



Richard DeDomenici

Fame Asylum - a good idea or not?

Hello, my name is Richard DeDomenici, and I'm an artist. I'm 29 and I graduated from art school in 2001. My surname is Italian, my father migrated to the UK when he was five, and my ethnic breakdown is as follows:

50% Italian
33% English
12.5% Welsh
3% French
1.5% Spanish

But enough about my background. This time last year I undertook both my most ambitious and contentious project to date: To create a boyband comprised of asylum seekers. The project - Fame Asylum - was designed to alter attitudes towards immigration issues among the difficult-to-reach opinion-influencing female adolescent demographic, harnessing pester-power and the trickle-up theory to change minds, alter behaviour, shift paradigms, and transform societies.

The project was co-commissioned by the PSi #12 Performance Rights conference, in association with the Live Art Development Agency. The budget was originally 1000, and it was going to be a rather lo-fi affair, with the song being written and recorded by me on a laptop and the process documented by me on a mini-dv camera, and possibly uploaded to YouTube. Quite late in the process, however, Channel Four Television expressed an interest, and the project grew in scale exponentially.

The formation of the band took place over a period of two weeks, as part of my residency at the PSi #12 conference. Auditions were held, and four young men, who I shall hereon affectionately refer to as 'the boys', were chosen to be in the group: Aaron from Albania, David from Nigeria, Long from Vietnam, and Saeed from Iran. Conference delegates were able to observe an intensive rehearsal process in which the boys received vocal training, choreography lessons, stylist makeovers, and recorded a demo of their debut single 'A Guy Like Me'. The project culminated with a live performance on stage at Celebrating Sanctuary on London's South Bank, as part of Refugee Week 2006. The entire process was captured on film for a Channel Four documentary - also entitled Fame Asylum - which was transmitted last November, and repeated several times subsequently.

From its inception the project was designed to polarise the press, but I was a little surprised by their voracity: The Guardian described the documentary as 'The Worst Idea For A Television Programme In The World Ever', while the influential music website PopJustice described me as 'a fucking idiot'.

Much of the criticism understandably focused on the possible exploitation of the boyband members. It was explained to the boys before they auditioned that the most we could offer them were a fortnight of interesting experiences. When Aaron, David, Long, and Saeed all met for the first time I rammed home the point that the music industry is extremely fickle, boybands doubly so. I made it clear that no boyband has ever been formed in two weeks before, and that, as such, there was little to no chance the band would get a deal, and that they should consider just getting to the final gig as their overall objective (at the beginning many of us, including the boys, doubted even if we'd make it that far). Understandably, the director left all this stuff out of the documentary for dramatic effect. As it happened, we did get interest from several record companies, however most just wanted to sign the band for a one single deal, which would have seen little to no benefit for the boys, or longevity for the project.

Other criticism stemmed from the use of the term 'parody' to describe the band. I personally never used that term to describe the project. The term was attributed to an American delegate at the conference, who saw the band's first performance, and remarked 'it's a really interesting parody' (parody of what, they didn't say). I feel that this particular observer misinterpreted the project. Indeed some people in that audience didn't even believe that the boys were real asylum seekers - that they were instead paid actors. I realise this ambiguity may have been my fault, as my introduction sounded a bit sarcastic (just the way I talk, I'm afraid. I can't sound sincere to save my life, often causing unintentional offence), but I stand by the right not to make work that is obvious and easy to understand. One of art's greatest strengths is that it is open to interpretation. If artists lower the common denominator to the extent that everyone instantly knows what it's about, then what's the point of making the work in the first place?

I would certainly say that the band was a pastiche (in the way that Westlife were a pastiche of Boyzone, who were a pastiche of Take That, who were a pastiche of New Kids on the Block, who were a pastiche of New Edition, who were a pastiche of The Jackson Five..), and a rather satirical pastiche at that, but 'parody', I don't agree with. (Although 'parody' just means pastiche with mocking intent, and I did intend to lovingly mock the boyband genre, and less lovingly the wider music industry. But 'parody' is a loaded term with many incorrect and insidiously negative connotations, which would be to remove any serious intent or autonomy from the project, so I tried never to use the term in connection with the project.)

I cannot brush away all the criticism, however. The project was always going to be ethically dubious - which is a running theme of my work, and is fine when it's just me in the firing line (as is normally the case), but far more problematic when it's four 'vulnerable' men. (I put the word 'vulnerable' in inverted commas here as some have argued that, having gone through so much pain and suffering in their lives just to get the UK, being in a boyband for a fortnight is water off a duck's back.)

The project finished last summer, and since then the boys have returned to their normal lives, which was a bit weird for everyone, especially Saeed, who had only been in the UK for a few weeks prior to auditioning, and had thus learned most of his English from television people, stylists and choreographers. All are currently studying and hoping to stay in the country, although, having reached eighteen, everyone except Aaron currently has their cases under review by the Home Office. The chances of them all remaining in the UK is very low, although their legal representatives have asked for details of the Fame Asylum project, as it is thought that participation in such an enterprise may help further their cases.

In a way, I am glad the band didn't get a record deal, as the boys are all capable of so much more than being in a boyband. If the boys have taken anything away from the project I think it is that they should try and find out what they really enjoy doing, and then try and do it to the best of their ability.

I remain in regular contact with the Aaron, David, Long and Saeed, who also remain in contact with each other, the production team, and members of the crew.

I am very glad that C4 got involved, even though I lost some creative control, as they paid for amongst other things the choreographer, vocal coach, songwriter and recording studio time, and above all documented the project professionally and guaranteed it an audience.

The documentary is still broadcast every couple of months, although I normally only find out by the subsequent barrage of emails from strangers, saying that either the programme made them cry, and re-evaluate their attitude to asylum seekers, or that it was cruel and exploitative, and I should be shot.

Most recently Fame Asylum was nominated for a Royal Television Society Education Award, but it lost to a programme called Giving Up The Weed.

As I mentioned at the start of this essay, Fame Asylum has been by far my most ambitious and contentious project to date. It's still far too early for me to definitively decide whether it was a good idea or not.

To help you decide, if you haven't done so already, and to put it in context, below are some links to some of my other work.

Thanks for reading thus far. I look forward to your comments.

Richard DeDomenici

www.DeDomenici.co.uk

www.youtube.com/DeDomenici

This essay is adapted from material in the Fame Asylum Archive at www.dedomenici.co.uk. Fame Asylum can be viewed on Channel Four's online on-demand service 4OD.

Comments

1) I really enjoyed 'Fame Asylum' I think that it showed that asylum seekers are people, I also think that trying to touch the 'hard to reach' worked very well, even if some didn't like it or didn't understand it, the issues were still brought up and in their living rooms!

good luck with all the rest of your work I hope to see more in the future.

Stef, Swansea
