

CBS's new "Reality TV" series *Survivor* demonstrates that a detached, anthropological look at naked greed and half-naked campers makes for a mighty silly show.

*Survivor* - which has surpassed ABC's once-mighty *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* in the ratings - pits 16 strangers together on a deserted island off the coast of Borneo. So far they have survived on a steady diet of roasted rats. Whoever holds out the longest wins \$1m.

The rules of the game require the players periodically to vote members off the island, on any basis they desire: too annoying, too unskilled as a hunter.

I don't know what happens to the banished: are they slaughtered for their fire-starting eyeglasses, or do they go deep into the jungle and try to convince a group of natives to make gods of them?

The strategy is a delicate dance: each player must try to wear down the other competitors, yet without generating enough antagonism to get voted off the island. (CBS. Aired Wednesdays at 8pm ET/PT.)

Reality-based television does require some contrivance, but it need not be of this "what if a space alien were holding a gun to your head" variety. A case in point is the cute, campy premise of *1900 House*, a Channel 4 import airing on PBS.

The programme installs one ordinary modern English family, the Bowlers, in a moderately appointed late Victorian home, and requires them to live as though they were a middle-class British family in the year 1900.

The family members must forswear any item or activity not appropriate to that lifestyle: their larder is limited to a half-dozen unimaginative ingredients, primarily starches and dried currants. The father nearly bleeds to death trying to shave with a straight razor.

## TELEVISION EUNY HONG KORAL

# Reality with a stiff upper lip

It was the mother's idea to audition her family for the show even though the strictures included compliance to Victorian gender roles. She took a leave of absence from her job to play housewife for the three-month experiment, and kept her three

pre-menstrual syndrome.

This is *1900 House*, not *1900 Bank* or *1900 Military*, so it is unsurprising that domestic roles become an explosive issue for the Bowler family.

As Mother Bowler bitterly observes during one of her several meltdowns, her

## '1900 House' is a compelling illustration of the differences between British and US television

daughters home from school on wash day.

There really are people who romanticise the aesthetic and ideals of an era during which it was considered a virtue to make sacrifices for the good of the Empire. (PBS. Monday, June 26, and Monday, July 3 at 9pm ET. Check local listings. Parts One and Two have already aired.)

*1900 House* is a compelling illustration of the enduring differences between British and US television. The former remains at once more discreet and more candid than the latter. *1900 House*, for example, lacks the catfights and sex talk of US reality-based TV shows such as *Survivor* or MTV's *The Real World*; on the other hand, the British series includes a frank discussion of urination and feminine hygiene. The latter consists of a demonstration of the girls assembling their own sanitary napkins followed by a vivid description of these items' inefficacy.

A prime-time, non-news American network programme would never include any discussion of menstruation, unless it were some joke about

husband's life has scarcely changed except in the outward details: "Oh, poor little man cut himself shaving because he can't use a safety razor!"

Unlike the rest of his family, Father Bowler has not been asked to make concessions in his daytime activities. He goes to his regular military desk job, even taking business trips, and is able to act almost as if he is not part of the experiment at all.

The Bowlers' nine-year-old boy, Joseph, didn't take well to the bland food, but otherwise his burden has been light, with his proper Victorian sisters relieving him of most chores. Moreover, being a young boy, he didn't mind the shortage of hot water and soap in the slightest.

One of the startling effects of the experiment is the effortlessness with which the two Bowler males took to their master roles. Just a few weeks after moving into *1900 House*, the household maid confides to the camera that even the nine-year-old boy has taken to speaking condescendingly to her and addressing her as "Maid".

The lye-laden laundry soap rubs Mother Bowler's hands so raw that they are unable to produce natural body oils. Her devotion to Victoriana goes so far that she continues to wear a corset even after the production's physician tells her it is impairing her health. The Bowlers have placed the Victorian aesthetic ideal over personal comfort; the only time I've seen such fanaticism is with American Civil War re-enactors.

There's no big money prize for the Bowlers; the only reward is a stiff upper lip, but then again, entire civilisations were built on that.

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