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TELEVISION

Married to the camera

Life onscreen with Tori and Dean

BY: LARA ZARUM

Cottage country, prepare for the arrival of professional baby-makers Tori Spelling and Dean McDermott. For their next reality show, the two, along with their four young children, are designing their dream vacation home in Orillia, Ontario. *Tori & Dean: Cabin Fever* is set to air in spring 2014.

The pair's long-running reality show, *Tori & Dean: Home Sweet Hollywood* (which began as *Tori & Dean: Inn Love* in 2007 and ran for six seasons) was basically a celebrity gossip magazine come to life. In the manner of *People* and *Us Weekly*, the program presented its subjects (i.e., celebs) as both aspirational and relatable. This ethos was clearly telegraphed through the title, *Home Sweet Hollywood*, as well as the show's opening credits sequence, which began with the brood doing regular family things in their home and ended with their arrival in a red convertible at a swanky Hollywood event, cameras flashing.

In a way, Tori and Dean have a lot in common with *The Sopranos*. Throughout that show's six-season run, there was an implicit suggestion that, as the wife of Tony Soprano, Carmela (Edie Falco) was a kept woman. Marrying a Mafia boss was a guarantee that she'd never have to work a day in her life. But there are moments in which it's clear that Carmela is not satisfied. As her children grow up and occupy less of her energy and time, she turns to little projects—funded by Tony, of course, like when she asks him to buy a piece of property so she can build and design a spec house. She's not working; she's playing at working.

In this analogy—still with me?—Tori and Dean are Carmela and television is Tony. The subtext beneath the family's televised activities—indulging their children, redecorating their home, gardening in their spacious backyard—is the show itself, the operation bankrolling those activities. The cameras need something to capture, so the family makes a production of the kinds of things most couples have to squeeze into their legitimately busy schedules.

This gets especially dicey on Tori and Dean's Facebook page, where fans blithely disregard the fact that the Spelling-McDermott brood is getting paid handsomely to run errands on camera. On it, you'll find comments like, "You both are wonderful parents your kids are beautiful. Thanx for workin so hard for the viewing public!! You guys have a great day!!!" and "I love watching you guys. You all are so down to earth and all-American even though you guys are actors. I love that you guys are extending your family. You are the best parents." It's jarring to see fans

engaging with these people (or their online presence, anyway) as if they're just regular folks, while at the same time worshipping them. But there's a comfort to the rhythm of television, of watching a family grow over the course of six years.

Unlike other reality-show families, like *Jon and Kate Plus Eight*'s Jon and Kate Gosselin and the *Honey Boo Boo* clan, Tori and Dean are credited as executive producers on all their programs. Their reality-TV empire spans networks, from Oxygen and the Cooking Channel to HGTV and VH1, which produced the show that kicked off Spelling's self-mythologizing tendency, 2006's *So NoTORious*.

That show was a semi-fictionalized account of Tori's life after the death of her father and the revelation that he left her only \$800,000 of his \$500-million estate—of which her estranged mother, Candy, was the executor. Besides being legitimately funny, *So NoTORious* demonstrated Tori's playful tendency to make fun of herself. You've got to admire her spunk—not many celebrities would open up a bed and breakfast (the premise of *Tori & Dean: Inn Love*) and serve other people, even if it was for the benefit of the cameras. She once became an ordained minister to perform a wedding at the B&B. Bizarre, sure, but definitely not predictable.

It's both ironic and totally fitting that a woman whose family dysfunctions have been highly publicized has chosen to turn her own family into an industry. And the concept of living in front of the cameras becomes more "normal" with every new season of television. Far less watchable celebrities—Snooki and Kris Jenner come to mind—have admitted that they hope to live their whole lives onscreen. For the daughter of the most prolific TV producer ever, it almost makes sense. On one episode of *Home Sweet Hollywood*, Tori wants to redecorate the living room using the TV set as a focal point. Dean pushes back, but Tori is persuasive. As she argues, "TV is the heart of the family."

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W. K. Lis

Orillia? Hmm. Wonder if they'll film them at nearby Casino Rama? While for most of us, winning there would be tax-free, it may cause tax problems for Americans.

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5:30 pm on September 10, 2013

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 **DumDum**
Great point!

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7:09 pm on September 10, 2013

 Report