

Colombia's class wars now on TV

A Colombian television station tested viewers' taste with a reality show depicting class warfare.

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BOGOTA - As far as reality TV goes, this one may be too real.

Colombia's Caracol station, seeking to raise the stakes of television's *Survivor* franchise, is pitting lower-, middle- and upper-class groups against one another in one of its shows.

"This *Survivor* intends to show that people aren't born, they are made," hostess Margarita Rosa de Francisco said when she introduced the show, evoking the notion that life is a meritocracy.

But in a place with a large concentration of wealth in few hands, half the population living below the poverty line and a four-decades-old war between Marxist guerrillas and the government tearing the country asunder, some believe that the show is in bad taste.

"It's difficult to see what values they're promoting with a war between social classes," said Omar Rincón, a communications professor and TV critic at the country's largest newspaper, *El Tiempo*. "Everything has become a joke. We look at war between social classes and we see it as entertainment."

AT THE TOP

The show has been at the top of the ratings from the onset, perhaps, in part, because it has pushed the stereotypes. There was Cathryn "Cathy" Salazar, the rich girl who spent most of her childhood in Miami and inherited a bar.

"To live without a shower," she says during the introductions, "I'd rather starve."

She would get her chance.

On the other side was Tatiana Rueda, a poor jewelry maker who left her home at 14 and has three children.

In between was Jorge Pelaez, a middle-class accountant who "fought" his way through life.

The producers named the three teams "privileged," "searchers" and "screwed," and sent them to separate beaches in the Dominican Republic, where the show is being shot: a "high-class" beach with resort-like conditions; a "middle-class" beach with an austere but livable environment; and a "low-class" beach with few resources or food and a rocky cave to sleep in.

Then, as if by magic, or editing, the contestants seemed to play their roles to perfection.

TRADING PLACES

The privileged initially lapped up wine, then got whipped in the first challenge and landed on the low-class beach, where they spent the next several days scrambling for food and complaining.

The middle-class searchers won the first few challenges and seemed to get along with everyone except themselves.

The poor, with the only Afro-Colombian competitors, were loud and crude to one another, and when they won a stay on the top beach, they got drunk.

'Long live the `screwed,' " Rueda yelled from her perch on a table.

One of the show's creators and producers, Raul García, acknowledged the show sought to exploit the stereotypes.

"I wanted people who spoke and who represented the category they were in," he told The Miami Herald.

To achieve their goal, the producers asked one question during casting: Why are there so many poor people in Colombia?

"The guy who tries to take the middle ground, you get rid of him," García said. ``The first rule of casting: that your personality has to be your personality."

So far, the producers have gotten what they wanted. The colorful cast has punched and kicked their way through the challenges, then insulted one another, often referring to each other as "snobs" or ``crass."

"I never want to be like them," Rueda said of the privileged. ``They'll never change their thinking."

But some competitors soon began referring to each other by the assigned colors of the teams rather than the class names the producers gave them.

"This game is like a utopian dream, because every day you have a chance to remake yourself," said Juan Guillermo Zea, a lawyer from the privileged team, after he was ousted.

IT'S ABOUT RATINGS

García said the show has had to face the reality that it needs good ratings to stay on the air. He added that reality TV always seeks to create a soap-opera-type atmosphere, and he has no apologies for the mixed messages sent by the \$150,000 prize to be given to one competitor at the end, hardly an illustration of class unity or human values.

But he added that at least this reality show can make people think.

"We didn't create this to send a social message," he said. ``And if this has made people discuss the subject, well, we welcome that."

And discuss they have. Following a report on newsweekly *Semana's* website, Colombians ripped into the show.

"It's incredible that Caracol is not measuring the impact of its actions," wrote one person who called himself Oscar. ``Creating a rivalry between classes is irresponsible when what the country needs is to break down these absurd walls."

Another writer added: ``Unfortunately, this is what they call entertainment television. I can see that the next reality will be a competition between whites, blacks and Indians. Then another between Catholics, Protestants and atheists."

In fact, a new CBS *Survivor* season in the United States will pit blacks, whites, Asians and Hispanics against one another.

Still, Caracol is happy. In fact, it's using the show to launch its new station in Miami, WGEN. Coming soon to your TV sets, with slightly softer definitions: the "privileged," the "fighters" and the "challenged."