

● REALLY BIG SHOW

The Apprentice

'Survivor' on 5th Ave.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

REALITY-TV contestants who thought immunity challenges, bug-eating and Jeff Probst were as bad as the genre gets will face the toughest challenge of all in NBC's "The Apprentice": The Donald.

Yes, Donald Trump is back. The real-estate tycoon of the '80s, who wrote best-selling books ("The Art of the Deal"), was satirized in "Doodlesbury," went deep into debt but left his mark on the New York skyline, is on top again. Business is booming and, now, he's the star of the latest reality show from "Survivor" mastermind Mark Burnett.

Getting Trump to do TV at all took some convincing. "All of the networks have wanted me to do a reality show," he says. "Most of the shows [wanted] cameras following me around; nothing I was interested in. I'm the largest developer in the city — I don't have time [for that]. Nor do the people I deal with want to have a camera stuck in their face. I turned [the networks] all down."

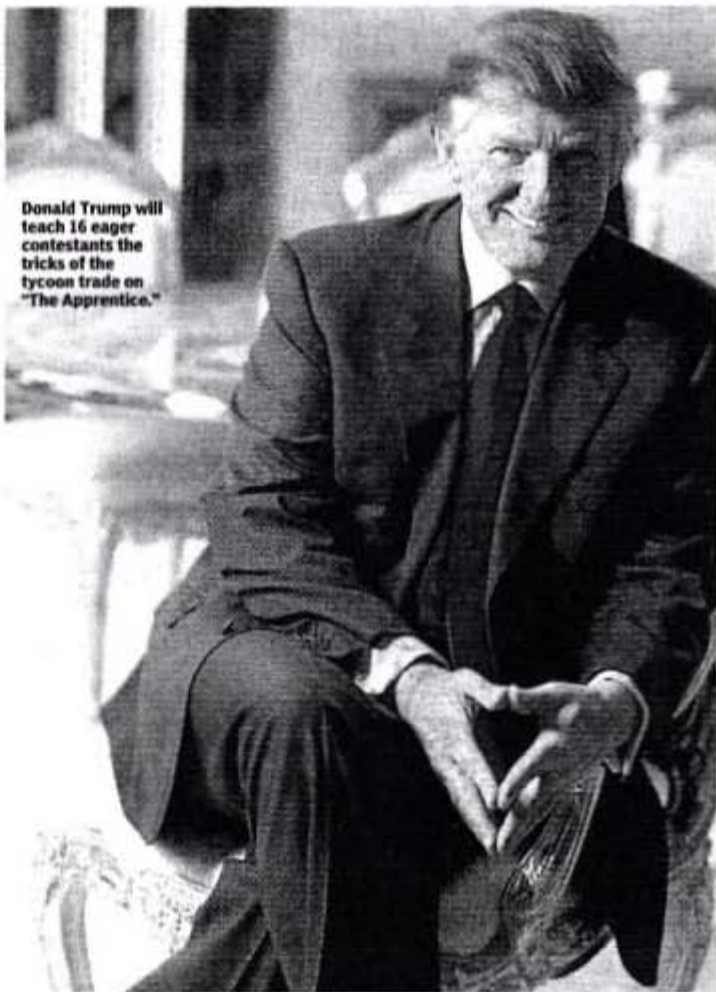
"But a year ago, [executive producer] Mark Burnett approached me with this idea of the jungle of New York. 'The Apprentice' is a very, very tough show. They had 215,000 people [download applications to take part]. Of course, a lot of people would rather be in New York than in Panama (location of the most recent "Survivor"). They chose 16 people and they're really brilliant."

Following the proven "Survivor" formula, "The Apprentice" pits two teams of eight contestants against each other. But the Trump show, which debuts this Thursday and moves to its regular 8 p.m. time slot on Wednesday, January 14th, has it all over "Survivor" when it comes to creature comforts. Rather than starving in a hut in some Godforsaken, far-flung locale, the players on "The Apprentice" live in a midtown Manhattan loft so fabulous that it's sure to arouse the envy of any "Real World" resident.

The show's format is deceptively simple. Each week, Trump gives contestants, who range from MBAs to self-made entrepreneurs, a new assignment. Their first is one almost everyone can identify with — running a lemonade stand. But not everyone on "The Apprentice" can hack it, apparently. The failing team reports to Trump's boardroom, where The Donald fires one of them on the spot.

Despite the absence of immunity challenges and other tests of athletic prowess that are the hallmarks of "Survivor," Burnett says that in some ways "The Apprentice" is even more physically challenging than the all-time reality-TV champ. The contestants, he says, get almost no sleep. And he emphasizes the wildly different jobs they have to tackle each week.

"None of this show takes place in an office building," says Burnett. "Week to week, [the contestants] are being given tasks [such as] operating a flea market, which means getting seed money and [figuring out] what the hell are you going to sell, to [asking yourself] how do I get space at a flea market and how do I make



Donald Trump will teach 16 eager contestants the tricks of the tycoon trade on "The Apprentice."

money? They'll also be asked to come up with a celebrity charity auction, produce a golf event and find real estate in a very rundown neighborhood, renovate and rent it above the market rate in 48 hours."

The winner of "The Apprentice" will be awarded a one-year, \$250,000 contract to work for Trump.

While the contestants stand the most to gain on this show, Trump himself has nothing to lose, even though many reality shows ("Newlyweds," "The Osbournes") reveal their stars to be train wrecks waiting to happen. He's not worried about the series tarnishing his image. "Mark never said I was going to come across well [necessarily]," says Trump. "I'm me. And you know me and people know me. There are certain instances where perhaps I won't look good. Who knows? I don't really care."

So far, Trump says he's been impressed with the contestants, but admits that

most people simply don't have what it takes to be a major entrepreneur.

"Most people don't have the skill," says Trump, who employs some 20,000 workers. "They're not born with it. Just like people don't have the skill of Jack Nicklaus to hit a golf ball or Babe Ruth to hit a baseball. Innate talent is a very important ingredient. You can get better at something, but having good genes is not the worst thing that can happen to a person."

Trump has always excelled at being the center of attention and fully expects "The Apprentice" to be just as successful as his latest real-estate development project on the Upper West Side.

"I always like success," he says. "I think [the show is] so good and hey, we've got the best network and the best producer. And they have me."

The Apprentice
Thursday, 8:30 p.m., NBC