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Reality TV? Not Really, the Capital Says

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WASHINGTON

REALITY TV in Washington has always been something of an oxymoron. The nation's capital should be a reality-show casting director's playground: overwhelming power, operatic personalities, nuclear codes floating around town in a black briefcase. And who wouldn't love to watch the East Wing ladies scramble to throw together a state dinner?

There's just one problem: Someone in power, close to power or even harboring the vaguest ambitions of ever attaining power is about as likely to allow television cameras to follow her around as she is to post Facebook pictures of herself smoking a joint in a hot tub with someone distinctly not her husband. "Too dangerous," a young West Wing aide said (so dangerous, apparently, he didn't even want to be identified talking about the prospect).

That hasn't stopped producers from trying. Bravo's "Top Chef" and MTV's "Real World" both came to town recently — and left with poor ratings. And while Bravo's "Real Housewives of D.C." opened to large numbers, its "real" housewives had such peripheral connections to the city that people joked they should have been called "The Real Housewives of Woodbridge, Va."

And now, a show called "Potomac Fever" has found a home at the E! network. Rob Lowe, a former star of "The West Wing," will produce it, along with Los Angeles-based 44 Blue Productions. Vinnie Potestivo, a veteran of hit reality shows who previously ran MTV's East Coast talent development department, is the casting director. Still in the casting phase, "Potomac Fever" promises to chronicle the lives of a half-dozen ambitious young Washingtonians as they struggle to make a name for themselves inside the Beltway.

"It's not the 'Real Housewives,' it's not 'The Hills,' it's not 'Laguna Beach,'" said someone close to the show who, lacking authority to discuss it, did not want to be identified. "We're not dealing with socialites. We're not dealing with society people. We're dealing with people who are connected to politics."

As Stephanie Drachkovitch, a co-founder and executive vice president of 44 Blue, said, “There are a lot of stories to be told in D.C.”

But just whose stories will be told? The likeliest current candidates include a plucky radio D.J. (Tommy McFly), a traffic and entertainment anchor for a local CBS affiliate (Angie Goff), the daughter of the conservative journalist David Frum (Miranda Frum), the former spokesman for the Log Cabin Republicans (Charles Moran), and a Congressional staff member and Washington Wizards dancer who once made a local newspaper’s “Most Beautiful” list (Kristie Muchnok). Mr. Lowe’s political roles — recently as a Republican senator on ABC’s “Brothers and Sisters” — may have helped with his foray into Washington’s real political waters.

One Thursday evening earlier this month, a crew of Washingtonians gathered at the Meridian House, a stately cultural building in Northwest Washington, to mingle with the show’s prospective cast. The yin-yang relationship between the two coasts was on full display. After everyone had stopped fawning over Mr. Lowe, a group of media and political insiders congregated around Gene Sperling to congratulate him on his new job as President Obama’s top economic adviser. (Also notable was that Mr. Sperling had chosen to spend the evening before his official appointment at a reality-TV show party that was essentially a giant soundstage for Mr. Lowe.)

Bisnow Media, a local e-newsletter publishing company; Washington Life magazine, a lifestyle magazine that covers the city’s celebrities; and Politico, a political news organization, have all been approached by reality producers, though none seem particularly excited about participating. “The reason we have the access we do is because we’re incredibly circumspect,” said Soroush Shehabi, the publisher of Washington Life magazine. “That’s the problem with all reality TV in D.C.”

Indeed, at the Meridian House party, all but the most shameless journalists scurried to the corners of the room when the boom mike hovered too close, and most everyone fled from the man trailing behind the camera with consent forms as if he were, well, the man with consent forms.

After all, Washington is in many ways a provincial small town, where everyone knows everyone else’s business and the truly interesting parts are off-limits to cameras. Almost all good morsels of gossip are off the record.

“I’ve gone to some very small, private party events,” said Pamela Sorensen, the founder of Pamela’s Punch, a popular Washington-based social blog, “and a Colin Powell will be there, or some ambassador, and they’re making jokes and they’ll say: ‘This is off the record. You can’t write about this, don’t tweet about this, I didn’t say this,’ and you have to respect a person’s privacy so you’ll get invited back again.

“When it comes to television, unless you’re going to be on ‘Face the Nation’ or ‘Meet the Press,’ you go to New York or L.A.”

Some of the women approached for “Real Housewives,” Ms. Sorensen said, told the producers, “My husband has worked way too hard on his career to have a camera come in here.”

Capturing Washington’s inner workings may be one of the show’s biggest challenges. “It will be interesting to see who they are able to cast for the show,” said Kiki Ryan, who covers the Washington social scene for MSNBC’s bltwy.com blog, “and specifically, if they will find themselves with a similar problem to what ‘The Real Housewives of D.C.’ faced: the truly powerful women in D.C. were reluctant to open their lives up to a reality show. As we’ve seen, good drama makes for good reality television, and drama is not something powerful Washingtonians want to be associated with.”

THERE is also the old Washington-just-isn’t-all-that-cool problem. Sure, it’s a city of characters, but Washington is truly at its best — and, dare we say, coolest — when it’s allowed to be its wonky, earnest, smart, overworked, chronically exhausted, wise-cracking, hyper-educated self.

Other than the annual White House Correspondents’ Association dinner (happily nicknamed the “nerd prom”), establishment Washington does not have a particularly wild party scene. At least not an on-the-record wild party scene. After all, Lindsay Lohan stumbling around drunk in Los Angeles could still conceivably fall in the “any publicity is good publicity” category; if Nancy Pelosi did the same thing, it would most likely be a career-ender.

Still, the producers of “Potomac Fever,” who have been working on the show for more than a year, seem determined to offer a sparkling glimpse of this city. An early questionnaire they sent to some potential cast members asks questions that are both earnest and amusing: “Is your life fabulous? What charities, parties, groups are you involved in besides your job? What has the new administration meant to the city? To you personally?”

“How do you represent the Washington Lifestyle?” the form also asks.

It is a question yet to be answered.