

Say Yes to the Text

Jennifer Burg*

In this essay, the author describes her experience as a participant in the reality television show Say Yes to the Dress. She delves into the production aspects of the show and her own feelings of identification with the production staff. She also considers the multiple audiences, both present and not present, in applying for, producing, and participating in a reality television show.

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Proposal

For years when we were single, my best friend Jackie and I would come home from late nights out in NYC, climb into her bed with bowls of cereal, and watch TV until we fell asleep. Our favorites were shows that aired on TLC, and of those we most loved *Say Yes to the Dress*. We took great pleasure in watching the brides-to-be try on, reject and select their dream dresses in the sparkly showroom of Kleinfeld, in the heart of Manhattan. We critiqued every ensemble, marveled at every price point, and added our own snarky commentary to that of the friends and family who came along to assist the soon-to-be-wed. We scrutinized everything from the tiaras to the toe clips and the whole lot in between. We had our favorite designers, and we knew the Kleinfeld consultants by name. Never did we think that we might actually have the experience that we so often watched: Jackie has two kids and is divorced; I was engaged once years ago, but that didn't work out. Plus I've never been a frilly girl. I certainly didn't grow up dreaming of my wedding day, or doodle sketches of my dream dress in the margins of my class notes, ever.

But when the man who is now my husband proposed to me during the summer of 2012, Jackie was one of the first people I called and told, and the first words out of her mouth were not "mazel tov" or "that's wonderful," but "OMG, now we can go to Kleinfeld!" My betrothal was instantly an opportunity to star in the stories that we'd seen so many times, to become members of the cast of real-life characters we saw on screen. And although I laughed at her, the next week I found myself online looking not just at wedding venues and flower arrangements, but also at the *Say Yes* casting application, and wondering what it would be like to participate in the production first-hand.

I approached the process as a future bride, of course, but I also couldn't avoid approaching it as a rhetorician. Perhaps my understanding of contextual communication and persuasion might assist us in being selected for the show, and if it did, might additionally inform the decision making process of buying a dress. In this way, I might become a part of the text that that I so often critiqued, entering into the story and simultaneously scrutinizing its telling: the critic becomes the text.

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Indeed, although I am a notoriously private person, and have spent considerable concerted effort keeping my personal and professional lives distinct, those lines in this situation began to blur in unanticipated ways. Of course I do have occasional colleagues who are also my friends off-campus, and who I spend time with outside of work, but over the course of my professorial career, they have numbered in the single digits. If in fact I do have an Instagram feed or a Twitter handle, no one in my department or my classroom knows that. So being on a high-profile television show, one about something as intimate as choosing a wedding dress, and then deciding to write about the experience, complicated my thinking of audience in more than one way. What would it mean that my students would see me trying on wedding dresses? Or my professorial peers? Others who serve on executive committees and chair conference areas? The national audience for TLC shows is vast and varied. It would be impossible to hide from them. As it turned out, the audience that ultimately became the most significant was none of the above, and that, in the end, became the most thought-provoking takeaway from my *Say Yes* experience.

Engagement

Say Yes to the Dress first premiered on TLC in 2007, and has aired for 12 seasons totaling more than 200 regular episodes and seasonal specials. The reality series revolves around daily operations at Kleinfeld Bridal salon, located at 110 W. 20th Street in New York City, following individual sales people, associates, fitters and seamstresses on the job, and profiling brides shopping for their perfect wedding dress. Each episode ties together the stories of two or three brides around a particular premise; a sampling of episode titles reveals the range of thematic topics common to the show: “It’s My Wedding, But Don’t Tell the Bridesmaid,” “Daddy Knows Best,” “Missing Mom,” “Indecisive Brides,” “Cinderella Comes in All Sizes,” “Mama Drama,” “Torn Between Two Styles,” “Sticker Shock,” “Never Settle,” “Sister Resisters,” “Expecting Brides,” “Big Budget Brides,” and “Picky Brides” are just a few.

My understanding of the show’s setting and my familiarity with the kinds of stories that it often portrayed were all in mind as I completed my application. Easily accessed on the Kleinfeld website, it asks practical questions about wedding date, dress size, budget and style of dress the bride is looking for. It asks for stories about how one’s fiancée proposed, how one feels about shopping for a dress, who will be shopping with the bride along with a description of those guests’ personalities, and what “the most stressful part about planning your wedding and looking for a wedding dress” has been. It also asks that applicants describe themselves in 3 words, explain why they think they “would be fun to watch on TV,” and share something about themselves that “we wouldn’t know by looking at you.... There is no right or wrong answer, just tell us something about you that may surprise us or make our viewers say, ‘Cool.’”¹

I approached the application like I would any rhetorical situation: with a focus on the purpose and desired outcomes, and with the intended audiences in mind. I knew that the application would be one of many submitted to an assistant to a producer, or an intern, or some other administrative gatekeeper who would sift through the piles, looking for something that caught her or his attention. I thought of the application as basic deliberative rhetoric, a “carefully timed performance” where the “purpose is not so much to induce or enable us to remember the parts of [an] argument as to inspire us to cast a favorable vote when hands are to be count-

¹ “Say Yes To The Dress & Say Yes To The Dress ‘Big Bliss’ Online Application,” *Kleinfeld Bridal*, 2015, <http://www.kleinfeldbridal.com/tlc/index.cfm> (accessed June 25, 2015).

ed: *movere* rather than *docere*.”² I kept in mind Kenneth Burke’s theory of dramatism while deciding what to present. Kleinfeld is no doubt a stage, where brides-to-be stand on a raised platform in front of their audiences while trying on dresses, and we would indeed be the actors, but to get there, I had to rely on “language [a]s a strategic, motivated response to a specific situation.”³ I considered Cicero and Quintilian’s notes on humor, recalling the former’s reminder that there is “great and frequent utility” in amusing one’s audiences.⁴ And I focused on the razzle-dazzle, a term I’ve lifted from the musical *Chicago*’s song of the same name, unabashedly trying to “give ‘em an act with lots of flash in it,” so “the reaction will be passionate.”⁵ After a few drafts, I submitted the following:

Name: Jennifer Jeanne Richardson

Occupation: Associate Professor and Chair of Humanities at Southern Vermont College

Address: XXXXX

Phone: XXXXX

Email: XXXXX

Date of Birth: June 23

Height: 5’3”

Dress Size: small

Fiancée’s Name: Scott

Fiancée’s Birthday: November 6

Fiancée’s Age: XXX

Fiancée’s Occupation: Graduate Student & Hobo/CEO

How did your fiancé propose to you?

Scott and I met last year. On July 14th – our 10 month anniversary – we spent the day at Scott’s off-the-grid house which sits on 40 acres in rural Roxbury, Vermont. At around 5:00pm, Scott said he wanted to go for a hike to the top of the mountain, which he had been mentioning for several days. I was happily reading gossip magazines and drinking wine on the front porch, and definitely didn’t want to go for a hike, so I declined. Scott was insistent, and I kept refusing to go, but I finally agreed; however, I was not happy, and I made sure he knew it. I was in a huff and stomping up the trail behind him, stopping and turning my back to him whenever he waited for me to catch up with him. I was being eaten up by bugs and getting my legs scratched by the brambles and bushes that grew over the trail. Scott kept saying “trust me,” but I just ignored him or replied “I hope you’re happy because I am miserable.” At some point, he went off the trail a little bit and started heading into the woods. I ignored him and kept kicking my way up, but he called out to me, “Hey, come look at this!” I ignored him. Again he yelled at me to come with him nearer the woods, and finally, realizing I had no idea where I was and couldn’t make it back down to the house without him, I followed. As I walked to where he was, chin tucked and head down, fuming at Scott, I saw a red rose petal in the leaves and brush by my feet. From that moment, I knew something was going on. I thought “Oh shit! I better get nice real quick!” For the first time since leaving the house, I looked at Scott, and I walked to where he was. He led me on a path of rose petals to a clearing where earlier that day, while I slept, he had hauled up a rough road by truck and a steep trail by hand a feather mattress, a cooler with champagne and cheese, a laptop computer and a PA amplifier that ran off of a car battery. He dropped down on one knee, presented me with a gorgeous heirloom diamond ring, said my full name, told me he loved me and would always take care of me, and asked me to be his wife. After I said YES we popped the champagne, blasted our favorite album (*The Whole Love* by Wilco), and had a dance party on top of the mountain.

² Huntington Brown, *Prose Styles: Five Primary Types* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966), 21.

³ Em Griffin, *A First Look at Communication Theory*, 6th ed, (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 339.

⁴ Cicero, *De Oratore*, trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), ix ff.

⁵ “Razzle Dazzle Lyrics by Richard Gere | From Chicago Soundtrack,” *ST Lyrics*, 2015, <http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/chicago/razzledazzle.htm> (accessed June 25, 2015).

Is he coming dress shopping with you? No

Are you a plus size bride? No

Wedding Date: XXXXX

Reception Location: Southern Vermont

Wedding Dress Budget: XXXXX

Most likely, who will be paying for the dress? XXXXX

If someone other than yourself, do they get to have a say in which dress you choose?

My family has some say. I set up a Pinterest board so everyone can look at dresses, and the two Moms are already expressing their opinions there very clearly!

Have you started looking for a wedding dress yet? Yes

If so, how long have you been looking? About a month, but only in magazines and online

Do you already have an appointment at Kleinfeld? Yes

If you do have an appointment at Kleinfeld, when is it? September 20

Describe yourself in 3 words: Articulate, Opinionated, Hilarious

Describe your sense of style in 3 words: Not really sure

How do you feel about shopping for your dress? Excited? Dreading making a decision? Worried you won't like any? etc...

All of the above! This is a first wedding for both of us, and I'm psyched to do it all, in a fairly traditional manner.

Are you planning on shopping for the dress alone or are you bring friends and family? If you are bringing friends and family, please tell us a little bit about them and their personality.

My Mom and my Grandmother are driving up from Ft. Worth, Texas. They're old-school, traditional, conservative Christian southern ladies. My fiancée's Mom is driving down from Boston. She's a liberal Jewish widow and a retired professor involved in local politics. This will be the first time that they've all met. My wedding party includes bridesmaid Jackie from Paramus, NJ. You may remember Jackie from such Page-Six articles as the one about a "height challenged woman" who slapped Jim Carrey's ass at Jack White's Webster Hall performance on April 27th. The two of us have spent many hours together watching *Say Yes!* Another bridesmaid is Danielle from New York City, a teacher at LaGuardia School of Performing Arts, aka "the Fame school." And another bridesmaid is James, NEA Award winning poet and my best gay.

What has been the most stressful part about planning your wedding and looking for a wedding dress?

Before the wedding date I'll be teaching an overload of undergraduate college writing classes during Fall semester; finding a place to live and relocating to Vermont in December; and starting a new job at a new institution where I'll be in a new administrative position. Just thinking about it stresses me out!

Tell us something about yourself we wouldn't know by looking at you. Ever run a marathon? Have a secret tattoo? Have a black belt in karate? Help build a village in Africa? There is no right or wrong answer, just tell us something about you that may surprise us or make our viewers say, "Cool."

I have a tattoo, but it's not a secret. I met Scott at a concert that Phish was playing to benefit the victims of hurricane Irene. Our first date lasted for seven days. During the summer I work hospitality backstage at music festivals, setting up greenrooms, fulfilling rider requests, and taking care

of the musicians and crews. I've been doing this for over a decade, from coast to coast. I love bands!

Are there any traditions that are important to you, your family or your culture? For instance is it good luck to have a really long train? Do your arms have to be covered for the ceremony?

I was adopted as an infant by my family and raised Christian, but my birth mother was Jewish, and Scott is Jewish, so we're going to have a traditional Jewish wedding with some Christian prayers added.

Do you have any special requests for your wedding dress? Are you having a Winter Wonderland theme and hope to find a dress with snowflakes on it? Maybe you are a non-traditional bride and you are looking for a short, tight dress or a red dress?

I'm open to looking at all different kinds of dresses.

Why do you think you would be fun to watch on TV?

My whole life is like a TV show. A camera crew should already be following me around.

All of these things are totally true. I invented nothing on the application, but I definitely emphasized certain things, and I tried to include whatever I could that might make my bid for the show unique and memorable. This is an overtly Burkeian approach, in that I was using terminology as a reflection, selection, and deflection of reality, so that it directed attention toward certain factors and away from others.⁶ I played up the differences between my Mom and my fiancée's Mom, and the fact that they would be meeting for the first time at the Kleinfeld appointment. I included the most colorful things I could think of about the friends who would be joining me in the showroom, including the detail that I had a gay male bridesmaid, even though I already knew that he wouldn't be able to attend the appointment. And I told the story of how I got engaged as dramatically and comically as possible.

It worked. I submitted the application on August 23rd, and I received a call from Lisa at TLC on September 12th, only 8 days before my Kleinfeld appointment. During our talk, I continued my attempts to be witty and fascinating, only without the benefits of revision, and while trying to not talk too fast or accidentally drop the F-bomb. At the end of the conversation, she said that she would bring my application to her supervisors, who I assumed would make the final cut. She also asked that I send photos of my fiancée and the people who would be joining me at my appointment, and the link to the Pinterest board that I was using to collect, share, and get comments on dress ideas. I sent the requested information, and the next day, she replied letting me know that we had approval to film.

The Big Day

The day before the appointment, Lisa emailed to ask that I remind everyone not to wear any sort of logo on their clothing, and that we all get to the shop half-an-hour early so that the film crew could mic and release everyone in the group.⁷ We did as she asked, but not before a mimosa and

⁶ Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1937), 45.

⁷ I have no record or clear recollection of what the release agreement said, and I hope that nothing here is in violation of that agreement.

mojito filled brunch around the corner from the store. The Moms met sans drama. Everyone was keyed up and nervous, especially me and Danielle and Jackie, who are otherwise generally quite cool in entertainment venues. I second and triple-guessed my wardrobe choices and neglected to apply lipstick even one time all day. My eighty-something grandmother Bonnie was the calmest and the best-dressed of our group. Finally the time came, and we pushed through the big doors of Kleinfeld: we had arrived. And we were immediately asked to leave.

The camera crew instructed us to go back out to the end of the block, and then come back down the street and in to the store again, so that they could record our approach and entrance. This was the only part of the four hours of filming that I would describe as staged, meaning it wasn't filmed as it actually transpired in reality. Every other part of the appointment was captured as it happened by one of three different cameras, and heard by at least 6 crew members including a producer, sound and lighting people, and the camera crew. There was not one word that we uttered or moment of action that was not recorded on audio and at least one video angle, often more than one. The only instructions we were given was to refrain from chewing gum, and to avoid mentioning the name or the idea of the show itself.

To begin, we were all taken back into the heart of the store, a bit breathless at seeing in person the scene that we had so often seen on the small screen. It was totally surreal. We were given a few moments to just look around and peruse the dresses, and then we were separated. The five ladies in my group were arranged on a couch in front of a small elevated platform surrounded by mirrors, and most of the *Say Yes* filming crew remained with them.

I was taken back into a fitting room and introduced to my consultant Paula. I'd never seen Paula on the show, which I'll confess was a bit of a letdown. This obviously had nothing at all to do with Paula, who was absolutely lovely and wonderful. And I wasn't expecting to work with Randy, the star of the show. But I did, after all, feel like I already knew many of the consultants, like Camille and Dianne, and the idea of shopping with someone I was already comfortable with was definitely appealing. More about this sense of identification and the ethos of the consultants later – I'm about to try on wedding dresses!

In the dressing room, I looked at pictures and discussed preferences with Paula, who pulled four options for me to try on. Even when Paula left me to go out looking for gowns on the show-room floor, I was never alone. A female camera-person was with me the entire time, with the dedicated task of filming me and my experience from start to finish. She was even there when I was changing in and out of dresses, with the camera trained only on my feet. For each dress, I would walk out to the viewing area where my group was waiting, and I would spin around to show the dress from all angles, commenting on what I liked and didn't like, and asking them for feedback. When we were all done discussing the pros and cons, the producer would ask me to repeat certain things while the dress was filmed close up. Then I would go back, change, and we would repeat the process. After I tried on the fourth dress, Paula decided to go and get Nicole, one of the Sales Directors, to talk with me and to select one additional option for me to try on. I definitely recognized Nicole from the show, so I was excited to meet her, and to see what she thought would be an apt gown for me. The dress she selected was beautiful, and after trying it on last, I was left with a big decision to make. But the filming wasn't over yet.

The producer took me, my Mom, and my Grandmother separately back to an interview room, where they asked us questions and filmed our responses. We were directed to answer all of the questions in present tense, which was one of the hardest parts of the whole thing for me. I was a bit worn out by this point, and I would accidentally describe the details that I "liked" rather than "like" about specific dresses, so the producer would interrupt and ask me to begin again. And I

kept almost saying the name of the show, which was also not OK. This went on for a while. I learned after the fact that this happened to my Mom and Grandmother also, and that we were not all asked the same questions. Indeed, we were not all treated the same throughout many parts of the appointment.

Reception

Understandably, my experience was different from that of my entourage. And it was one where I will admit that all of my training and expertise in rhetoric basically vanished. There was really no reason for me to persuade; in fact, I was the one to be persuaded, as the audience for the sales staff at the store. And although it did occasionally cross my mind that there would eventually be a considerable audience viewing an edited version of the day, I found myself largely careless about that fact, saying things that I would never tell a stranger, much less thousands of strangers. But I wasn't talking to them, the nameless and faceless audience at home. Nor was I talking to Paula much of the time. I found myself opening up to the camera-woman who was assigned to me as if she were an old friend, sharing things from my past and hashing out thoughts that I hadn't really articulated before. She invited and encouraged our conversations, asking me questions and steering me back to topics that I might have shied away from earlier in the day. I'm sure the producers were listening to everything we said along the way, and that they were prompting her via the earpiece that she wore. But she was kind and understanding and seemed like a cool NYC girl, someone who I'd enjoy getting a drink or going to see music with. And, unexpectedly, it was *that* sense of identification, it was *her* ethos, that got me to be the most "me" that I could be during the whole extraordinary day.

While I was working with Paula, changing in and out of dresses, and bonding with my camera-woman, my Mom and Grandmother, my fiancée's Mom, and Jackie and Danielle were on the couch out front with the rest of the filming crew, including the producer. They have told me that they were coached a bit around the things that they would say: they were asked to repeat certain things with more emotion, and they were asked to provide clarity about certain remarks. For instance, at one point one of my guests, who shall remain unnamed, remarked that another customer in the store was too large for the dress she was trying on, and the producers rushed over to ask what she meant, and to encourage her to expand on her less-than-thoughtful comment. My group was also directed more concretely that I was about "not breaking the fourth wall" – that is, not acknowledging that they were on TV. This instruction was intended to maintain the appearance that we all were simply being observed, without interference of any kind, when that was obviously not the case. The most memorable example of this was when the group made signs with the names of the bridesmaids who were not there to hold up during one my dress showings – "Hi James, it's fabulous" or "Hi Emily, you'd love it"! The producer canned that idea instantly, since acknowledging that there was another reality beyond the illusory one that the cameras were capturing was strictly prohibited.

In the end, the most revelatory point for me was that the success of the show really has more to do with the crew that the television audience never sees than with the consultants who the home viewers know and love. That and the fact that I basically abandoned all logos for pathos as soon as I entered the Kleinfeld showroom. Thankfully, you'll likely never see me undergo this rhetorical regression. It's been two years, and I've not heard another word from the folks at TLC. The footage from my appointment has never aired, or more likely, it wasn't even edited at all.

All of the dresses that I tried on were beautiful, and each clearly reflected what I had noted as my preferences. There was certainly nothing *wrong* with them. I liked them all, and the ladies I was with liked them too. But none of them was THE dress. None of them was my dress. For reasons that I could not properly explain to Paula, or Nicole, or the producers, or myself, I did not say “yes” to the dress.