

Live! Defining Television Quality at the Turn of the 21st Century

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Despite substantial institutional, technological, and aesthetic developments in U.S. television, certain myths about the medium's essence persist. One of the longest-lasting is the myth of *liveness* as television's ontological essence. This myth has circulated widely throughout television history. Production theorists such as Herbert Zettl have argued that, "the essence of television is a temporal, ephemeral experience whose only record is memory," that television's very technological basis—the reproduction of image and sound through electronic scanning beams—certifies that "Each television frame is always in a state of becoming," making television "[exist]—[live]—as a process."¹ The myth has circulated beyond mainstream production circles, as well. For example, John Caldwell argues that the myth has been reproduced in video artists' explorations of contemporary ways of seeing and in a wide body of television criticism and theory since Marshall McLuhan.² Of course, the television industry has always been a major promoter of the liveness myth. From the anthology drama as the "showcase programming" of 1950s TV to today's videophone footage from Baghdad, the television industry eagerly flaunts liveness as a marker of the medium's immediacy and authenticity.³

The best known scholarly debunking of the liveness myth is Jane Feuer's "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," published in 1983. While Feuer acknowledges that we perceive television as more "live" than film, she argues that that perception, along with the myth of liveness as television's essence, are ideological constructs, "exploited in order to overcome the contradiction between flow and

fragmentation in television practice.”⁴ In 1985, Robert Vianello debunked the liveness myth with an historical argument, contending that liveness had been a strategy for network domination of broadcasting since television’s beginnings.⁵ More recently, John Caldwell has continued this deflation of the myth, pointing out its technologically determinist underpinnings and its manipulative use as a “badge of dramatic honor and prestige.”⁶

This paper explores the recent permutations of the liveness myth by considering multiple *new* attempts at live television in the last ten years. My focus here is not on on-going instances of live television, such as sports, news, talk shows like *Live with Regis & Kelly*, or entertainment programs like *Saturday Night Live*. The newer versions of live television in which I am interested fall into two general categories: the theatrical and the real. Theatrical liveness can be distinguished from real liveness by its transmission of staged performance, usually fictional, either comedic or dramatic in tone. In contrast, real liveness refers to the trend of introducing live elements into reality shows, as in multiple season finales of CBS’s *Survivor*, segments of ABC’s *I’m a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here!*, the weekly elimination episode of CBS’s *Big Brother*, and a Las Vegas-set installment of TLC’s *Trading Spaces*. While I am interested in exploring the role of liveness in reality programming, here I focus on recent “experiments” with theatrical liveness, a programming strategy virtually absent from television comedy and drama since the late 1950s. These recent theatrical liveness “experiments” include the 1992-93 season of the FOX sitcom *Roc*, the 1997-98 season premiere of NBC’s *er*, the 2000 CBS movie *Fail Safe*, and a week of ABC’s daytime drama *One Life to Live* in 2002. While these live TV “experiments” can be seen as reproducing the liveness myth in many ways,

they have also helped construct a new kind of television liveness in response to recent industrial, technological, aesthetic, and social developments. The television industry still calls upon liveness as a mark of distinction, but some of the ways that distinction is constructed have changed. In fact, more often than not, theatrical liveness is represented as an indicator of television quality due to its *differences* from most television, not its ties to the medium's true essence.

Before I examine the ways that recent theatrical liveness differs from its 1950s incarnation and veers away from the liveness myth, I want to consider the ways the liveness as television essence myth has been perpetuated in this recent group of live shows. William Boddy has argued that the early television critics who praised live television saw in the medium “a unique synthesis of the immediacy of the live theatrical performance, the space-conquering powers of radio, and the visual strategies of the motion picture.”⁷ The anthology dramas in particular were praised as the ideal televisual form, as they brought live performances of original plays into the home. They were seen by critics and creators as ideally suited to sensitive and intimate explorations of character, in opposition to cinema's supposedly “natural” tendency to emphasize plot and impressive vistas. They were imagined to deliver a degree of honesty and authenticity unavailable to radio, to cinema, or even to theater.

Newer instances of theatrical liveness have been constructed in similarly glorifying ways, highlighting the unique properties of television. For example, one review of *Roc*'s live season commented, “We forget, sometimes, how remarkable it is, this striking communal experience known as television. *Roc* reminds us.”⁸ Discourse surrounding CBS's live 2000 teleplay, *Fail Safe*, also framed liveness as television's

most unique trait, and its most impressive. As executive producer George Clooney, the most visible champion of theatrical TV liveness in recent years, described, “It’s the last frontier. It’s the one place where everything else can’t compete with television.”⁹

The distinctiveness of live production has also been highlighted in nostalgic references to the history of live programming. *Fail Safe* is the most obvious example of this, as a remake of a 1962 novel and 1963 feature film that tells a cautionary Cold War-era tale about nuclear weaponry. The program was broadcast in black and white, an obvious step toward nostalgic recreation, and it was introduced on-air by venerable former CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite. In addressing the audience as ladies and gentleman, in ceremoniously declaring that “Tonight, television takes a giant step,” and in reminding viewers that they were “tuned to CBS!” Cronkite’s presence hearkened back to an earlier time, an imagined past when television was something special, delivered to the American home by dedicated public servants like Cronkite and the CBS management. Yet even those recent instances of theatrical liveness that *haven’t* had an inherently nostalgic gloss have also called upon associations with television’s “Golden Age” to enhance their special status. As *One Life to Live* executive producer Gary Tomlin explained about his show’s week of live episodes, “I’ve always wanted to do this. I’ve always remembered the energy of watching *Edge of Night* broadcast live from New York with my grandmother.”¹⁰ To enhance the retro feel of the soap’s live broadcasts, a cast member would flip through hand-written placards with the credits at the end of each episode, instead of merely rolling electronically generated credits that would be no more difficult to broadcast live than on a taped show.

But perhaps the most prevalent way in which recent experiments in theatrical liveness have reproduced the liveness myth is in the sense of unpredictability, the sense of “anything can happen” that surrounds live television. Caldwell points out the centrality of this unpredictability to live TV dramas of the 1950s: “‘The show that you [were] watching’ could, as it were, fall apart at any moment. The technical apparatus was an essential part of the dramatic suspense.”¹¹ In the 1950s, this kind of suspense was employed to comedic as well as dramatic ends, such as in Milton Berle’s playing up of technical mistakes during broadcasts of his *Texaco Star Theater*.¹² The potential for something unpredictable to happen, for something to go awry, is of course central to live coverage of breaking news events; it is part of what makes viewing even the most horrific of real-world happenings so enthralling.¹³ Because the tension and thrill of the unpredictable is so central to both theatrical and real versions of television liveness, it is perhaps the most vital element of the liveness myth—it is television itself that allows for the excitement, not any specific form or genre of television, and thus it is cited as the medium’s most fundamental trait.

Discourse surrounding the live November sweeps episodes of *The Drew Carey Show* in 1999 and 2000 well-exemplifies the pervasiveness of this aspect of the liveness myth in recent live experiments. As executive producer Bruce Helford explained, “To do a live show when America can watch the train wreck as it happens—it’s a great form for sitcoms.”¹⁴ The addition of improvised segments further intensified the “train wreck” comedic potential, as did the broadcast of three separate live performances, one for each time zone. Along similar lines, promotions for *Roc*’s live season urged viewers to watch just to see who might blow a line.¹⁵

The importance of the “anything goes” factor in sustaining the liveness myth is most clear in a recent example of theatrical liveness that many saw as a disappointment. The 1997-98 season premiere of *er* featured the usual emergency room chaos through the eyes of a documentary crew; everything viewers at home saw was ostensibly footage shot by this crew. The device provided a frame through which the diegetic world could remain intact despite having a different look (live video instead of film) and a different pace (long takes and camera movement over intensified continuity editing). It also provided a built-in cover for many potential errors—actors blocking the camera’s view, shaky or out of focus camera work. Even though the *er* cast and producers hyped the unpredictability of the episode in advance, some critics and viewers felt cheated by the protections against that unpredictability built into the story. Clooney, one of the major forces behind the episode, also expressed disappointment and pledged to do things differently on *Fail Safe*: “For one, we’re not going to have the [plot] vehicle of a documentary film crew where, in case there is a screw-up, we can go, ‘Oh, we screwed up because a camera crew was here.’”¹⁶

In claims of television’s unique abilities, in nostalgic references to television’s “Golden Age,” and in the centrality of unpredictability, recent experiments in theatrical liveness have actively endorsed the liveness as ontology myth. However, these experiments can also be seen as positioning liveness as a marker of distinction and quality in ways that *defy* television’s essence. At least as often as these recent cases uphold the liveness myth, they also identify themselves as *anti*-television. One way in which theatrical liveness has been positioned as anti-television has been in the emphasis on non-television talent in the creation of these programs. Press coverage of *Roc*, *Fail*

Safe, and CBS's 2001 teleplay *On Golden Pond* consistently emphasized the actors' impressive experience on stage and in feature film and *lack* of experience in television. For example, *Roc* star Charles Dutton argued that the talents of the theatrically-experienced cast were the saving grace of the sitcom's first, recorded season and that the cast was so expert that they would typically tape the half hour show in about an hour and a half, record time for sitcom production. His "boredom" thus inspired him to push for the live season, knowing that the cast of "seasoned . . . Broadway actors" could easily handle the pressure.¹⁷ Similarly, the *Fail Safe* cast, including Richard Dreyfuss, Harvey Keitel, Sam Elliott, and Don Cheadle, was described as a group who "wouldn't go near a TV project" without the unusual element of liveness.¹⁸

The non-TV backgrounds of other creative personnel has also worked to construct recent live experiments as anti-television. Along with stars Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer, who are more associated with feature films and Broadway than with television, CBS's *On Golden Pond* was written and directed by the original playwright, Ernest Thompson. *Fail Safe* was written by Walter Bernstein, screenwriter for the 1963 feature film version, and was directed by feature film director Stephen Frears. But Thompson and Frears served as directors only *before* the live broadcasts. Martin Passetta, Jr., an experienced television director, took the reigns at that point, a fact that was de-emphasized in publicity for both movies. Certainly, the general public's lack of understanding of the production process is one reason press discourse did not point out Thompson's and Frears' inability to direct live television. But I argue that these experiments in the new liveness were also being explicitly positioned as more akin to the Broadway stage or the Hollywood big screen than they were to any fundamental aspect of

television. With a feature film director like Frears and stars like Dreyfuss and Keitel, *Fail Safe* could achieve the high pedigree of a major theatrical release. It could hardly seem like television at all.

Recent experiments in theatrical liveness have also been distinguished from television in their narrative and visual styles. *Roc*'s Dutton criticized the show's writers for "writing three jokes to the page" and following "sitcom rules," making the show "more about episodes than character development." His hope was that the live season would change all of that, allowing for more in-depth characterization and references to current events, qualities he associated more with the theater than with television.¹⁹ Along similar lines, *Fail Safe*'s visual style was an explicit attempt *not* to look like live television. When interviewed about *Fail Safe*'s style, Clooney always discussed it as a distinct contrast to the live episode of *er*. Clooney argued that one of the key reasons *er*'s live episode was a disappointment was that it was shot in color, which gave it "this cheap look. Like a porno film without the sex."²⁰ He also compared the *er* broadcast to local talk shows like *Good Day L.A.*²¹ What Clooney found so objectionable in *er*'s visual style was not just the fact that it was so different from most *er* episodes, but that it looked like *video, like live television, not like film*. Film has become the much more prevalent recording medium for dramatic and comedic television—even the vast majority of sitcoms are shot on film these days. At the time of the live *er* episode, before reality television as we now know it hit in full force, the kind of television shot on video was either lower budget or live fare—soap operas, game shows, talk shows. The low-brow associations with video made *er*'s live episode distasteful to Clooney and to many others who criticized it.

Thus, to distinguish *Fail Safe* from the live *er*, from video, from the technological essence of live television, the movie was shot in black and white and letter-boxed. As Clooney explained, “If [we] do it in black-and-white and we use the right lenses and the right lighting, we can make it a lot more cinematic.”²² CLIP Unironic references to the movie’s “cinematic look” were frequent in the *Fail Safe* press coverage, as were admiring statistics on the number of sound stages (2), the number of sets (8), and the number of cameras (18). After the broadcast, coverage emphasized the impressive number of male viewers the movie attracted (increases of 60-70% over CBS’s typical share of male viewers in that time slot).²³ In the emphasis on technical virtuosity, in the distinctions between the tastefulness of cinema and the cheapness of video, and in the plot of *Fail Safe* itself (a military and political drama with an exclusively male cast), this experiment in theatrical liveness employed class and gender hierarchies to mark its distinctiveness as anti-television. In contrast, the week of live broadcasts of ABC’s daytime drama *One Life to Live* received virtually no press coverage, and certainly received none that glorified the show’s technical virtuosity or cinematic look. As a program always shot on video, with a rapid production schedule that relies on multiple camera, nearly live-on-tape shooting on a regular basis, not to mention the soaps’ association with the feminized spheres of the personal and the emotional, *One Life to Live* was not the kind of theatrical liveness that could distinguish itself as anti-television. Its version of theatrical liveness was too much like its already feminized and devalued mode of production, too much like *television* production.

Clearly, the recent experiments in theatrical liveness are constructed as important, quality television as much for the ways they defy associations with television as for the

ways they embody the long-standing liveness myth. Exactly *why* the meanings of theatrical liveness have changed with this recent generation of live shows requires further investigation. But these changes are surely linked to the many institutional, technological, aesthetic, and social changes television has faced since the medium's early days, and particularly since the 1980s, the last period before theatrical liveness made a noticeable comeback. The growth of cable and satellite delivery systems, as well as digital recording and transmission, have altered the institutional and technological bases of television production. The myth of live television signals being instantaneously beamed from station transmitter to home antenna in a series of always-in-process electronic scanning lines is a less and less accurate characterization of the process. The advent of home VCRs and, now, personal video recorders and webcasts, makes the immediacy of television liveness even more tenuous. Aesthetically, the dominance of a cinematic visual style since the 1980s—what John Caldwell has labeled “televisuality”—has changed our expectations. *ER* actor and sometime director Anthony Edwards claimed that part of the motivation for *er*'s live episode was the directors' increasingly competitive use of long takes in their filmed episodes. They thought, “Well, [these filmed long takes are] like live because you have to keep the ball floating no matter what.”²⁴ Of course, the inspiration for the long takes comes, in the first place, from cinema, with telefilm directors seeking to replicate such impressive long takes as the Copacabana scene in Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas*. Thus, while the components of televisuality may be changing since the editing and effects-heavy 1980s, a distinctly cinematic style is directly influencing even conceptions of theatrical liveness. Finally, although some of the recent attempts at theatrical liveness have been constructed as

“quality” responses to the early incursions of reality programming (one *Fail Safe* review argued that the movie demonstrated “a golden opportunity for television in its live roots—without anyone getting married on a Las Vegas stage,” a sardonic reference to *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?*), the subsequent dominance of reality liveness over theatrical liveness indicates the changing valuations of live television. The myth of liveness may carry on, but its meanings will continue to change.

¹ Herbert Zettl, “The Rare Case of Television Aesthetics,” *Journal of the University Film Association* 30:2 (Spring 1978) 3, 5.

² John Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995) 28-9.

³ Robert Vianello, “The Power Politics of ‘Live’ Television,” *Journal of Film and Video* 37:3 (Summer 1985) 34.

⁴ Jane Feuer, “The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology,” in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches—An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1983) 14, 16.

⁵ Vianello 39, 33-34.

⁶ Caldwell 31, 49.

⁷ William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990) 80.

⁸ Julia Keller, “‘Roc’ to roll ‘live’ and remember,” *Columbus Dispatch*, 9 February 1992.

⁹ Richard Huff, “‘Fail Safe’ hits live target,” *New York Daily News*, 9 April 2000.

¹⁰ Richard Eldredge, “Soap opera ‘Life’ visiting live territory,” *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 13 May 2002.

¹¹ Caldwell 49.

¹² *Ibid.* 46-47.

¹³ See Mary Ann Doane, “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe,” in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) 232 for more on this.

¹⁴ Richard Huff, “A show of bravery: ‘Drew’ is live again,” *New York Daily News*, 8 November 2000.

¹⁵ M.S. Mason, “Live TV sitcom enthralles viewers with lively intimacy,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 3 September 1992.

¹⁶ Alex Strachan, “Television without a net,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 8 April 2000.

¹⁷ Noel Holston, “‘Roc’ stresses acting,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 19 July 1992; Deborah Hastings, “Fox’s ‘Roc’ goes live,” Associated Press, 17 August 1992.

¹⁸ Huff.

¹⁹ Holston.

²⁰ Alan James Frutkin, “Clooney bets on live TV; Show to air Sunday in black and white,” *The Washington Post*, 9 April 2000.

²¹ Ellen Gray, “Fail Safe will be black and white and live all over,” *The Toronto Star*, 9 April 2000.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Richard Huff, “‘Fail Safe’ is a hit with guys,” *New York Daily News*, 11 April 2000.

²⁴ Jonathan Davies, “Season bow for NBC is a scary TV first,” *Hollywood Reporter*, 25 September 1997.