

CBS Tries a Dutch TV Treat

By Christopher Dickey and Marc Peyser

John de Mol fires up another Marlboro Light and considers what we might call the Gladiator Paradigm. De Mol is the Dutch producer behind the quasi-reality show "Big Brother", set to debut on CBS this week. Ten strangers are locked in a house for 89 days. Every minute of their waking, sleeping, bitching, loving, nose-picking lives is recorded by 28 cameras and 60 microphones – until, one by one, they're voted off the show by the viewers. Thumps up, let'em live. Thumbs down, they're out of the house – the coliseum connection. You get the impression there's nothing de Mol wouldn't consider. "I am 100 percent sure that if we announce a show where we say we'll take 10 people and put them in an airplane and there are nine parachutes and one person is probably going to die and the nine who will live all get \$1 million," De Mol says, stubbing out his latest cigarette, "we will get enough contestants for a daily show."

Not that he's going to try it. Besides, the formula de Mol has with "Big Brother" works just fine. It's been a phenomenon in the Netherlands (where it was the most popular show of 1999), Germany (where it was nearly banned for "violating the participants' human dignity") and Spain (where its ratings topped big-league soccer). It'll be in 25 countries by next year. CBS is hoping "Big Brother" will be irresistible enough to lock in audiences for an unprecedented five shows a week for 18 weeks. And that's just on TV. Viewers will also be able to see every move the contestants make on the Internet, which will broadcast from the 1,800 square-foot house 24 hours a day. CBS says its network standards will be in force on the Netcasts, so there will be no nudity – despite the cameras in the shower and toilet. "That's not to show people *going* to the bathroom. It's to prevent people from *meeting* in the bathroom," says Leslie Moonves, president of CBS Television. While some industry watchers say that the amazing success of CBS's other European import – "Survivor" – will make it harder for "Big Brother" to break through, Moonves says the opposite is true. "If 'Survivor' had failed, it wouldn't have boded well for 'Big Brother,'" says Moonves who paid de Mol about \$20 million for the show. " 'Survivor' shows that this genre can work with the American public."

De Mol says the "Big Brother" idea came to him three years ago at the end of a late-night brainstorming session, after several drinks, when someone mentioned Biosphere II. Remember those folks locked in that greenhouse, pretending they were on another planet? "Thinking back on Biosphere was 'the big flash,'" says de Mol, "and, well, the idea was born." (...)

De Mol got his start in the media as a gopher with one of the private "pirate" radio stations that used to operate on the North Sea. Gradually he worked his way up, building a production company. His co-workers say de Mol is often the last man to leave their modern offices at night, and personally turns off the lights. But the best indication of the man and his vision is probably the list of other shows he's been developing since the success of "Big Brother". There's "The Bus" in which a group rides around in, yes, a bus, and a referee throws them off one by one. In "Chains of Love," a man or woman gets to pick four members of the opposite sex. The five of them are then chained together for a week, and their adventures aired each night. De Mol reluctantly agreed that contestants could be unchained for a trip to the bathroom. But the entire experience is videotaped. And each day, a contestant is taken off the show. And then there's "Money for Your Life," in which average-guy contestants were given a camera, some training and an editor who would help them record their quotidian lives. The most dramatic moment came when one contestant, a woman carrying triplets, gave birth. Because of a doctor's mistake, one of the triplets died. "The anger and the grief these people had was ... fascinating," says de Mol. No doubt the ratings were, too.

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TRAVAIL A EFFECTUER

- 1) Faire un compte rendu en français du texte (250 à 300 mots). (8 points)
- 2) Traduire le paragraphe en grisé, de " While some industry watchers... " à "... for the show. "
(4 points)
- 3) Répondre en anglais aux questions suivantes. (8 points)
 - 3.1) Why do shows such as " Big Brother " fascinate audiences worldwide in your opinion ?
(50 words)
 - 3.2) Do you think de Mol is admirable (as a highly successful professional) or contemptible
(as a character of dubious motivation) ? (60 words)

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