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Three summer reality TV shows use Chicago settings, but only one satisfies

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Jerry Springer may have abandoned Chicago three years ago, but the impresario of camera-ready interpersonal conflict will be pleased to know that his influence remains.

It's certainly there in the two Chicago-based "reality" shows airing this summer, "Chicagolicious," a sort of hair-salon confidential, and "Mob Wives Chicago," which plays out like a middle school social scene, but in heavier eye makeup and without middle school's promise of eventual wisdom and maturity.

Like "Springer" guests, the people in these shows are ready to mix it up at the drop of an insult, or a perceived confrontational remark, or even something that couldn't possibly be taken as a slight yet somehow, miraculously, is. Why, it's almost as if the producers encourage their characters to mix it up whenever possible.

Apparently, "client comes in and gets a decent haircut" is not good TV. But "aging stylist vocationally threatened to a comical degree by any and everyone else" is.

The good news is that Chicago, to the extent that the city is pictured, looks spiffy in these shows, a place that — per ex-Mayor Richard Daley's vision of a clean, crisp, world-class urban playground — can at least provide sophisticated settings for sophomoric behavior. (And we presume, of course, that people recognize it's unfair to judge a geographical region by its reality TV participants. This is why, for instance, New Jersey continues to be held in esteem.)

The other good news is that a third reality show, "Secret Millionaire," sets its Sunday episode in Chicago, and it is almost powerful enough to act as an anti-venom to the other two. Seeing suburban rich guy Steve Kaplan give away money on the South Side takes at least some of the sting out of having to endure probably seven or eight repeats of the hair-pulling fight the "Mob Wives" got into at a downtown bar.

It's a little hard to fathom how "Secret Millionaire," with its determination to depict the pressing human need that most of television ignores, actually made it onto a network TV schedule, ABC's. But there it is, showing

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the other face of Chicago, where kids fight to resist gangs, homeless people bathe with hotel-soap castoffs and group homes battle to give seniors community and an alternative to the nursing home.

The other two series, though, are just standard-issue, reality-in-quotes fare, following on the high heels of assorted real housewives and celebrity families from other places.

You know the formula: Cast of characters is introduced, each with a trait that will define them for the run of the series: ingenue, stripper, what have you. An objective for the particular episode is announced — usually something very small, yet treated as if achieving it will change worlds. And then, with varying degrees of plausibility, the characters proceed to get in their own and one another's way.

These shows remind, constantly, of the old joke about academia: The fights are so vicious because the stakes are so low.

“Chicagolicious” is a bookend to an established Style Network show, “Jerseylicious,” which takes those willing to view it backstage at a New Jersey beauty parlor. The local edition is set at AJ’s of Chicago, the West Randolph Street home of veteran stylist AJ Johnson, and it has a handful of likable people to display, most notably the owner.

But likable does not translate to interesting, and so senior stylist Valincia — last name, Saulsberry — acts a little tipsy, seems threatened by her younger peers, boasts about her model good looks.

She constantly tells her colleagues and the cameras that “I’ve been with AJ for 20 years.” She gets in glaring matches with younger, prettier makeup artist Katrell (Mendenhall). She has a hissy fit over a fellow stylist helping out with a photo shoot and shows up late.

To underscore all of this — ahem — drama, everybody spends a whole lot of time making soap-opera faces, exaggerated tableaux of emotion that they hold for the camera as if auditioning for Agnes Nixon herself.

There’s no way to know how much of Saulsberry’s behavior is put on. But if this has been the real her for the past two decades, then somebody needs to buy Johnson a “World’s Most Tolerant Boss” mug, immediately.

The goals of the “Chicagolicious” crew are almost minuscule: to get mentioned in a society blog in one episode; to win the local alderman’s certification as a “green” business in another; to successfully shoot a salon ad for an airline magazine.

To achieve these minor successes, they seem to spend a lot of time having meetings at budget-busting restaurants such as MK, drinking what appears to be champagne.

“Mob Wives Chicago” spins off from VH1’s “Mob Wives,” which originates from Staten Island. In the Chicago version — which, like “Chicagolicious,” began this month — there are no wives, only daughters and nieces of men with ties to organized crime.

It’s better made than “Chicagolicious,” and watching VH1 shoehorn song credits into the show, a nod to ancient roots as a music channel, is unintentionally amusing.

But it’s a version of the same show: Each one even has a character still living with an ex. Here, viewers are asked to peer in as a group of women acquainted with one another to varying degrees try and often fail to get along in front of the cameras.

Some of the women are strong characters, tough-talking, brassy and un-self-conscious. Nora Schweihs, the daughter of the late alleged mob enforcer Frank Schweihs, delivers one of the funniest lines heard on television this year.

After the big bar fight, she said she was feeling “Humiliation! With capital letters all the way through how it's spelt!”

You could see her wanting to express the big emotion, but at the same time realizing that she wasn't going to be able to spell the word.

Such moments do, in fact, feel real. But the reasons the women give for doing what they do are often incomprehensible: The fight happened because one character kept bringing up a conflict between two others that had been settled.

And the situations they are in are so contrived that the whole enterprise seems as unnatural as a surgically enhanced chest. (No idea why that comparison came to mind.)

The “mob,” the ostensible reason for their relationship, is merely a bit player, mentioned here and there as a “lifestyle” the women have been born into but seemingly having little influence in their lives at the moment.

“Secret Millionaire,” meanwhile, starts with a gigantic contrivance. A rich person is stripped of his or her identity and put into an impoverished situation to try to find heroes. Those people or organizations will then receive some kind of largesse, when the person, who has been pretending to be part of a documentary, reveals his wealth.

The reveal itself isn't all that satisfying. “I am fortunate enough to be a millionaire” recalls “Austin Powers” and Dr. Evil's failure to realize that \$1 million isn't what it used to be.

But the quest for good deeds, and the way it affects the wealthy donors, is genuinely engaging stuff. “My Chicago got bigger,” says Kaplan, a 52-year-old from Buffalo Grove who made his money through marketing companies and writing business books. “I now mean the North Side all the way down to 120th Street.”

This is a reality show in the best sense. It shows a different reality than the one people think they know. And it changes the reality for some of its participants. When Kaplan calls his ability to help out “one of the best moments of my life,” the sincerity is palpable.

The same emotional connection is present when he works on a memorial for scores of people who died before reaching adulthood.

“Why are we not outraged that this is happening?” Kaplan asks of the broader society. One possible answer lies in our willingness to be distracted by stage-managed bickering among groups of people we don't personally know.

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‘Secret Millionaire’

7 p.m. Sundays, ABC. Kaplan is hosting a viewing party Sunday at Moe's Cantina, 155 W. Kinzie St., with all proceeds going to the organizations he helps in the show.