Daytime Trauma

Today’s episode: “Hetero hussy has HIV”

April 1, 1998 By River Huston

I got screwed. You’d think I’d be happy after all this time, but it’s not what you’re thinking. I’m talking about something way more shocking than me and my man getting it on. I’m talking daytime TV.

Have you ever wondered where the people on these salacious talk shows come from? Husbands who wear lacy G-strings to work, obese teenage daughters who seduce their fathers, plastic surgeons who’ve mutilated breasts while eating sushi in the operating room. Right this way ...

My alleged role on the chatfest was author promoting her book about women and HIV. The producers promised that the issue would be handled responsibly. Everyone I trust -- from my lawyer to my publicist to the lady who waxes my legs -- swore that the daytime diva in question did not lurk in the common cesspool of talk-show hosts.

Now I know the process by which talk-show guests become so vulnerable: The producers hire special people to break you down. First, you must arrive at the studio six hours before show time, and are put in a tiny room, alone, just you and a package of stale Ho Hos. When you leave the room in search of human contact, the producers go berserk. They are afraid you’ll conspire with the other guests -- it’s divide and conquer, baby.

The next step in deconstructing emotions is hair-and-makeup. I had already put on my face, but the makeup lady insisted on a touch-up. She binged on the liquid eyeliner -- she was going for the tart look. And the hairdresser had a few kinks to iron out -- namely, my hair. When I fluffed up my newly flattened ’do, she turned into a coif cop and threatened me with a can of hairspray.

Then came the lawyers. What’s more nerve-racking than legalese? To ensure that you won’t bring an injunction against the show after it airs and you’ve been completely humiliated, you must sign a 10-page contract in front of a video camera and repeat three times, “I am here of my own free will.”

Finally, after hours of captivity, the big moment: Le host appears. By now, you must be beside yourself with wonder. Was it Jerry Springer? Jenny Jones? No, too obvious. It was none other than Montel from Hell. As he announced that he’s done more AIDS shows than Oprah and that the purpose of this one was To Save Lives, the other guests and I were herded onto the set, to the

tune from *Love Story*.

Right away, Montel pressed the first guest, a woman profiled in my book, about how she contracted HIV: “So, would you say you were more or less promiscuous than your friends? Exactly how many people have you slept with?” To add insult to injury, the caption under her name read “Infected With HIV Through Heterosexual Sex” in lurid red. Call me naïve, but I still assumed that I was there to promote my book. Period.

It all started innocently enough. Chatting sprightly about why I wrote the book, I explained the need to humanize the plight of women and HIV -- when suddenly Montel pounced. "Isn’t there a *special* reason why you wrote the book?" I knew what he was after, and once I’d disclosed my status, he pulled out the full arsenal -- dead husband and all. These people do their research.

After I told my story (and even got a little choked up about it), I realized I’d been set up as another victim selling daytime soap. Suddenly I had empathy for all the gabbing guests who came before me -- crying, screaming, lobbing chairs, wedding their serial-killer lovers. At first I imagined that I had lost a rare opportunity to address the issue of women and HIV on national TV. But as I sat under the hot studio lights, in front of all those looks of pity, it dawned on me: That chance never existed. Strength, responsibility and a sense of humor about living with HIV don’t sell.

I managed to redeem myself in the last 30 seconds of my sob story. Grabbing my book from Montel’s hands, I pronounced my three practiced sound bites: “Women are the fastest-growing population to get infected with HIV. We can no longer look at high-risk groups and behaviors, just the facts: If you let semen, vaginal secretions, blood or breast milk enter the bloodstream through the rectum, vagina or mouth, you are at risk. This isn’t about someone else -- this is about your mother, your aunt, your sister ... yourself.”

Walking off the set, I knew it would take a long, hot shower to make me feel clean again. And to top it off, I still needed a cold shower.

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