

GO JERRY! GO JER

It's trashy and tasteless, but millions love the

Jerry Springer show. We meet

Reason No. 237,643 why I love my job: it takes me to some weird and wonderful places. Today, I've ended up in Connecticut – a dowdy-looking state that borders New York. But what brings me here is far from mundane as I'm at the studios of the legendary *Jerry Springer* show. In celebration of its twentieth year of broadcast, the CBS Network has invited me to sit in the audience to observe the hair-pulling, cussing and shocking revelations that have made *Jerry Springer* compulsive viewing for two decades. This is going to be hilarious. On arrival, I'm greeted by people queuing around the building. It surprises me how normal they look. I ask one how far he's travelled. 'From Pittsburgh,' says Matt, 23, a chef. 'I've watched the show my whole life.' Inside the grey building, I'm ushered into a poky office where a man is on the phone bragging about Jerry whooping fellow American talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres in the ratings wars. You've got to hand it to Jerry, he's still got it. Putting down the receiver, the man introduces himself as Jerry's publicist and gives me a rundown of dos and don'ts while I'm here: no dictaphones, no note taking, no unchaperoned exploring and absolutely no talking to anyone in the audience without permission. Yes Boss! This does nothing to quash my suspicions of the show being 'set up' but, being a good girl, I play along. I'm told the host will see me for a quick pre-show chat. Making our way down a bustling corridor, we pass a room where the 'guests' are having make-up applied and a beefy security guard is outside. Perhaps my earlier cynicism is unfounded. Knocking on the next door along, Jerry himself comes out and greets me warmly. It's not so much a dressing room but a study, containing a desk stacked with serious hardback books, a sofa, TV and very little light. Jerry catches me looking at pictures of his grandson. 'He looks like Winston Churchill,' he says proudly. Jerry, 66, is clearly a smart guy. In the past he's dabbled with politics – he was the mayor of Cincinnati – so I'm dying to know what's kept him umpiring this circus for so long? 'This is my bread and butter,' he explains. 'I enjoy what I'm doing, it's only two days a week and it gives me time to do other things. Anyone could do what I do – I don't have any particular talent.' When I press him on the show's authenticity, he defends it like any politician worth their expense slips. 'The stories are absolutely truthful,' he vows. 'Have we ever been duped? Sure. But the goal is that every story is true; there are lawyers involved, you can't make up a story – there'd be libel suits. But, when the cameras are on, do they [the guests] get carried away and show more anger than, maybe, they really feel? But that's true of everybody.' When my 10 minutes are up, I'm led into the studio where floor manager Todd is whipping the audience into a frenzy. 'You can "oooh and ahhh" as loud as you like,' he says before asking how we'd welcome Mr Jerry



Jerry gives a definite thumbs-up to our girl Lyndsey



Springer? Right on cue, they chant 'JERRY! JERRY! JERRY!' as our man takes to the stage. Sitting at the back, I clock a raucous bunch of middle-aged African-American ladies. One in a yellow tunic has a cheeky glint in her eye. She leaps and screams joyfully throughout the proceedings. 'I have nothing to do with the subject matter of the show,' Jerry told me earlier. 'They hand me a card before I go on and all it has on it is the names of the guests because I've never met them. My job is to ask them questions as if I were a viewer at home. That's why my first question is always, "So what's going on?" They tell me their story and my job is to then make jokes.' Over the years, Jerry, whose show has even been parodied in a musical theatre production *Jerry Springer*:

The Opera, has addressed many issues concerning fidelity, sexuality and even bestiality. Who can forget the notoriously titled episode "I married a horse"? Thankfully, today's issue isn't as extreme. Well, not much. When the theme is revealed to be 'Darling, I used to be a man' I can't believe my luck. But before we meet those unlucky enough to get shafted, Jerry entertains the audience with a 10-minute stand-up routine. Cue more howling from Yellow Tunic Lady. 'Has the audience got any questions?' Jerry asks before the cameras start rolling. 'How do we get on TV?' asks a camp ginger kid. 'Will there be Nazis and Ku Klux Klan?' asks someone else... Er... moving on. The first pre-op transsexual is brought on. She's here to tell the bloke from the coffee shop (whom she got well frisky with) that she's got man bits too. How did he not know this?! Coffee shop man isn't happy with

RY! GO JERRY!

the legendary Jerry and his audience as the show celebrates its twentieth year



The guests on the show play 'spot the lady with the man bits'



Lyndsey finds herself getting a bit carried away



Having a chat with Jerry before the show starts

The audience are in a state of hysteria. OK, so I've thrown a few air punches myself and chanted the host's name, but I feel a bit silly



Shy and retiring they're not! The overexcited audience let rip, including Yellow Tunic Lady

the revelation but, as I suspected, isn't as shocked as he could be. They exchange some heated words and eventually leave the stage together making room for the next 'reveal'. The audience is in a state of hysteria. OK, so I've thrown a few air punches myself and chanted the host's name, but I do feel a bit silly. The next three stories include a few scrappy moments and security staff step in, but it's clear no one's going to do real harm. Could it be that our heartbroken men weren't really duped in the first place? But where do these pond life characters come from? 'They come to us with their weird and wonderful stories,' says executive producer Rachelle Wilkos, who's been with the show for 15 of its 19 seasons. 'Of course, we have to check their authenticity and make sure they don't have criminal or mental health issues, but in doing so we often uncover

a bigger, better story.' But why would they voluntarily put themselves up for such humiliation? 'Because they want to be on TV,' she says matter of factly. And when I think it couldn't get any stranger, the format changes and it's questions from the audience again. I'm

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astonished to see that not one, but two sets of women use this opportunity to whip up their tops and jiggle their naked, floppy breasts in the direction of the stage. Apparently, this behaviour is rewardable. The ladies (if you can call them that) get a string of 'Jerry Beads' for

their efforts. The crowd erupts again – and I feel a little bit of sick come up in my throat.

Although Jerry happily admits the show has 'no social merit other than entertainment', he acknowledges that there's been a shift in people's attitudes since it began. 'The first year we broadcast we did a show on interracial dating and there were protesters outside saying, "How could you do such a show?"' he says. 'Now, 20 years on, we have a President who's a product of an interracial marriage. It shows how society has changed and thank God for that.'

So with 20 years in the bag and a blossoming spin-off career (he did the American version of *Strictly Come Dancing*, *America's Got Talent* and West End show *Chicago*) surely Jerry's going to quit while he's ahead? 'No,' he says. 'This is fun! As long as I'm healthy, why not?' Indeed Jerry. In fact, 'Go Jerry! Go Jerry! Go Jerry!'