

Stranger than Fiction

By Reg P. Wydeven

December 22, 2007

The O.J. Simpson murder trial changed the way courtroom dramas are televised. Trial highlights were often reported, but every aspect of the Juice's trial was on the air. O.J. essentially put CourtTV on the map.

Paving the way for the murder trials of Robert Blake and Phil Spector, O.J.'s prosecution also led to extensive coverage of paternity hearings for Anna Nicole Smith's baby. Well, after his recent arrest for assault and robbery, it looks like O.J. will be filling the airwaves again. Thanks to a U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, he may not be alone.

In a close 11-7 vote, the Committee approved a measure allowing all public U.S. Supreme Court proceedings to be televised. The measure was passed despite fierce opposition from the justices. Next, the measure goes to the full Senate for approval.

According to the proposal, unless the justices decide by majority vote that coverage in a particular case would violate a party's legal rights, the Supreme Court must allow television coverage of all open sessions.

Proponents of the measure claim the public would benefit from seeing the high court in action, citing the fact that coverage of Congress on C-SPAN was once opposed but is now supported. Opponents assert that televised hearings may discourage witnesses from testifying. In addition, Justice Anthony Kennedy stated that cameras would provide "an insidious temptation for justices to get a sound bite on the evening news."

How could the Supreme Court deny the American public of riveting cases, such as the recent court battles taking place in Orange County over two feuding Gypsy clans and their war over the fortune telling trade in Southern California?

The highly insular culture has surprised many by airing their dirty laundry in court, as Gypsies have traditionally resolved disputes in front of a secret council of elders that can impose fines, make territorial decisions or order someone shunned. The allegations thrown around in court would make must-see TV: death threats and graveside fights involving characters named "White Bob" and "Black Bob."

The cases center around the Stevens and Merino clans, or the Hatfields and McCoys of fortunetelling. The dispute arose after Edward and Sonia Merino opened two fortunetelling parlors in Newport Beach, near Stevens' turf. The Merinos then allege that members of the Stevens clan promptly broke into their parlors, stole a credit card machine and threatened to kill the Merinos if they didn't shut the places down. The Merinos then obtained a restraining order requiring George Stevens to stay a safe distance away.

After Stevens died of a heart attack at age 53, Merino came to his funeral in a limo, claiming he wanted to make sure "the mother-(expletive) was dead." Death threats and requests for restraining orders ensued.

If Gypsies don't pull in viewers, Disney characters always draw big ratings. An Italian court recently ordered Mickey Mouse, Donald and Daisy Duck and Tweety Bird to testify in the criminal trial of a Chinese man accused of counterfeiting products of Disney and Warner Bros.

An apparent clerical error in a summons cites Titti, Paperino, Paperina, and Topolino, the Italian names for the characters, requiring them to appear in the goofy case. Refusing to cooperate, Tweety claims that if asked to testify, he will say he definitely did not see any putty tat.

I hope you and your families have many holiday blessings.

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