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TELEVISION REVIEW

## 'The Real Housewives of New Jersey'

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Andrei Jackamets / Bravo

**UP THE ANTE:** "New Jersey's" stars include Caroline Manzo, second from left, Teresa Giudice and Dina Manzo

**With the fourth series comes the charm as Bravo's 'Housewives' franchise finally gets real.**

By MARY McNAMARA, Television Critic  
May 12, 2009

So it's true. If you live long enough, you will find a "Real Housewives" to love.

After all the head-shaking, hand-wringing, migraine-plagued years I have spent trying to understand the appeal of "The Real Housewives of Orange County," "New York" and "Atlanta" -- the women are so phony and hateful, the men so bloated and ridiculous, the setups so stupidly obvious -- here come "The Real Housewives of New Jersey." And they are just wonderful.

Maybe it's the accent, that consonant-slurring, vowel-stretching rumble that says there's nothing so terrible it can't be solved with a slap in the head or another dollop of ricotta. Maybe it's the opening: shots of the traffic and freeway signs so reminiscent of "The Sopranos" you find yourself scanning restaurant scenes for Edie Falco. Maybe it's the beefy, slightly sweaty husbands and their dismissive but still loving amusement as the cameras move in.

Or maybe it's just that the women, two of them sisters married to brothers, their sister-in-law, their nice friend and New Jersey's own Cruella de Vil are actually recognizable as human beings, even with their wads of cash and strange relationship with eyeliner.

Caroline and Dina Manzo are the sisters married to brothers. Caroline's husband owns one of Jersey's "premiere event facilities," a concept so wonderfully hilarious it makes the show worth watching in

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Here Caroline and two of her three children also work, thoughtfully providing a backdrop of weddings, confirmations and other gown-, centerpiece- and catering-heavy festivities that promise to evoke fond memories of the "Godfather" movies. Dina also has an office *en premise*; she's an interior designer and event planner, which I believe are the new code words for unemployed, though I could be wrong.

Jacqueline Laurita is their sweet-faced sister-in-law who has the best "bubbies" (breasts) of the family and doesn't feel the need to add interior designer or event planner to her job description as stay-at-home mom.

The villain of the piece is her friend Danielle Staub, a woman so physically and emotionally taut she seems to have bypassed Pilates for an exercise regimen involving the rack (and not the one synonymous with "bubbies"). Immensely pleased with her many glaring defects, she proudly announces that "You either love me or hate me" with most of us falling immediately into the latter camp.

Teresa Giudice, meanwhile, is so funny and amiable that even her lavish spending on a perfectly *hid-eous* dream house is fun to watch. (Though with a husband in "construction" and a tendency to slap down a hundred grand *in cash*, you have to wonder if there's something else afoot -- this is New Jersey after all.)

In the pilot, Caroline appears to be the sun of this little universe, the slightly stout Mama figure who has her eye on everyone. While almost all of the other variously located "Housewives" are regular candidates for Worst Mother Ever, Caroline seems genuinely, and at times, slavishly devoted to her children. A scene in which the family prepares for a big party is a fabulous window on an actual weird family life.

With such an anchor, "The Real Housewives of New Jersey" promises to do what the rest of the series in the franchise never really did: show upper-middle-class families living something that approximates their actual lives. Sure, there's rigging going on. In the pilot, the dreaded Danielle makes a scene over not being invited on some "girls night out" that these shows are so fond of staging. But these gals seem less interested in creating TV personas or proving themselves the "hottest Housewife" than in reacting the way they might actually react if what was happening were real.

Which in this case, it might just be. Because unlike in Orange County, Atlanta or even Manhattan, real things tend to happen in New Jersey.

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