

CAPTURING COMPETITION ON CAMERA

By Becca Nadler

Competition series are a relatively recent genre of television, but the panoply of shows that focus on elimination and an ultimate winner can seem to be, on the surface, quite disparate. How does one compare the terrifying challenges of *Fear Factor* with the superhuman performances of *American Ninja Warrior* and *So You Think You Can Dance*. What do the catwalks on *America's Next Top Model* have in common with the cooking on *Iron Chef America*? For directors, the answer lies in the storytelling: a focus on real people with real and relatable backstories, and on the drama that their day-to-day interactions can generate, as well as in the directors' trusting relationships with their teams.



PATRICK MCMANUS *American Ninja Warrior*

► A spinoff of the long-running Japanese TV series *Sasuke*, this sports competition show features thousands of athletes from all over the country running through timed outdoor obstacle courses of increasing difficulty, culminating in a national finals course on the Las Vegas Strip. Director Patrick McManus—a six-season veteran of *American Ninja Warrior*, for which he earned a DGA Award nomination—uses the athletes' individual backgrounds to inform his coverage. "Before each run, we find out the story and play that up," he says, "so the hosts can react to it and bring deeper meaning than just focusing on the completion of the course."





TONY CROLL
America's Next Top Model

► In this reality series, contestants' lives are documented as they compete for the opportunity to launch a modeling career, with runway coaching, makeovers, photo shoots and fashion challenges shot at different locales every day. Director Tony Croll, who shared 2005's inaugural DGA Award for Reality Programs with director J. Rupert Thompson and won a second for his work on *Top Model* in 2008, is constantly adapting on the fly as he leads the directorial team through the fast-paced shoot days. "I look at it as making the best product within the parameters," says Croll. "That's part of the fun."

ALAN CARTER
The Voice

► Alan Carter, who has directed every season of *The Voice* since its premiere in 2011, was initially skeptical of the notion of another singing competition show during the heyday of *American Idol*. But he soon realized that "the spin on this show was a positive vibe of finding talented people." Carter told *DGA Quarterly* that he films *The Voice* in three segments: auditions, which are "about the interaction between the four coaches"; elimination battles, which are "about the drama of the coaches changing somebody's life"; and the musical live segments, which are different "because it's all about the performance, so I turn the camera away from the coaches and focus more on the performers."



PHOTOS: (TOP) KRISTINE LARSEN; (BOTTOM) HOWARD WISE



"If they tell me a dance move, I'll probably know exactly what they're talking about. It helps understanding how to shoot dance."

— NIKKI PARSONS

NIKKI PARSONS
So You Think You Can Dance

► Director Nikki Parsons' background in dance gives her an enhanced ability to understand the coverage needed for competition series *So You Think You Can Dance*, an invaluable skill given the show's tight turnaround time from blocking rehearsals to filming contestants live on-air. "If they tell me a dance move, I'll probably know exactly what they're talking about," she says. "It helps understanding how to shoot dance. The choreography and the dancing [are] just so out of this world that all the shots are designed so that you get the story of the choreography, you see the Emmy Award-winning lighting, and you see the beautiful dancing as well."



PHOTOS: ADAM ROSE/FOX



J. RUPERT THOMPSON
Fear Factor

► One of the most memorable shows of the reality-TV era, this competition series directed by J. Rupert Thompson pits contestants against one another in dangerous, outrageous and often gross stunts for a cash prize. Thompson, a two-time DGA Award winner who shared 2005's inaugural Reality Programs Award with director Tony Croll, has directed stunts challenging enough to appear in a Michael Bay film. He loves the adrenaline rush, he told *DGA Quarterly*, "of having to fly by the seat of your pants because you never know what will happen, and [to] shoot action and make it feel fast, scary, gross—whatever is needed."

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EYTAN KELLER
Iron Chef America

► DGA Award-winning director Eytan Keller, right, approaches this culinary game show—based on the Japanese show *Iron Chef*—like an over-the-top sporting event, pitting chef contestants against one another in Kitchen Stadium, with effects-heavy lighting and crew members in full view. Keller's unique style of close coverage on the talent helps to emphasize the live and immediate nature of the show. "I like to use the camera to enhance the narrative," he told *DGA Quarterly*. "You'll never hear anyone on *Iron Chef* say, 'This is the most difficult thing I've ever had to do.' You have to show that, show it on their face—you have to see that an accomplished chef like Bobby Flay is nervous, that he's sweating, that his hands are shaking."



GLENN WEISS

The 90th Annual Academy Awards

► And what about capturing the entertainment industry's ultimate competition: the Academy Awards? Eight-time DGA Award winner Glenn Weiss is an awards show veteran, having directed multiple Tonys, Emmys and Oscar broadcasts in addition to the Billboard Music Awards, Kids' Choice Awards and Miss USA Pageants. "I think people want to watch award shows because you get to see actors not acting but being themselves," Weiss told *DGA Quarterly*, going on to note that filming an awards show "is not about action but reaction—being premeditated enough to have your cameras in the right place to get that reaction."



PHOTOS: (TOP) ELKO WEAVER; (BOTTOM LEFT) FOOD NETWORK; (BOTTOM RIGHT) COURTESY EYTAN KELLER

PHOTO: COURTESY GLENN WEISS

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