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Big Deal

## Large Egos, Small Screen



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Ryan Serhant, left, and Fredrik Eklund, brokers on Bravo's "Million Dollar Listing New York."

By ALEXEI BARRIONUEVO

SHIVERING in the chilly nighttime desert air of Chile in late 2010, I was among the throng of reporters and locals who felt relief and elation as the Phoenix capsule lifted the first of the 33 trapped miners to safety. The two-month-long saga was a roller-coaster of raw and elemental emotions — hope, fear, courage and ingenuity to overcome the cruel dangers of sending men to work nearly a half-mile underground.

With my foreign posting over, I've recently returned to New York to cover high-end real estate. And although no lives are at stake (that I know of, anyway), it is a world where the emotions of buyers, sellers and brokers can seem just as raw.

How else to explain the juggernaut of reality TV shows about high-end brokers, whose lives will be on full display next month in a third show?

The newest, Bravo's "Million Dollar Listing New York," chronicles three high-end brokers in Manhattan. The original "Million Dollar Listing," which follows the lives of three agents in Los Angeles, is entering its fifth season. It averaged 1.2 million viewers a week last year, its highest-rated season, and is now licensed in 150 countries. There's also "Selling New York," the HGTV series that follows agents from three real estate companies, now in its fourth season.

I was in my teens when "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" made its host, Robin Leach, a household name. The "Million Dollar Listing" shows give viewers the same voyeuristic pleasure of peeking inside spectacular homes and letting them imagine, "What if that were me?"

But there is something more emotionally charged about the buying and selling of real estate — especially in the stratospherically priced Manhattan market — that goes far beyond simple video tours of palatial homes. The heat of the deal can bring out the worst in people. And compared with a lot of the reality shows that feel less than real, the sight of people digging in their heels on deals can often make for don't-touch-that-remote television.

"We are so emotionally invested in our homes that to show the looking and the actual negotiating and transaction process felt like you were sort of digging into a vein," said Shari Levine, the senior vice president for production at Bravo.

In the show's premiere, John Rosatti, a downtown client, informs his agent, Fredrik Eklund of Prudential Douglas Elliman, that he wants to be paid \$2.2 million for his apartment, warning his agent, "I don't want you to [expletive] this up." Mr. Eklund frowns.

In Episode 2, Mr. Eklund reaches an impasse with a client when she stubbornly refuses to drop the price of her converted textile factory to under \$7 million. "It is worth that and every penny more because of the detail that we have put into this," she says. "I am not being thick-headed."

Another agent, Michael Lorber of Prudential Douglas Elliman, loses a deal for an eager Newport socialite when he waits too long over the weekend to submit her offer. She is shaking and visibly upset with him.

The show's third broker, Ryan Serhant of Nest Seekers, charms an Asian heiress into hiring a professional organizer to deal with a bedroom stuffed with 800 pairs of shoes and dozens of high-priced jackets and gowns (the room is locked so that only she can enter by using a thumb-print entry pad). She is crestfallen when he explains that buyers are unimpressed by the white Carrera marble and hidden plasma television, and that the price needs to be dropped from the original \$4.4 million listing.

In a later episode, Mr. Serhant told me, he copes with a buyer looking for a home for him and his pet wallaby. "Some people might think that was too weird," Mr. Serhant said. "But I strapped that wallaby to my chest and figured out how I could make it work."

Bravo's production team searched high and low and found three agents who are young, single and all seemingly on the rise (certainly they will be after their star turns). Mr. Eklund is a 34-year-old Swede who starred as Tag Eriksson in gay adult films back home before becoming an agent. On the show he calls himself "the closer, and the listing machine."

He has a friendly rivalry with Mr. Serhant, a former hand model and short-lived soap star whose character on "As the World Turns" was a biochemist gone bad.

They are tall, perfectly groomed and dressed in pricey tailored suits, and there are plenty of shirtless scenes where Mr. Eklund and Mr. Serhant show off their lean bodies.

Mr. Lorber, who is “5-foot-8 on a good day,” is the son of Howard Lorber, the chairman of Prudential Douglas Elliman. A lawyer by training, he once interned with Donald Trump. At 32, he dyes his graying hair on the show and admits his tailored wardrobe is more “60-year-old man.” (Mr. Serhant, at 27, has flecks of grey as well, no doubt worsened by his heated negotiations with two French brokers in Episode 2.)

They lead a fast-paced life. Mr. Eklund and Mr. Serhant are up at 5 a.m. and in the gym by 5:30. Mr. Eklund can’t put down his BlackBerry, even in the whirlpool.drama.

Mr. Serhant shaves his arms in the shower and brags about a recent conquest to his unimpressed female assistant. “I have very little time,” he tells one blonde date, “so the drunker I get you the faster, the better it is for me and you and the end game.” She smiles and stirs her martini.

There are confrontations, like when Mr. Eklund tries to steal a potential client from Mr. Serhant at a restaurant. Mr. Serhant snipes that Mr. Eklund “has done gay porn.” The woman, unfazed, says she is impressed by Mr. Serhant’s claim that he did \$100 million in sales in a year. “Oh really? I did a billion,” Mr. Eklund fires back.

There are moments intended to balance the ruthless dealmaking. The camera crew followed Mr. Eklund to Stockholm, where he owns a real estate agency. He gives his mother money and his father tells his son he needs more life balance.

Mr. Lorber searches for ways to earn the respect of his powerful father, who is also his boss. Compared to the other two agents, he is refreshingly nerdy, accumulating inane factoids like the importance of white marble in Namibian culture. He gets [Botox](#) injections in his armpits to treat his excessive sweating.

When I visited a Jean Nouvel-designed penthouse with sun-splashed views of the Hudson River, listed at \$22 million, Mr. Lorber said he was into “floor porn” — his Midtown home is filled with floor plans by famous architects.

That the television exposure will be good for business seems all but assured. The cast members of “The Real Housewives” shows have published more than a dozen books and received product endorsement deals for everything from makeup to jewelry to sex toys, according to The Hollywood Reporter.

After Mr. Eklund recently did some “crossover” filming with the Los Angeles cast for the upcoming fifth season, Josh Altman, a broker on the show, sent him an e-mail. “Freddy, your business is going to double globally,” he told him. “Get ready.”

Perhaps these shows will be as popular in Chile someday soon. That country knows a thing or two about