke.

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BY B. J. SIGESMUND

YOU'RE WATCHING THAT old standby of all reality-TV matchmaking shows, the "group date," and the star and his suitors are line-dancing in tight jeans. But there's the de rigueur twist: this is Bravo's "Boy Meets Boy," a gay variant of "The Bachelor," and all the dancers are guys. And a further twist: the star doesn't know it, but some of these guys aren't gay at all. If a straight man can get the star to fall for him, he stands to make \$25,000. Now at least one guy is having second thoughts. "We're all partnered up," a heterosexual suitor recalls, "and I'm crotch to crotch with this 6-foot-4 guy—who *also* turned out to be straight. I'm thinking, 'Is my mother gonna see this?'"

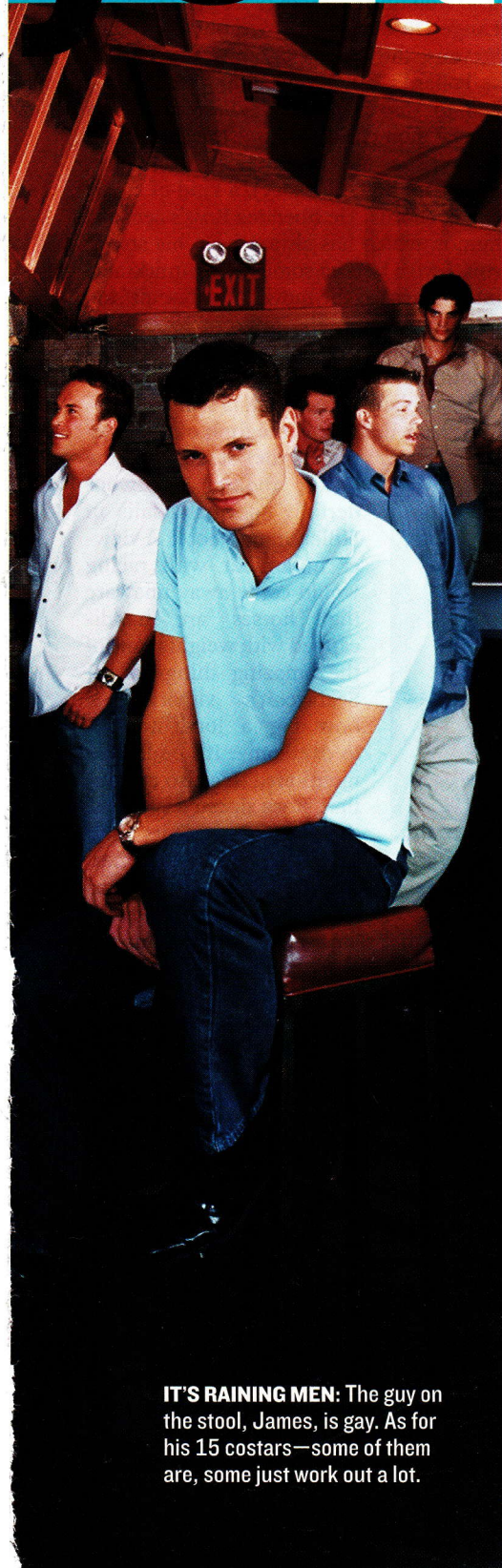
Sorry. Yes. Bravo expects "Boy Meets Boy," which debuts July 29, will draw not only a gay audience—the channel's also premiering the terrific gay makeover show "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" this week—but straight audiences who might get caught up in the guessing games. (Viewers won't know a suitor's sexual orientation until he's eliminated.) Douglas Ross, the show's executive producer, says he "wanted to test boundaries between gay and straight, and create a world where the straight people were in the closet." But the show may even prove divisive among gays—especially when they learn that the leading man himself is still smarting from the experience. "I felt betrayed," says James, a California human-resources executive, perhaps the first reality star ever to speak a bad word about his own series. James was finally let in on the big secret when he'd narrowed his suitors down to three—we won't give away their orientation—and he was livid. "They told me they put the twist in there because they wanted straight people to watch," he says. "I said to them, 'Well, you've played gay people as entertainment for straight people. Of *course* they're going to watch.'"

Ross's team combed bars across Califor-



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IT'S RAINING MEN: The guy on the stool, James, is gay. As for his 15 costars—some of them are, some just work out a lot.

nia in search of both gay and straight players. In casting heterosexual men, producers picked those who “got” their experiment. Many had gay friends, roommates or family members, and they were curious to see how the other half dates. (Although one, an aspiring actor, admitted to *NEWSWEEK* that he did it to hone his craft.) Producers instructed the straight guys to fabricate gay dating histories, and warned them they had to be willing to kiss another guy. The contracts stipulated that the action would go no further, even though other matchmaking shows regularly feature “overnight dates.” Ross says he wanted the show to be about “intrigue rather than sleaze.” Besides, advertisers can bear only so much reality.

“Boy Meets Boy” proceeds much like other such programs. James hosts group dates, has downtime with individual dudes and winnows out the unworthy in the dreaded elimination rounds. The guys—who lived together during filming, sharing bedrooms, in a house in Palm Springs—hike, work out, play Ping-Pong, swim, drink and sit around talking, sometimes until 2 in the morning. “Watching the episodes, it’s *impossible* to tell who’s gay and who’s straight,” says Ross. “That’s the point of the show.” During one bull session,

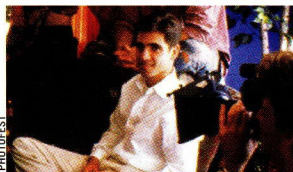
one of the mates—as they’re called—asks another, “Who do you think is the most feminine?” As co-executive producer Kirk Marcolina puts it, “They’re examining stereotypes, not knowing that there’s a straight guy right there.”

Unlike contestants on “The Bachelor,” the “Boy Meets Boy” suitors have a strong potential to fall for *each other*—which is exactly what happened in one instance. The crushee was one of the closet straight men, and he felt so bad about the situation that he went to the producers. The gay mate says that when he learned the truth, “it hurt. A whole relationship that could have happened was just immediately taken away.” Is “Boy Meets Boy” in part a cruel practical joke at gays’ expense? Ross scoffs at the idea. “Why do gay people need to be protected from participating in reality shows with twists?” he says. “I don’t see us as a victimized minority. We’re capable of handling this.”

But James’s problem with “Boy Meets Boy” goes beyond his feeling of personal betrayal; he worries that it plays on homophobic stereotypes. “It may reinforce the idea that gay men secretly like straight men, but have to hide it,” he says. Ross has an answer for that, too. “Please!” he says. “Gay men are attracted to *men*. Sometimes they’re straight, sometimes they’re gay. The show demonstrates that gay men can be attracted to straight men and that straight men are OK with it.” Both Ross and James, however, agree on one thing: that people will be tuning in. “Is it entertaining?” James says. “Sure. To people who are not involved, it will be interesting because they’ll get to see me cry and wallow in misery. That makes for good television.” ■

It Takes an Audience of Millions to Hold Us Back

Reality TV has helped erase stereotypes for gays, but for other groups, it’s only reinforced them

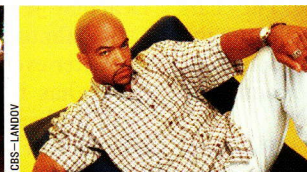


GAYS

‘AN AMERICAN FAMILY’: On this 1973 reality-TV progenitor, son Lance Loud comes roaring out of the closet during filming.

‘THE REAL WORLD’: The San Francisco season features HIV-positive Pedro Zamora. His death becomes national news.

‘SURVIVOR’: Richard Hatch is brilliant, if buck naked, and he wins the first \$1 million prize—by a vote of his peers.



BLACK MEN

‘THE REAL WORLD’: L.A. cast member David is tossed after some roughhousing gone awry; Later, in Seattle, Stephen slaps a female housemate.

‘TEMPTATION ISLAND’: The show’s only black couple are asked to leave because they’ve had a child out of wedlock.

‘BIG BROTHER’: Will Mega is voted off, then revealed to be a Nation of Islam fundamentalist.



WOMEN

‘THE BACHELOR’: A show about 25 women desperately seeking the attention of one guy.

‘BRIDEZILLA’: Nine brides-to-be basically going utterly insane.

‘JOE MILLIONAIRE’: The women are put in a room with 20 ball gowns and they pounce like vultures. One woman grabs two.

‘AMERICA’S NEXT TOP MODEL’: In a confessional interview, Elyse calls a rival ‘a worthless c---.’