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TELEVISION REVIEW | 'STYLISTA'

It's a Fashionista War: Wear Armor

By [GINIA BELLAFANTE](#)

"Stylista," which begins on Wednesday on CW, is selling itself as "The Devil Wears Prada" in reality-television form. But it may even surpass its predecessor as a treatise on the empty ambition and distaste for civility that girds so much of Seventh Avenue. "Stylista" shows that catfighting in the fashion world doesn't always have to bow to cliché. People are apparently capable of annihilating each other in novel ways. You can do so much better than "that dress makes you look like a Buick" if you really, really try.

Consider Ashlie, one of the show's 11 contestants for a junior editor job at Elle magazine and one year's free rent. Early on, she looks into the camera and disparages one of her undermining rivals in Devil-worship terms: "She is horrific. The girl is the double spawn. Like don't try to act like, you know what I mean, all innocent. You're Rosemary's baby. Accept it."

A few seconds later, Ashlie takes her grievance directly to the source, telling her enemy, Megan, that she is "Satan's little hand foot maiden."

Ashlie seems to thrive on confrontation, and it is hard to know why, given her particular gifts, she is selling out to the gods of Balenciaga when she seems to have such a bright future producing political attack ads.

Ashlie's fate rests in the hands of Elle's fashion news director, Anne Slowey, who puts on her very best imperious face as she judges, for instance, the competitors' attempts to present her with a nutritious and artfully arranged breakfast. I say "puts on" because Ms. Slowey's reputation in the fashion world is far from one of a Miss Nasty Pants.

But here she refuses to smile, tightening every muscle in her face and delivering a convincing performance as she passes by the platters of cereal and nuts and yogurt, proclaiming: "I don't do wheat at all. Don't do almonds unless they're soaked overnight. Melons should never be mixed with any other fruit."

[Meryl Streep](#) was nominated for an Oscar for her role as the exacting editor of Runway magazine in “The Devil Wears Prada,” and Ms. Slowey ought to receive a reality-TV acting Emmy for playing a much more intimidating version of herself.

Are there any bosses anywhere as demanding as Ms. Slowey pretends to be? Not really, and maybe on some level we miss them. Part of the appeal of a show like “Stylista” is that it resurrects a long-vanished way of office life, one filled with rules and regulations, distinct hierarchies and dress codes and nothing as fuzzy as flex time. As Ms. Slowey succinctly explains to the contestants at the outset: “To be in my world you either get it or you don’t.” No one has to spend a lot of time figuring out a manager like this.

And yet, as the economy free-falls, competitive reality shows in this vein also seem to have a fresh resonance as allegories for the Darwinian challenge likely to accompany even the lowliest kinds of job-getting. One contestant, Kate, is a former law student so frazzled by the backbiting feel of the whole project that it is hard to imagine how she thought she could ever handle corporate litigation.

Kate practically cracks up during an assignment to find hidden consumer gems in Chinatown. She is outperformed by Johanna, who describes herself as “a military analyst slash Chinese linguist.”

Kate has a good figure and cute clothes, and that used to be enough to get a position as an assistant at a magazine like Elle. It is a brutal world indeed when securing a job to procure coffee for women in six-inch heels suddenly means going up against adversaries who speak Mandarin.

STYLISTA

CW, Wednesday nights at 9, Eastern and Pacific times; 8, Central time.