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Richie Wilcox

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# My Life as a Celetoid: Reflections on *Canadian Idol*

by Richie Wilcox

In 2003, I was within the top eleven finalists in the premiere season of *Canadian Idol*. I lived in a mansion in Toronto for the summer, signed autographs for adoring fans, and attended numerous fancy private events. My face was featured on the cover of a gold-selling compilation album alongside the other ten finalists that year. *Canadian Idol* quickly transformed my life—and gave me the life of a celebrity during that time. But who did this fifteen minutes of fame belong to?

In her rich and informative article “Reality TV Formats: The Case of *Canadian Idol*,” Doris Bultruschat pinpoints a specific process of transformation as the major component of reality television programming. This manipulative process is referred to as the “transformation of characters”—characters being “actual” individuals in the majority of reality television programs—from ordinary members of the general public to new-found celebrities. This transformation can be achieved in a variety of ways, depending on the particular reality show. But as Bultruschat explains, it serves as “an integral part of most narrative structures” in this specific genre (Bultruschat 44). The transformation reaches full fruition when the everyday participant morphs into a superstar, thereby reaching the status of “celetoid,” a term coined by Chris Rojek to describe the short-lived stardom attained by reality television participants (Rojek 20). Bultruschat outlines specific steps utilized by Insight, the production company behind *Canadian Idol*, which helped ensure a transformation in the contestants on the show. These steps included emphasizing the ordinariness of the person, “the application of consumer products to enhance a character’s physical appearance,” the “intervention by experts” who come in the form of a judging panel in *Canadian Idol*, and “the incitement of ‘buzz’ around the shows” (Bultruschat 43,





Season One Canadian Idol Top 11 Finalists.  
Courtesy *ctv.ca*

44). By comparing my personal experiences on *Canadian Idol* with this detailed analysis of the tactics used to transform one into a celebrity, I hope to give insight into the celestoid experience as well as expose how the public transformation leads to a more difficult and, decidedly, more lasting private transformation.

In order to transform into a *Canadian Idol*, it is helpful if you are the farthest possible image away from it. The more extreme the change, the stronger the impact will have on the public as it creates an engaging storyline and boasts a newly remodeled product. Therefore, the introduction of the participants and the specific details of their lives that are emphasized tend to highlight the everyday aspects of each one. At least, this is what definitely occurred in my case. First, the motivation to audition for *Canadian Idol* is relatively the same for each participant: everyone has a drive to be a star and only needs the opportunity to show their talent for that transformation to take place. This is highlighted by the program through numerous clips of potential *Idols* stating their wishes and dreams of fame before the camera. Hal Niedxviecki emphasizes the similarity in motivation through his interviews with numerous auditioners, as all of them stated “that they had a good chance, that they had what it takes to be famous, and that singing was their dream” (Niedxviecki R7).

Let it be clear that I had none of these thoughts. I had been approached by *The Coast*, a weekly alternative newspaper in Halifax, to write an article on the experience of auditioning for *Canadian Idol*. Prior to this, the idea of auditioning had not entered my mind. At the time, I was a budding theatre actor and director fresh out of theatre school. I had co-founded my

own independent theatre company, *Angels & Heroes*, and was working at a dinner theatre in short stints. I had numerous stage experiences and was heavily involved in the theatre scene in Halifax. My one and only singing gig was getting together with friends to belt out tunes at a weekly karaoke night. *Canadian Idol* emphasized none of the above. My joe job as an assistant manager at an Italian deli was the occupation advertised to the national audience. The choice to ignore my artistic endeavours and emphasize my food service job supports Bultruschat’s step of advertising the ordinary aspects of a person. The show helped create the image of a common “everyday” person by molding the character of “Richie Wilcox” into an assistant deli manager, rather than a theatre artist—thereby hyperbolizing the future transformation process. This character would not only transform into a star, but would also make the huge leap from sandwich maker to artist.

This emphasis on the ordinary is also stressed by the regionalism in *Canadian Idol*.

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Although I had lived in Halifax for over five years, I became the contestant from Cape Breton, as producers found out that I was born in New Waterford, NS (along the eastern shore of Cape Breton Island). This yet again positioned me as an extreme contrast against the assumed image of a *Canadian Idol* celebrity; the Cape Breton label conjured up stereotypical images of miners and fisherman living in an economically depressed part of the country. The Cape Breton connection allowed for further potential transformation as the rural character “Richie Wilcox” would transition into the urban setting of Toronto. It is important to recognize that both the job and birthplace are factual, but within this context and focused spotlight they served not only as facts, but also as definitions. These carefully chosen definitions forthrightly ignored anything that might have been looked at as out of the ordinary and helped strengthen the commonalities between viewers and the participant.



Once the ordinary image of the contestant has been established, the transformation process can begin. This step relies heavily on the physical appearance and vanity of each participant. The overall goal, of course, is to take the everyday looking person and make them glamorous. The most famous example of this in *Idol* history would have to be the transformation of a nerdy skinny redhead into a leather-jacket wearing heartthrob named Clay Aiken. *Canadian Idol* was no stranger to this step as its sponsor, L'Oreal, played a large role in this makeover party. The top eleven finalists



The press shot for "Richie Wilcox."  
Courtesy *ctv.ca*

in Season One were regularly whisked away to a smaller studio to film L'Oreal segments that would be featured in the episodes between songs. While the segments featured *Idol* contestants getting tips from L'Oreal stylists, it mainly served as a commercial for L'Oreal products.

This "key element in the transformation process" left me relatively unfazed, as far as L'Oreal was involved (Baltruschat 44). I quickly learned that being a bald male had its advantages. The L'Oreal products, such as eyeliner, shimmery lip gloss and hair gel were not directed toward me and could not be demonstrated on me. Other contestants continued their transformation by obtaining new make-up and hairstyles, care of L'Oreal, while my physical attributes were left to fend for themselves. Of course, the show did get to design my character by having a personal shopper outfit me for major events. As well, numerous free gifts such as sunglasses and shirts were

handed over to us, knowing full well that we would wear these expensive treats. L'Oreal may not have transformed me, but the producers of the show still managed to leave their fingerprints all over my style.

Baltruschat views "the intervention of experts, often in the form of judging panels" as another integral narrative device in the transformative process (Baltruschat 44). She focuses on how the judges can shape the story of the character and help lead the participant from ordinary to extraordinary. This step, undoubtedly the simplest of them all, is very

influential in the entire process. The public may vote to decide on the winner of *Canadian Idol*, but the judges' opinions carry much weight in how each participant is perceived by the viewers. Just as a person's occupation and birthplace can define who you are, any comment uttered by a judge can immediately and definitively shape your character for the public. After singing a version of "Your Smiling Face" by James Taylor, I received comments from the judges and host that made reference to my smile, as well as a mysterious "X factor" that I possessed. These remarks were, of course, picked up by the media and printed in newspapers across the country and repeated on numerous radio shows. My character now included smiling as a major trait and a mystery element that no one could explain. These characteristics, which were pointed out by the judging panel, now replaced the audience's previous perception of Richie Wilcox. The image of Richie Wilcox, which had been somewhat manipulated and transformed through material goods, had now been given a defined personality as well, albeit a rather limited and vague one.

The final step in the transformation process was the addition of "buzz." The hype surrounding a show is what brings the manipulated character to the level of stardom. The attention from the media was

outstanding, since it was the debut season of *Canadian Idol*. In addition to the television episodes, there were numerous newspaper articles, radio interviews, editorial cartoons, advertisements, and high-profile events, which allowed little chance for anyone in Canada to bypass the phenomenon of *Canadian Idol*. As the first season continued, episode viewing gained momentum with almost "3.6 million viewers for the closing section and winner announcement on *Canadian Idol* in 2003" (Baltruschat 48). The buzz and fan base *Canadian Idol* generated ensured that participants would have their proverbial fifteen minutes of fame. The obvious catch was that these fifteen minutes of fame were designed for the character that the television show molded and created. The product of transformation, the character of Richie Wilcox, was the one who achieved fame.

Although an individual's public transformation is a key

factor in creating the *Idol* image, the end product relies more heavily on the public's changing perception of, rather than on any actual changes in, the individual. After all, the packaging of the characters is what sells the idea that they are famous. And *Idol* is an expert celebrity-making machine. By following the appropriate steps you can make anyone into a star.

The interesting part about living the life of a celetoid is that you are living on a see-saw. Half of the time the franchise looks after you and keeps you in the luxurious spotlight while the other half of the time you are left on your own, ignored by the company and discarded back into everyday life. This is quite different from the perception held by many members of the public who believe when you are a celebrity, you must be living a celebrity life all of the time. In fact, at times it seems like the influence and power of said transformation is felt most by the viewer, while the participant (i.e. myself), can still feel quite grounded and unchanged. The following interaction happened on Queen St. W. in Toronto after I had been eliminated from the competition. A stranger in a cab spotted me walking and decided to yell his support out the window. He proceeded to stop and exit the cab to get my autograph, as well as a personal answering machine message recorded by yours truly. To top it all off, the man told me that in that year alone he had met Annie Lennox, Will from *Will & Grace* (Eric McCormack), and now me.

I bring forth this rather funny memory not to relive glory days, but to show the absurdity of my so-called transformation into stardom. The *Idol* franchise had fully succeeded in turning this Cape-Breton-born-assistant-manager-of-a-deli into a person with enough celebrity status to be equated with bona fide stars that have experienced far more than fifteen minutes of fame. By treating me with such exuberant admiration, this stranger, whether he knew it or not, was just re-affirming to himself that anyone can be a celebrity. The truth of the matter was that I was completely on my own at that point without an *Idol* chauffeur, wearing my own clothes, and visiting my family. The see-saw between reality television and reality had already begun. I highly doubt this person would still place my celetoid persona alongside the likes of Annie Lennox, now that years have passed and the phenomenon of that *Idol* season is dead.

The public transformation that Baltruschat expertly relays in her article is one that may last long in the public eye, but it is the private transformation that *Canadian Idol* (and theoretically



Wilcox performing on Canadian Idol.  
Courtesy ctv.ca

all reality shows) instigates in each participant that potentially has a more lasting effect. While the viewer tends to see the newly transformed *Idol* as a neatly defined famous package, the participant must deal with the loss of fame in the post-*Idol* phase. The transformation from public figure to “ordinary” self is one that can take some participants a long time to complete. Many participants can try to be the manipulated character created by *Canadian Idol* for as long as that ride will last. There are others who latch onto their fame and cannot or choose not to properly adjust their new lifestyle. These transitions can include a desperation where individuals cling to their celetoid personas and try to live beyond their means. The private transformation can also be a simple one where a quick switch is made back into what life was like before participating in the television show. However, the public that expects more of an *Idol* and wants the *Idol*'s fame to continue prospering makes this

transformation difficult. All of this is experienced with little contact from the people who actually placed the individual on this pedestal of fame. The private transformation is more significant because individuals are forced to examine who they are, how they perceive their own identities and how they wish others to perceive them in reality, not reality television. As their celetoid experience and character dissipates, contestants

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make a choice about how they will continue to live and represent themselves, all on their own, which in turn educates these individuals in what they value most in themselves.

The private transformation process is one that can resurface repeatedly and force the individuals to once again revisit who they are and measure themselves up against a character they once portrayed. Each time a fan recognizes participants and asks them about their singing career, the ex-reality stars and their choices are put to a test—what did you do with your fame? I tend to side with Will Manley’s comment that we “have a moral obligation to step aside and allow some other nobodies to enjoy the spotlight for 15 minutes” as we all know that “celebrity is false, ephemeral, and fleeting” (Manley 621). A celetooid is only allowed so much time in the spotlight. Of course, just when you think your life as a celetooid has passed, you end up writing an article about your experience six years later, or you sing a song for a friend at a wedding.

And sure enough, the character of “Richie Wilcox” is at the forefront again.

*Richie Wilcox* is a PhD candidate in Theatre Studies at York University. This freelance director shares most of his time between Angels & Heroes, the Halifax company he co-founded, and Festival Antigonish Summer Theatre.

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