

# If At First You Don't Succeed

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There is no shortage of aphorisms about the virtues of repetition. “Practice makes perfect” is familiar to anyone who has had the joy of being inexperienced, the phrase itself being a sort of stand-in for actual progress. Rarer are meditations on failure, or the impossibility of perfection itself. *The Rehearsal*, a show by Nathan Fielder, stands as a counterweight to these platitudes. The show’s premise is simple enough: What if you could rehearse awkward or difficult situations until you were ready for all possible outcomes? Fielder, the director, writer, and arguable main character, offers this possibility to the show’s other participants, volunteers who’d like to practice various life events before experiencing them in reality. As Fielder states, he wanted to convey to his clientele that “if you plan for every variable,” happiness doesn’t have to be subject to chance.<sup>1</sup> This is the show’s promise and failure; that a good life can be predicted, and that a bad one can be avoided through meticulous planning. *The Rehearsal* captures and refracts the frustration of modern life’s promise – that success is a matter of planning – through the lenses of family, career, and religion. After a brief discussion of two other contemporary analyses of the show, I will analyze its portrayal of failure through repetition in modern life.

It is perhaps unsurprising that a show as odd as Fielder’s has left people confused and divided. Two articles in *The New Yorker*, one highly critical of the show, one more sympathetic, offer insight into what so divides the viewer. In the former, Richard Brody argues that Fielder’s “gaze” is predicated on a sort of contempt for the participants.<sup>2</sup> He outlines the efforts of a man who “is pulling the strings,” and thus cannot extricate himself from a power dynamic on the show, one

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1 *The Rehearsal*, season 1, episode 1, “Orange Juice, No Pulp,” directed by Nathan Fielder, written by Nathan Fielder, aired July 15, 2022, HBO, 2022, HBO Max.

2 Richard Brody, “The Cruel and Arrogant Gaze of Nathan Fielder’s *The Rehearsal*,” *The New Yorker*, October 9, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/the-cruel-and-arrogant-gaze-of-nathan-fielders-the-rehearsal>.

in which Fielder ultimately rules.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Brody concludes that the show cannot capture its own object, the genuine experience of its subject. For him, the show is plagued by “the failure to find a dramatic form,” for its content and its implications.<sup>4</sup> At the other end of the spectrum is Naomi Fry’s analysis, which finds “something intensely comical,” in the show’s extreme efforts to duplicate experiences for its subjects.<sup>5</sup> For her, the show exists as a kind of Rube Goldberg machine built to solve problems in life that do not need such extreme solutions.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately though, Fry still views *The Rehearsal* as a desperate attempt to reach beyond Fielder’s “relentless solipsism.”<sup>7</sup> What neither of these analyses entertain is the possibility that *The Rehearsal*, rather than being the cruel take on reality tv and control that it appears to be, is a work about the difficulty of truly accomplishing kindness. That Fielder, and the show, fail to be kind is perhaps the one thing in the show that is not a product of design.

Fielder strives to practice having a family but only becomes further removed from the feelings of closeness that are the ideal of family life. The majority of the show follows a rehearsal designed for Angela, a 44-year-old woman who wants to practice raising a child (dubbed Adam). On its face, this is the ideal test case for the show’s premise. As Fielder states, “most people don’t have the resources,” to properly create a simulation of parenthood.<sup>8</sup> (Un)Predictably, this whole production unravels, failing to prepare Angela for parenthood in even the loosest sense. Notably, after it becomes obvious that Angela will potentially be rehearsing raising a child alone, (an impossibility for her due to her adamance about raising a child in a two-parent, Christian household) Fielder steps in to raise the practice child with her. He intimates his hope/belief that he “could be a good dad,” and the audience hopes and prays with him.<sup>9</sup> That this is doomed, of course, does not enter into either co-parent’s mind; their mutual participation in this project is an assertion of their belief that practice works. In the midst of this, Fielder introduces another participant, Patrick, whose portion of his grandfather’s estate is being withheld from him by his brother.<sup>10</sup> Patrick solicits Fielder’s help to practice convincing his brother to give Patrick his portion of the will. Through a series of bizarre circumstances designed by Fielder, Patrick has a truly cathartic conversation with his proxy brother and vanishes from the show. Fielder states that he never heard from him again, but

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3 “The Cruel and Arrogant Gaze.”

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5 Naomi Fry, “Don’t Worry, Nathan Fielder Also Hates Himself,” *The New Yorker*, October 9, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/08/15/dont-worry-nathan-fielder-also-hates-himself>.

6 “Don’t Worry.”

7 “Don’t Worry.”

8 *The Rehearsal*, season 1, episode 2, “Scion,” directed by Nathan Fielder, written by Nathan Fielder, Carrie Kemper, Eric Notarnicola, aired July 22, 2022, HBO, 2022, HBO Max.

9 “Scion.”

10 *The Rehearsal*, season 1, episode 3, “Gold Digger,” directed by Nathan Fielder, written by Nathan Fielder, Carrie Kemper, Eric Notarnicola, aired July 29, 2022, HBO, 2022, HBO Max.

muses that “maybe for some, the rehearsal itself is enough.”<sup>11</sup> Critically, Patrick never reaches catharsis with his actual brother, in just the way that Angela, and Fielder, do not achieve the feeling of parenthood. The child actor who was hired to portray the teenage version of Adam, because of Fielder’s imagined negligence as a father, develops a fake drug addiction, ultimately resulting in a fake overdose.<sup>12</sup> Just before the conclusion of his arc, the actor (as Adam) yells “You’re not a dad!” at Fielder, and the fact that this is only a rehearsal is merely an afterthought.<sup>13</sup> The failure, of being a good father and of the method, is real.

*The Rehearsal* demonstrates that success in one’s career, far from being a result of planning, is a matter of pure luck. In another diversion from the main arc of the show, Fielder creates an acting school aimed at producing actors capable of working on rehearsals. Dubbed ‘The Fielder Method,’ the style is aimed at hyper-realism because, as Fielder admonishes his students in class, a bad performance can “ruin someone’s life.”<sup>14</sup> As the only real expert in this method, Fielder should stand out as being the most skilled of all the actors in achieving this goal, but is instead plagued with insecurity that his students will see through his inexperience. He tells us, in voiceover, that he is often “intimidated by actors,” and their assuredness.<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, the audience’s experience with Fielder at this point in the show renders this statement inherently plausible: Fielder is a human meme of insecurity, often standing somewhat apart from the participants in the rehearsals with a laptop attached to his chest with a papoose-like device in order to walk and type simultaneously. However, that Fielder, the recipient of a seemingly unlimited budget from HBO, should be intimidated by a bunch of jobless acting school students is patently absurd. The show explores this dynamic of power and uncertainty in excruciating detail, with Fielder eventually engaging in his own rehearsal of his class, conducted by his own actor doppelganger, with him acting in the role of one of his acting students. After embodying the student, listening to his own lessons through the mouth of his lookalike, Fielder asks, with a sense of horror, “wait, what is this show?”<sup>16</sup> Against the grain of the show’s conceit, practice has inexplicably caused Fielder to lose certainty in his project.

The certainty of faith in *The Rehearsal* serves as stand-in for knowledge of the world. The show’s main participant, Angela, is a born-again Christian, and spends much of her time in *The Rehearsal* speaking about her faith and how much of a mess her life was before she came to Christianity. In a scene from one of her dates (looking for a co-parent for her rehearsal) she talks at length about how certain Christians don’t read the Bible, and how without it, “people start going by their

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11 “Gold Digger.”

12 *The Rehearsal*, season 1, episode 4, “The Fielder Method,” directed by Nathan Fielder, written by Nathan Fielder, Carrie Kemper, Eric Notarnicola, aired August 5, 2022, HBO, 2022, HBO Max.

13 “The Fielder Method.”

14 “The Fielder Method.”

15 “The Fielder Method.”

16 “The Fielder Method.”

opinions.”<sup>17</sup> For her, this is the greatest error one can make. In another scene, we overhear her praying that the show’s production, with its attempts at control, be directed by God because only God, “holds the world together on its axis.”<sup>18</sup> After Fielder moves in with Angela to co-parent Adam, a new difficulty arises in the form of Fielder’s being Jewish. Fielder states that he “still [does] all the holidays and stuff,” and inevitably tries to incorporate this into Adam’s life.<sup>19</sup> However, Angela firmly believes that this is no way to raise a child, stating that she can’t participate in Judaism because it “denies that Christ came and died for us.”<sup>20</sup> The tension of how to raise Adam ultimately becomes a breaking point for Angela’s participation in the show, and Fielder is left to raise a young Adam (the show reset the timeline to before the neglect that caused the older Adam’s OD) alone, as a Jew. Tellingly, the show does not end here, resolved as to the ‘correct’ religion to raise a child with. Instead, Adam’s Judaism tutor is shown admonishing Fielder for not using his platform to advance Israel’s cause. “You have a platform,” she cajoles Fielder, “you should support Israel.”<sup>21</sup> Even religious practice thus dissolves into uncertainty and failure, and the credits of the episode roll with Fielder resolutely not taking a stance on the State of Israel. Importantly though, no one’s opinions or beliefs change throughout the episode or show, and each participant leaves the show believing what they believed when they joined. Only the audience is aware of how much their beliefs have failed to prepare them for reality.

*The Rehearsal* is a singular artifact in our time. Emerging from the wreckage of Covid-19 and the larger alienation of our era, it asks, simply, how we can hope to understand other people. We the audience watch as what seems a simple goal – making life a little easier – spirals out of control. That, at base, “understanding someone is always just a guess,” is both deeply unsatisfying and honest.<sup>22</sup> The show insists that it would be nicer to “pretend that everything is ok,” whilst also refusing to pretend that anything really is.<sup>23</sup> Maybe this is what provokes people to wonder whether everyone on the show is an actor, whether the whole production is itself staged. But in the end, *The Rehearsal* insists that maybe that doesn’t matter, that “life can be more than one thing.”<sup>24</sup> Maybe we can’t really know other people, and instead, kindness is just a process where people “gather only what they need to know,” to keep themselves safe, to feel secure.<sup>25</sup> Because really, if we could try it all again, would we do it any better? I’m not sure.

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17 “Scion.”

18 “Scion.”

19 *The Rehearsal*, season 1, episode 5, “Apocalypto,” directed by Nathan Fielder, written by Nathan Fielder, Carrie Kemper, Eric Notarnicola, aired August 12, 2022, HBO, 2022, HBO Max.

20 “Apocalypto.”

21 “Apocalypto.”

22 “The Fielder Method.”

23 “The Fielder Method.”

24 “Apocalypto.”

25 “Gold Digger.”