No, I don't think we have. Not in the early years of dirt shows at two-bit medieval faires. Not at new festivals in new countries, navigating foreign social cues. Even the teenage Gypsy boys wanted attention more than to tear us down, and when I learned to say "I love you" in Roma — "*Tumen boot!*" — it stopped them like a switch.

We weren't booed in the slums of Mumbai, where we stepped around eddies of trash to crack the whip. We weren't booed in Mexico, where children in freshly ironed clothes shyly pressed single pesos and cookies into our hands.

We finish at the 87-second mark — exactly on time, as William and I had planned. I am already disconnected, awaiting the verdict I already know. I smile and thank the judges for their feedback. Maybe if we aren't funny or angry, they will leave us on the cutting room floor. Even when the shock jock judge turns to the crowd, exhorting them first to cheer him and then boo us again, louder, I think only, *Those jeering young men ages 18-25 are certainly his demographic.*

Even if I could win a verbal fencing match the edit would make me a loser — a sore loser, a bitter loser, an arrogant loser who had it coming.

The first exit interview, which takes place immediately offstage with a rapper-turned-TV-host, is what producers call the "kiss-n-cry." We neither kiss nor cry. I grin directly into the camera and say, "Hey, we're already professional entertainers and this was just another gig!" and I high-five the host. *Edit* that *like a loser, motherf---ers.*

We bail on the second exit interview, telling Aubrey that we're sorry, but we're finished. And Aubrey, who is a local, listens shocked when we tell her about the booing and escorts us past five security checkpoints and out of the building. I hope that this lack of footage will help us be a non-story, not even a two-second clip in a montage. That the mother called to the stage to be reprimanded for her six-year-old twins' salacious choreography, or the water-skiing squirrel or the girl whose father cuts her hair while blindfolded, will be far more fascinating. There is nothing compelling about polite, upbeat professionals.

After the show, my mom reclaims her cell phone from the audience security checkpoint, and she explains that the audience was coached. Their cue to boo was the crewman with the white sign in front of stage right. We learn that the audience was seeded with plants, paid to be there, knowing who would win, and that the locals who lined up for tickets were given the instruction "If someone next to you jumps up or makes an X, you do it too!" Knowing that the contest and the voting and the judging are rigged, I don't know why it surprises me so much that the audience is rigged, too.

America sure does have talent, but that's not what this show is about. Talent's not in the 90-second bites boiled into montage clips, not going with the breakdancers "Goin' to Vegas!", not listening to the singer stopped at two bad opening notes. (This is round three — we were recruited, but that singer waited in line and has twice been told, "You're good enough!") Talent is back in the driveway where the breakers popped and locked on flattened cardboard boxes. Talent is lip-syncing in its bedroom. Talent is hanging with the adult beginner aerialists back in the gym in Memphis, working out on borrowed equipment, their bodies aging out on borrowed time. Talent is singing with its friends in the car with the stereo up and the windows down.

And that's the shield that keeps me gracious on mic while the 18-to-25-year-olds jump up and down, howling for our third X. Back at the hotel, showering out hairspray and removing the last of the glitter from my eyes, I wonder just how dumb this mistake will turn out to be, how many Americans this summer will see me and see a loser. But as I hang up costumes and plan the route to the next gig, and the next gig, and the one after that, I thank the universe that I am up there taking scorn, instead of watching and dishing it out. Even standing up to boos and jeers and the caustic acid of three judges in the twilight of their celebrity — their downward trajectory still a place higher than I will likely ever reach — even that is better than waiting for opportunity to knock, for lightning to strike. Waiting for a life to begin. Waiting for a dream — any dream — to arrive. M

Allison Williams is a fire-eater, whip-cracker, aerialist, and the artistic director of Aerial Angels. She also blogs at IDoWords.net.

viewpoint

ALLISON WILLIAMS

Reality

I said no the first six times.

The seventh year, the seventh season, after an hour-long phone call with William the freelance producer, I think: *Well, it's in my mom's city, and there's money, and this project we're working on that can't get booked because nobody's ever heard of it could use some exposure.*

So I say, "Yes." And with William's help, I start mapping out the act.

"What the producers really like is the fire trick," he says. "But bigger. Can you add some aerialists?"

William thinks it's important to be big. *America's Got Lawsuits (If You Reveal The Outcome Before The Episode Airs)* is focusing on group acts this year. I know one fire-dancer, two jugglers, six acrobats, and a pole dance team who have done this show. I know fifty more entertainers who will *never* do this show, who have said no seven times.

> America sure does have talent, but that's not what this show is about. Talent's not in the 90-second bites boiled into montage clips.

I know we're not going to win.

I know that the contract says "Producers of *America's Got Lawsuits* reserve the right to determine the winner by any means they choose." I've heard about the holding rooms, about showing up at 7 a.m. in full hair and make-up and waiting in a convention center ballroom full of chairs for twelve hours, for three days, and then being told, "Everyone else, sorry, you won't be doing your acts this round; you'll be flying home tomorrow."

William has gone through the act with me. We've storyboarded every four seconds and provided a recommended shot list to the director. Everyone in the act has been issued a plane ticket, a room at the Hyatt, and a list of instructions from Aubrey, our perky brunette production assistant.

"Remember, guys," chirps Aubrey, "never look directly into the camera! It ruins the shot!"

I have met the rigger and the pyrotechnician; we've run the full act once and the fire section three times, for the stage manager, the director, and the fire marshal.

And here we are. The glossy black stage gleams.

The new judge, sitting on the left, is a shock jock brought in to expand the demographic. He wears his sunglasses all the time. The lady in the middle, married to someone famous, smiles supportively. The man on the right twirls the straw in his water bottle. ("Fist bumps only!" said Aubrey, "No handshakes, no hugs!") He will not drink from anything that is not handed to him wrapped in a towel. His assistant hovers out of frame with a bottle of hand sanitizer.

So far, we've been guessing at what role we'll be cast in, how the editors will choose to show us to America. The pre-interview questions/directions seem to provide a hint of their angle:

"Could you say that again, but touch on your street performer background?"

"Could you phrase it something like 'This is our big chance?'"

"Just say 'We're here to win,' and make it really big, okay?"

"Can we do that again? One of you glanced at the camera."

Our guess is "Small Time, Big Dreams" or "Scruffy But Driven."

Before we start the act, the sunglassed judge wearing sunglasses tells us he thinks street performing is sad and pathetic. We talk about theatricality, about performing for people regardless of their ability to pay, about shows for war orphans in Kosovo. I don't know if any of that will fit the eventual edit. The lady judge smiles supportively. The straw-twirler twirls, and we hold briefly as he receives a new water bottle and a squirt of sanitizer.

With a burst of nothing — the sound cue is late — our act begins. The sound kicks in. The singer sings. The aerialists spin in a whirl of colored fabric. And 39 seconds into the act that William and I planned together, my brain begins evaluating.

What's that sound? Has something gone wrong?

Fast check. Aerialist Number One, still in the air, her split is beautiful. Aerialist Number Two, his split amazing. Aerialist Number Three is in a flaming aerial hoop. Is she on fire? No. Good.

What's that sound?

At 59 seconds in, I step into position to pass a flame from my tongue to my partner's tongue and down the line of eight people, and I realize: *That's booing.*

With a "Hup!" to cue the group, I set my tongue on fire, then pass the flame to the right.

Have we ever been booed before? by a sober person? with a home to go to?

Have we ever been booed by an entire audience?