

# On the Prowl for Cheaters. And Ratings.

By Joe Rhodes

We've been sitting here -- in the post-thunderstorm humidity of a Houston summer evening -- for nearly an hour and a half, a dozen proud Americans hunkered down in two unmarked white vehicles, engines idling, in the dead-grass driveway of the Shady Acres Church of Christ; about as inconspicuous as a presidential motorcade. Just down the block, if everything goes as scheduled, a used car salesman is about to cheat on his wife.

After which we will leap out of our vehicles, descending upon him and his floozy, an avenging army of bright lights, big furry microphones and video cameras, crusaders for love, justice and advertising revenue, bearing down so fast that he won't know what hit him. Unless it's his wife, Sylvia, who is right there with us, ready to be outraged, hurt and angry, just as soon as the director says, "Go."

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For those of you concerned that pulp television had gone as low as it could go, who found Jerry Springer too erudite and "Chains of Love" too tame, we have reassuring news. The barrel is apparently bottomless. As evidence, we present "Cheaters," a weekly syndicated hour-long program in which unfaithful partners are followed by actual hidden-camera-wielding private detectives who capture them on



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videotape doing their loved ones wrong.

When the cheaters are confronted on camera –usually in the parking lot of a pool hall, fast-food restaurant or pawn shop -- there is screaming and lying and lots of bleeped-out dirty words while the “Cheaters” security force – big, burly off-duty lawmen who often wear cowboy hats – makes sure no one gets their lights punched out. Then come stammering wide-eyed denials, even when the incriminating video evidence is shown to the philanderer, who then switches his defense to something along the lines of , “You had me followed? How could you do that to me? Don’t you trust me?”

“Cheaters,” already airing in 80 percent of the country’s television markets, mostly in late-night weekend time slots, is formatted like a low-rent detective mystery. Every segment begins with a case file, every aggrieved lover is referred to as “the client,” every low down dirty two-timer as “the suspect.” The stubble-faced host, Tommy Grand, always dressed in black, tries to look like a street-smart private eye -- tall, dark and glowering, an effect that is considerably diminished by the fact that he sounds almost exactly like Mr. Rogers.

“I hate to have to show you this,” Grand will invariably say, right before shoving a palm-sized video viewfinder in front of the already-

tearful “client” so she can watch footage of her husband/boyfriend with his hands all over some big-haired hussy. Then Grand puts his arm around her (more than 70 percent of the clients are women), looks reassuringly into her eyes and says, “We happen to know that they’re together right now. Would you like to confront him? Would you like to ask him, ‘Why?’”

This is also a good question for “Cheaters’ creator and executive producer Bobby Goldstein, a 43-year-old disgraced former divorce lawyer from Dallas, who came up with this idea even before a 1998 jury slapped him with a \$100 million malpractice judgment, finding that he had been negligent, stolen money from his client and had charged “an unconscionable fee.” Show business seemed like a natural next step.

“I’ve told so many lies about this, I don’t even know which one is the truth,” Goldstein says when asked how he came up with the idea for “Cheaters.” He then explains that, in 1995, he was straying from his own marriage (which is still intact) when he had something like a vision.

“I was wondering if my wife was watching me (i.e.: having him followed), which she wasn’t,” he says. “But had she been, it would have made for a great display of what I call emotional tectonics. And the idea hit me instantly and simultaneously, ‘What a great idea for a tv show!’”

At a Dallas cocktail party in 1998, while still on trial for malpractice, Goldstein met Tommy Habeeb, a struggling actor and formalwear designer, who agreed to help him produce the show and also to play the part of Tommy Grand. Low on funds and unable to get an American distributor, they managed to sell the few episodes they had to a German television station in 1999. In early 2000 Der Spiegel, a German magazine, wrote a story about the show that was picked up by an American tabloid newspaper.

Suddenly Goldstein and Habeeb were getting calls from Court TV, Entertainment Tonight and every sensation-seeking show in between. That most interviewers described the show as “scandalous” “outrageous” or “shocking” didn’t bother Goldstein a bit.

“It was like having a \$50 million advertising campaign,” he says, grinning.

An American distribution deal, with “Cheaters” popping up on more stations every week, was soon in place. In most markets the ratings are climbing, and the “Cheaters” officially-licensed detective agency, run by a former Dallas police officer, gets almost 2,000 requests a month from people who are ready and willing to go on tv, if that’s what it takes, to catch their cheating lovers with their pants down. Sometimes, literally.

Before “Cheaters” takes a case – and they pursue at least 50 cases a month – the clients sign an agreement that, should they chicken out at the last minute and decide they don’t want to put their love life on public display or go through with the confrontation, then they may be billed for the cost of the investigation. The suspects, of course, have no such incentive. But most of them, amazingly, also agree to have their names and faces revealed.

“Most people are attracted to the sensationalism of being on tv, and we do point out that if they sign a release they’ll get to tell their side of the story,” Goldstein says. “And if all else fails, I have been known to offer them a little (financial) consideration.”

Goldstein, short, round and fast-talking, has the air of a hustler about him and he knows it. He seems to play up the part with his violin-shaped wire rim glasses and his graying 80’s-vintage Miami Vice beard. One minute he is talking about how “Cheaters” is really providing a public service, shaming unfaithful lovers, showing them the error of their ways. Then, just a few sentences later, he’s admitting some viewers may like the show because “they enjoy a car wreck.”

“Bobby is always saying, ‘Take a bullet for the show, it’ll be great for ratings,’” Habeeb says. “I tell him, ‘I know you’re gonna set that up one day. There’s going to be a sniper out there somewhere.’”

Although there have been allegations of over-eager investigators setting up suspects and production staff going unpaid, Goldstein, not really denying anything, seems unphased. He's pleased with any attention he can get, good or bad.

"When we first started doing this, much like the guys that exploded the first A-bomb in the desert, we didn't know what was going to happen," Goldstein says. He is wearing a t-shirt with the "Cheaters" logo, including the slogan, "encouraging the renewal of temperance and virtue," which he created and may or may not actually believe.

"I think people watch because it's like a Greek tragedy, they want to sympathize, they want to villainize," he says. "To some extent we are exploiting a situation, but in a fair way. There are a lot of reasons to do this show. And I will admit to all of them."

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In the war room – the business center of a budget motel just off Houston's Katy Freeway – it had all looked so easy. We'd been reminded by the director, John McCalmont, that we couldn't go on private property and, above all, "safety first. We are not there to incite a riot."

It was all planned out: where the unmarked vehicles would park, where the five camera crews should position themselves, how we'd catch the used car salesman as he walked off the lot and into the pick-up truck where he and his girlfriend liked to make out.

Sylvia Vargas, his wife and mother of his three children, had already been shown the video of his indiscretions and was more than ready to confront him. "If you're mad, you can be mad. If you want to go ballistic, it's okay," Tommy Grand had told her. "You can give him a piece of your mind. But you can't hit him or anything."

Vargas would say later that she had no qualms about having her troubled marriage turned into fodder for other people's amusement. "Many times I wanted to get a private investigator myself, but they're kind of expensive," she said. "And I don't feel exploited. I feel like the people that are being exploited are the people doing the cheating and they deserve it. I needed to find out what was going on and if that means humiliating him, fine."

Except that tonight's humiliation is not going according to plan. His girlfriend isn't with him. He's not leaving the lot. And – even worse – he's standing in front of the used car lot, looking right at us. Suddenly, he jumps in his truck and takes off. Alone.

“We’ve been made!,” McCalmont screams and suddenly, we’re in a high-speed chase, going the wrong way down a one-way street, bouncing around like lottery balls even as we’re being told to keep our heads down. The accused loses us once, twice and then we see him driving through a parking lot. No point being discreet now. We pull right up behind him.

He ducks into a drive-through bank and we cut him off, one vehicle in front, one vehicle behind, pinning him at the ATM machine. Out come the lights and the cameras and the security guys. He is ours.

Sylvia is yelling and Tommy Grand keeps saying, “Do you know what we had to show your wife?”

“I was just talking to her, that’s all,” the used car salesman says of his “friend.”

“Talking to her?,” Sylvia shoots back. “In bed, obviously.”

Then we show him the video and mostly he just sits there, looking like a guy trying to solve a really hard math problem. But he hardly says anything, finally making a flat-voiced admission that yes, he’d been seeing someone else. And then he leaves, Tommy Grand yelling after him, “For God’s sakes, man, I can’t believe you’re gonna throw it all away.”

It’s been a little anti-climactic, not catching him in the act. We’re all a little let down. Until the radio

crackles. Someone has been tracking the girlfriend. She’s home and we know where she lives. We pile back into the vehicles, energized, back in the hunt.

“The night’s not over,” the director says, as Tommy Grand puts his arm around Sylvia Vargas and asks if she’s okay. She cries, but not much. She’s glad it’s finally over, all out in the open, so she can get on with her life. “The next time he cheats on somebody,” she says. “It won’t be me.”

We find the house and, once again, wait in the dark. Tommy Grand and Sylvia get ready to walk towards the door. The lights are positioned, the cameras are ready to roll. Just as soon as the director says “Go.”

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