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MTV's 'Styl'D' shows the reality of a stylist's job

Five junior assistants compete for a styling contract with the prestigious Margaret Maldonado Agency.

By Melissa Magsaysay
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'STYL'D': Clockwise from left, Julie Weiss, Eric Archibald, Jen Rade, Janna Brown, Gary Samuelian, Cody Conti, Tara Ahmadi and Brett Nelson. (Christina House / For The Times)

In a scene from the trailer of "Styl'D," a new reality show premiering at 10 tonight on MTV, junior stylist's assistants Janna Brown and Gary Samuelian wearily drag, shove and push rolling racks full of clothes up a steep dirt hill in Runyon Canyon. It's an extreme scenario, with shades of gimmicky stunts à la "America's Next Top Model," but it aims to illustrate the physical and mental demands stylists go through for their job -- showing it as a literal uphill battle.

Brown and Samuelian are among five junior assistants competing for a styling contract and spot on the Margaret Maldonado Agency's impressive roster of artists. This reality show is more like "The Hills" than "Project Runway," with cameras following the assistants from working on set to "off-duty" personal dramas (think romance and roommate problems). There are no weekly eliminations, no one being told "you're out" and no formal challenges. Instead, over the eight one-hour episodes, the assistants are cumulatively judged by three senior stylists -- Jen Rade, Eric Archibald and Julie Weiss -- on their work on various jobs throughout the season. During the final episode, one will win the coveted contract.

Rade, Archibald and Weiss exemplify how a slew of successful stylists have stepped out from behind the scenes to share the spotlight they've helped create around their celebrity clients.

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Stylists such as Rachel Zoe have become known by name, signature look and endorsement deals, not just by the people they clothe. "People have always looked to celebrities and fashion icons for their style inspiration," says Kent Belden, a Maldonado executive and a "Styl'D" producer. "Now, people are more privy to the fact that there is a whole team of people behind them creating the trends they are wearing and the images they portray." With a show centered around breaking into the profession, millions of young MTV viewers will find out exactly what a stylist's work is like and why the job is as demanding as it can be glamorous.

Stylists traditionally have been the people who interpret fashion in magazine spreads by setting up arresting images, using clothing and accessories as tools much as a painter would use paint. Their images tell stories that can be full of whimsy, color or just plain wackiness. The role is perfectly captured in the documentary "The September Issue," where Vogue creative director Grace Coddington upstages editor in chief Anna Wintour as the artistic force behind the magazine's illustrious photo shoots.

More recently, stylists such as Zoe have been dressing celebrities for red carpet events, working closely with designers to create gowns and looks for their clients. Stylists are integral in building brands, whether that means for a celebrity or for a sneaker company.

The junior assistants on "Styl'D" dream of constructing impressive fashion editorials or picking out the perfect Oscar gown, but first they must endure the manual labor involved with styling. Most of this falls to assistants, who are expected to pack and unpack clothes, unload rolling racks and schlep garment bags in and out of designer showrooms. "This is a lot more physical than people realize," Archibald says. "Everyone thinks you're running around and going to go meet Donatella at Versace. It's not like that. This is work."

A successful stylist must also have an innate sense of what looks good and what works for a given job, whether it's a red carpet, commercial or high-concept magazine spread. As Rade puts it, "Anybody who wants to be a stylist needs 30 minutes, \$20 and a Goodwill. If you can't put together a great outfit with those things, then this is probably not the job for you."

"Styl'D" airs at 10 p.m. Sundays on MTV.

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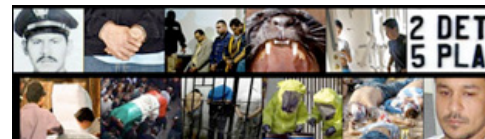
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