

## AN EXCERPT FROM "I PARTICIPATE IN TV STUDIO AUDIENCES"

by Kevin Collier

*Kevin Collier sits in on a variety of TV shows and finds out the hidden cost of getting to watch a Howie Mandel or a Paula Deen for free. His article appears in the Arts Two section of the Panorama.*

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### MAURY

*Studio location:* 33rd Street at 7th Avenue, NYC (In May 2009, the studio moved to 307 Atlantic Street, Stamford, CT)

*Concept:* Maury Povich uses boot camps, lie detectors, and makeovers to help some of America's most desperate families

The first thing you notice going into *Maury* (formerly *The Maury Povich Show*) is how very little goes into the set. When I went, it was located in the ninety-year-old Hotel Pennsylvania, near New York's Penn Station. The bathroom for guests was in the basement of the hotel, and is frequented by the homeless. The set itself looked shoddy, with faux-brick walls. We sat in stackable chairs on risers. An electronic remix of Rihanna's "Umbrella" played on a loop. Maury comes out to adoring fanfare. Audience members run onstage to hug him, and he is happy to oblige. I get the impression that the people in his crowds come again and again.

He carries an ironic smile that implies he's in on the joke. He spits out aphorisms like "When times are good, I'll have a forty-ounce."

The episode's theme is a common one: Baby Mama Drama, known for the tagline "You are NOT the father!" A couple comes to Maury with a dispute or doubt about their child's parenthood, and airs their dirty laundry on the show in exchange for a free paternity test.

A woman named Forever struts onto the stage, dressed to impress. Maury introduces her. "I call her Forever. But she says it's 'Fo'Eva.'" She has three kids, two of whom, Eternity and Christopher, have joined her on previous episodes in unsuccessful attempts at identifying their biological fathers. Her youngest child is a boy named Cincere. This is, Maury points out, her sixth time on the show. Two of those prior times were to test a man named

Terrence against her two older children; both tests came up negative. Terrence is on the show today, too, this time to test his DNA against Cincere.

Maury calls for Terrence, who comes out with arms spread triumphantly. The crowd loves him. He and Forever spar in the expected way:

T: Get it through your head that there's no way I'm any of these babies' father! I'm never gonna get with your skanky ass!

F: As soon as we left the last show, you were all up in this coochie! You're messed up.

T: Your shoes are messed up!

Audience: Ooooh!

According to Terrence, he and Forever didn't have sex anywhere near the time she would have gotten pregnant with Cincere, so Forever isn't on the show for truth and child support—only to smear him.

Maury stands back and lets them spar for a few minutes before interrupting with a manila envelope containing the paternity-test results. He waits a few suspenseful seconds. Terrence looks supremely confident, for good reason. "In the case of five-month-old Cincere," Maury roars, "Terrence, you are NOT the father!" Terrence shoots out of his chair, grinning. He runs into the audience, high-fiving and hugging people. Meanwhile, Forever runs offstage. A camera follows her, and we watch on a monitor as she collapses in the hallway, sobbing. Maury cuts to commercial and begins chatting with the audience—"Can you believe she's had him on this show for three different kids?"—before noticing the booming sound coming from the monitors. Forever's mic is apparently still clipped to her shirt, and she's sobbing directly into it. It's a good five seconds before someone cuts the sound. Maury excuses himself and goes to talk to her.

When he comes back, he introduces another young mother and the man she claims is her baby's daddy. It's essentially the same story. After it's

announced, once again, that the man is not the father, the second woman runs into the hallway and collapses. She doesn't sob into her mic or get consoled by Maury, though, and so the monitor cuts the image of her and we move on.

Having wrapped enough material for an episode, Maury addresses us. "We've got a whole 'nother episode of Baby Mama Drama coming up next. But in the meantime, we're going to take you outside, feed you pizza, and bring you back in!" We cheer and line up to exit.

Staff members escort us out. A long line of new people, roughly enough to fill all the seats in the audience, stretches out the door. I ask a security guard if we have to get in the back of the line.

"Yeah," he replies.

"These people have been waiting. We can't promise you seats." "Where's the free pizza?" I ask.

"What are you talking about? There's no food," he says. Then he closes the door in my face.

Maury, you slick bastard.