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TV REVIEW

'Who Wants to Be a Superhero?': Misfits Just Want to Save the World

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Vivian Zink/Sci Fi Channel

Some of the contestants who answered the Sci Fi Channel's question "Who Wants to Be a Superhero?"

By VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN
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Rotiart spelled backward is traitor.

Readers' Opinions

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enlightened on the first episode when Rotiart, a dubious-looking superhero wearing something like chain mail, turned out to be a plant by the program's godhead, Stan Lee.

This is among the powerful lessons of "Who Wants to Be a Superhero?," which started a six-week run on the Sci Fi Channel last week. Viewers were

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Rotiart was on hand to keep tabs on the contestants, each of whom is vying to have his or her character included in a comic published by Dark Horse. What he determined was that Levity, a promising-seeming hero who controls air and detests hate, was in it for the wrong reasons. In real life Levity is Tobias Trost of Los Angeles, a gay man who said his outsider status suited him to superheroism. But Mr. Trost makes custom action figures, and he confessed in Rotiart's hearing that he planned to win the competition and cash in on the Levity doll.

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Adios, Levity.

The show, which is thoroughly in the tradition of Marvel Comics, is knotted with this kind of sententious turnabout and hacky narrative gimmick. But it gains momentum anyhow as one of the few reality shows to engage nonconformists honestly. ("Mad Mad House," also on the Sci Fi Channel, was another one.)

The hypertan Spring Break kids from network reality shows are nowhere to be seen here, and no one will miss them. In their place are inventive, sentimental misfits who evince a wholehearted combination of fury, fear, humility, courage, reverence and conviction. It's a wonderful all-too-human cast, and as Mr. Lee insists, it's the human qualities that make a hero superhuman.

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The program's other lessons include "It's one thing to laugh in the face of danger, but not when you're failing to accomplish your goal," and "If the world is in grave danger, do we just ignore it because you have a headache?" No, we do not.

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And then there's a perennial point of clarification — "Superheroes don't kill people; they save people" — that seems to determine the action of the show. In the first challenge, last week, contestants were told to change into their costumes in a public park without being seen, and then race to a designated spot. All fine, except that the executive producers Mr. Lee, the estimable co-creator of Spider-Man and the X-Men, and Bruce Nash couldn't resist a plot twist. Into the path of the speeding superheroes they threw a damsel in distress: a little girl who can't find her mother.



The girl, presumably an actress, really did seem like a lost child in a park. And the contestants who stopped for her — mostly the women, but not always whom you'd expect — were protected from elimination. The fools who kept running (often the fastest runners, whose eyes were trained on the finish line) had to face Mr. Lee. Nitro G, a comic nerd from Staten Island named Darren Passarello who both hadn't stopped and had dressed in plain view, didn't have a prayer. The challenge made a surprisingly sophisticated point about the

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limits of focus and the moral importance of distraction.

If reality television is to thrive in the outer boroughs of television — channels like Sci Fi — this competition proves that it must leave off trying to find businessmen (“The Apprentice”) and spouses (“The Bachelor” and “The Bachelorette”). Such searches attract only talentless squares. Instead, it should continue to invite amateurs from morally interesting cultural sectors — fashion, comics — to prove themselves in the arenas they care about. That way, you get both surprising characters and a window on a subculture with its own lessons and provocations.

But on “Who Wants to Be a Superhero?” the lesson about saving and not killing people seems chiefly directed at Iron Enforcer, a shirtless, pockmarked contestant from Brooklyn (he gives his real name as Steel Chambers) whose two arms play the roles of Mercy and Judgment. The Judgment arm is a massive machine gun. He seems more menacing than heroic. And on tonight’s episode he essentially seems to admit to juicing, which is disturbing.

“I look better than everyone in this house,” he says. “If steroids are used for a positive thing, I think it’s a good thing, no?”

Now, that’s a question for all of us.

WHO WANTS TO BE A SUPERHERO?

Sci Fi, tonight at 9, Eastern and Pacific times; 8, Central time.

Produced by the Sci Fi Channel, POW! Entertainment and Nash Entertainment; Stan Lee, Bruce Nash, Gill Champion, Andrew Jebb and Scott Satin, executive producers.

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