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## Review/Television; A Soap Opera Based on Reality Moves to L.A.

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

Now beginning a second season, "The Real World," on MTV, doesn't really mean to be real. Its official label is "reality-based soap opera." One creator, Mary-Ellis Bunin, is a veteran producer from network daytime dramas.

But the series, Thursdays at 10 P.M., with weekend repeats, does star real people -- nonactors -- gathered together for several months, their triumphs and crises followed by cameras for up to 75 hours a week, both in their communal house and on related locations. All participants, unknown to one another before, are, of course, young (and generally attractive) adults. Think of an extended adventure at Club Med.

On its initial go-around, "The Real World" was shot in a loft in downtown Manhattan. The recruited roommates, male and female, black and white, encompassed a broad spectrum of artistic aspirations: modeling, writing poetry, performing rock music and rap, painting, dancing. The problem: real people are indeed real people and, without scripts, tend to lead messy, unpredictable lives. And more significant, some are more telegenic than others.

Reunited for last week's premiere of the second season, the New York cast did its best to sound cheerful, but the undercurrent of grumbling was unmistakable. Of them all, only one, Eric, the former model, ended up with something tangible: an on-camera job with MTV. Most of the others appeared resentful because they felt reduced to supporting players as the series increasingly focused on Eric and Julie, the youngest of the lot, who was coming to the Big Apple for the first time. On the other hand, Julie was not thrilled with Eric's success, noting pointedly, "I don't think he's grown a lot in the last year." New York is a tough town.

That is undoubtedly one reason "The Real World" has decided to move to Los Angeles or, more specifically, to a \$2 million, three-story, 6,000-square-foot beach house in the toney neighborhood of Venice Beach. The high-tech wireless production equipment includes ceiling microphones and tapped telephones throughout the house. There's a pool table, hot tub, a roof garden and a cool decorator look.

In short, the seven young adults recruited for this "Real World" outing will be living in an environmental space with about as much connection to most people's real world as "Dynasty." At least this time, the cast represents a broader cross section of types. Not much New York artsy stuff for the California crowd. One black woman, a Muslim, works at an H.I.V. center. A Hispanic woman is a deputy marshal for Los Angeles County, where she met her boyfriend (paving the way for "The Real World" to have what every soap opera covets: a wedding). There is a young Republican terribly unhappy about George Bush's losing the election and a former firefighter who is a lesbian.

In tonight's episode, the series is still busy introducing the main players. But it's already clear that some will be more camera-friendly than others. Born and reared in Dublin, hard-drinking and hard-smoking Dominic is, when not tending bar, a freelance music critic with a sharp tongue. And Jon, at 18 the youngest, is a country singer from Kentucky who's a smash in Owensboro but something of a lost waif in Los Angeles. One already established plot line involves the possibility of Jon's losing his virginity, something he, as a God-fearing Christian, is not eager to do.

Shaped by directors and camera people, given the familiar MTV gloss of breathless pacing and quick edits, "The Real World" is a relentlessly artificial concept. That is often the nature of "reality" on television. Accepting that, viewers can sit back and enjoy the carefully cultivated performances, keeping them in skeptical perspective. The Real World MTV,

tonight at 10 Directed by George Verschoor and Bruce Toms and produced by Mr. Verschoor. Oskar Dektyar, Alan Cohn and Jason Sands, editors; Robert Fisher, story editor; Van Carlson, director of photography; Lisa Berger, co-executive in charge of production; Lauren Corrao, executive in charge of production; Mary-Ellis Bunin and Jonathan Murray, executive producers.