ON TELEVISION

THE FINALE OF “THE REHEARSAL” IS OUTLANDISH AND SUBLIME

The first season of Nathan Fielder’s mind-bending show seemed to exhaust all possibilities for its conceit. But the second is, somehow, even more berserk than the first.

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

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Nathan Fielder in “The Rehearsal.” Photograph by John P. Johnson / HBO

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Nathan Fielder, like Andy Kaufman before him, makes performance-art comedy that does not only poke fun at the world but experimentally perturbs it, and he plies this trade in the buffer zone between reality and artifice. He presents himself as something of a Kaspar Hauser figure for the age of artificial intelligence, a foundling raised not by wolves but by an advanced and affectless race of extraterrestrial anthropologists. His object is to isolate and mimic the rudiments of human sociability. Fielder's intuition is that many putatively normal people share his own bewildered dread of everyday interactions, which are at once governed by established, if opaque, social norms and subject to unnerving unpredictability. Children learn to tame uncertainty through repetition: they replay interactions in an effort to interpret and control the varied challenges of their environment. Adults who adopt this tactic are diagnosed with repetition compulsion. Actors, however, transform such neurotic behavior into the virtue of professionalism, and, as such, he sees their work as a broadly applicable practice for any civilian beset by doubt and equivocation. This is the premise of the "The Rehearsal," Fielder's attempt to deploy perfect facsimiles of actual environments—night-life venues, apartments—to serve as human sandboxes for dry-run iterations. The whole thing has only worked because Fielder shows an unflagging commitment to the bit. His transformation of artifice into authenticity has been rendered credible by the delighted, deadpan alacrity with which he set vast sums of HBO's money on fire.

Fielder promises his participants lives of greater freedom and ease: to playact the game of life in a controlled, low-stakes setting would prepare them to meet actual interactions with newly relaxed spontaneity. In the first, relatively sane example, a New Yorker named Kor frets that his pub-trivia team will excommunicate him if he comes clean about the fact that he does not, in fact, have a master's degree; Fielder not only hires an actor to play Kor's friend and teammate, he re-creates an

entire Brooklyn bar to give their fake conversations an asymptotic proximity to the real. By the end of the season, Fielder has taken his approach to its logically batshit conclusion: he scaffolds the entirety of a child's development from infancy to adolescence.

Fielder, however, was not just the stage manager of these experiments in preëmptive reënactment; he was also his own primary client. Fielder was well aware that no amount of coaching could successfully tame the disorderly inner lives of his participants, and, as he ratcheted up the absurdity of their environments, the authenticity of their emotions became key props on a stage ultimately set for Fielder himself. He needed them to have real feelings in the hope that he might develop a greater facility for natural human interaction. The infinite regress of recursive self-awareness is pushed so far that it collapses in on itself, and Fielder's faith in artifice proves no match for the inescapable power of the real. The finale—where Fielder, who by this point has thoroughly undermined his own ability to separate rehearsal from reality, breaks character and appears to identify as the actual father of one of his child actors—is a shocking and genuinely destabilizing confrontation with sincerity. Then again, maybe it's not.

The first season of "The Rehearsal" seemed to exhaust all possibilities for the conceit that acting—the science of the artificial—could provide a prophylactic for life. It did not. The second season is, somehow, even more berserk than the first, but it's also more disciplined and coherent. (If you haven't watched the show or got to the finale, two words of warning: there are spoilers to come, and even my attempt to describe what happens will make me sound as though I, too, have lost my mind.) The quarry of authentic feeling proved a red herring; Fielder has abandoned his interest in interiority for an interest in conduct, and the idea that there is no aspect of human behavior that cannot be "learned, or at least emulated." The pilot episode opens with an ostensibly in-flight exchange between an airplane captain and his first officer. When the captain, in a show of stereotypical arrogance, ignores his first officer's reservations about their trajectory, their little collegial quarrel is definitively resolved by an unceremonious and fiery

plunge to earth. Fielder then materializes as a demonic observer backlit by an inferno. As the camera pans out, we see that the whole episode was conducted not at cruising altitude but in a flight simulator. Aviation is a domain where the operative metaphor of the show—that life is amenable to simulation—can be fully literalized.

Fielder, or at least his character, explains that he has a hobbyist's interest in plane crashes, and the first episode uses cockpit voice recordings as dramatic screenplays for the dark re-creation of a series of actual disasters. These prove out Fielder's intuition that aviation safety depends on candid cockpit conversation, a particularly high-stakes—and, crucially, perhaps tractable—example of Fielder's over-all preoccupation with the fear and anxiety that inhibits genuine communication. Fielder believes that his own expertise in elaborate role-playing scenarios might represent a major contribution to aviation safety. Although he would like to be taken seriously as a moral actor, he can't renege on his obligation to entertain: "Even though I had the resources to potentially solve this life-or-death issue and save real humans from dying, I was given this money to create a comedy series. So far, I was failing. We were over ten minutes into this episode with zero laughs."

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On three interconnected warehouses in Los Angeles, he constructs an exacting replica of an entire terminal of the Houston airport, complete with a Brookstone

and chain restaurants. He hires more than seventy actors to perform the roles of security personnel, gate agents, and Panda Express employees. All of this infrastructure creates a context of verisimilitude for fake rehearsals designed to bear real fruit. He invites a cohort of real pilots to step outside of their usual self-conceptions and inhabit playful exchanges between First Officer Blunt, who never hesitates to express what's really on his mind, and Captain Allears, who graciously accepts criticism in the spirit of self-improvement. These exercises might liberate them from the constraints of their routine self-consciousness.

Although the presumption of the show is that the aviation industry has neglected the interpersonal dimension of the cockpit, the discipline of "crew resource management" has existed for more than four decades. Fielder's obsessive research seems to have missed the seminal contribution of "NASA Technical Memorandum 78482," which called for the replacement of the archetypally imperious captain and deferential first officer with a more forgiving and comfortable cockpit culture. As William Langewiesche, the greatest aviation journalist of all time, put it in a harrowing 2014 article about the crash of Air France 447, this emphasis on candid teamwork included nothing short of "a new approach to the use of simulators." My point is not that "The Rehearsal" has been anticipated. It's that Fielder may be a lunatic, but he's definitely not crazy.

In the famous "Bad Faith" chapter of Jean-Paul Sartre's "Being and Nothingness," the reader is asked to consider the example of a waiter in a café, whose fidelity to a set of gestures represent his aspiration to the status of automaton. His identification with his identity as a waiter provides a refuge from the overwhelming terror of existential freedom. Sartre contrasts the timid fixity of the waiter with the heroically protean figure of the actor, who treats the recitation of a script as merely one of many games that he might play. Actors are free insofar as they recognize their performances as performances. Their "true" self is treated with the lightness of yet another role.

When Sartre wrote his book, this classical approach to character was about to be superseded by Method acting. Method actors didn't simply imitate their characters and pantomime their sentiments; they *became* them and *felt* their emotions. These contrasting modes were encapsulated in the apocryphal exchange between Laurence Olivier and Dustin Hoffman on the set of "Marathon Man." Hoffman, legend has it, stayed up for three straight days to deplete himself for the sake of realism. Olivier is said to have turned to Hoffman and said, "My dear boy, why don't you just try acting?"

Classical acting, in its usual failure mode, feels rote or mechanical. The failure mode of Method acting, by comparison, is that the obsessive attempt to manufacture an inner state of authentic intensity has no limiting principle, and can drive you out of your mind. This dynamic is taken to its ultimate extreme by the narrator of Tom McCarthy's cult novel "Remainder." In the wake of a traumatic brain injury and subsequent legal settlement, the book's narrator spends a great deal of money in the compulsive attempt to re-create the physical settings, and reënact the personal interactions with which he associates vague feelings of profound contentment. His increasingly psychotic dedication to reënactment eventually devolves into theatrical violence and destruction, including drive-by shootings and a bank heist. Fielder, too, flirts with pathological extremes. Many moments from the season—the creation of a fake reality-show competition, featuring pilot judges, called "Wings of Voice"; the theory that Chesley Sullenberger spent the final twenty-three seconds of his descent into the Hudson River listening to Evanescence's "Bring Me to Life"—are frankly bananas.

"The Rehearsal" thus bears a superficial resemblance to the spiralling madness of "Remainder," but the signal difference is that Fielder—who teaches his own acting technique and calls it the Fielder Method—isn't distracted by the chimera of authentic feeling. In one of the show's many intertextual references to his other work, he recalls what it was like to play opposite Emma Stone in his project "The Curse": "I didn't understand how an actor could feel love in a completely fake

relationship." Acting, as he sees it, isn't about convincing yourself but convincing other people. Fielder populates his own shows with actors because their remit is to convey feelings—a crucial part of his incessant rehearsals—without *actually* having them. He can experiment with his own performances without worrying they might take his responses personally. They are not, after all, regular people. They're professionals.

The object of Fielder's rehearsals is not the nurturance of some elusive inner truth; it's the hope that he might make his own performance of self in everyday life more convincing. He is not interested in authenticity or inner depth. He would just like to learn how better to be taken at face value: "Every public opportunity I've had in my life to convey sincerity I've turned into a complete joke."

The finale of this season, "My Controls," is one of the most astonishing, ridiculous, and sublime episodes of television I think I've ever seen. It opens on a barren soundstage, where Fielder is holding auditions for the role of airplane passenger. The actors have prepared to deliver lines drawn from a beverage-service scene: "Diet Pepsi, please," and other in-flight banalities. These scenes, Fielder explains, will be performed not on a soundstage replica but at actual cruising altitude. There's one small caveat. The role of the pilot will be played by Fielder himself.

Two years earlier, he explains, he began to take flying lessons. He concedes he was "not a natural, especially when it came to landing the plane." One of his flight instructors told him that he was "the slowest learner they ever taught." They advised that he return home and focus on "chair flying"—sitting on a piece of furniture, in other words, and acting as though he's piloting an aircraft. There is an element of manifestation at work: he tells himself he is "confident in every decision," and even imagines bragging to his pilot friends about particularly smooth landings. Somehow this works, and all of a sudden he sticks his actual landings. He gets his pilot's license.

Over a short succession of harrowing videos taken from the back seat of various rideshares—one driver texts, another scrolls through TikTok—he makes a final bid for his campaign against conflict aversion as a genuine public service: "We're all just people in the back of an Uber, trying to avoid an awkward conversation, and I intend to prove that." After having failed to secure regulatory, congressional, or industry interest in his scheme to reform cockpit communication, he proposes a plan that's just crazy enough to work—or to kill himself and a hundred and fifty others. Although this seems not only narratively but morally and legally preposterous, he explains that an obscure loophole will allow him to captain his own 737 as long as there are no paying passengers. If he instead flies actors—people who are at once real and make-believe—he's technically in the clear.

With less than three hundred hours of flight time—about a fifth of the minimum required to qualify for a job as a commercial pilot—Fielder pursues his 737 type rating. The whole of his training, his instructor tells him, will take place in a simulator. He will never fly the actual aircraft until he and his hundred and fifty actors board the plane for real. Despite his bedrock commitment to the principles of rigorous simulation, it takes him a theatrical beat to convince himself that the simulator must be "real" enough to gamble with the lives of real people. A month later, he becomes the least experienced pilot licensed to fly a 737 in North America.

There's one hitch. This season has highlighted his popularity in the autism community, which appreciated "The Rehearsal" as a vivid illustration of "masking," or the neurodivergent tendency to study and mimic standard social intercourse. The thought appears to cross his mind that the condition might account for his own social perplexity. This comes to a head when he is faced with the F.A.A.'s required medical questionnaire. A doctor tells him that none of the psychological conditions mentioned on the form are materially relevant unless they interfere with "the capacity to perform adequately." If this external, behavioral appraisal seems dubiously sufficient, Fielder submits to a special fMRI that purports to peer inside his brain for more concrete evidence, but he won't have the results in time

to fly. He checks the "no" box on the form. From a desk in a bleak hotel room, in his full pilot's regalia, he turns to address the camera: he is going through with this certifiably demented plan to show "how hard it can be for any pilot to say what they're thinking in a cockpit environment"—not on rare occasions but "on every single airline flight." Plenty of art is a metaphor for our inability to connect with one another. Most of it doesn't entail a mortal risk to a hundred and fifty people for the sake of a television comedy program.

One of the pilots who served as a judge for the singing competition "Wings of Voice" is also an aspiring reality-television producer, and he agrees to sign on as Fielder's first officer. As they are preparing to complete the preflight checklist, the first officer says something slightly uneasy about how actors in films and television don't usually fly their own planes. Fielder seems a little peevish, reminding his colleague that he's not *just* an actor or comedian: "I'm a pilot too, I guess." As they prepare for takeoff, Fielder welcomes everyone aboard "on behalf of your entire flight crew, and, of course, HBO."

The flight—two hours out into the desert and back to the San Bernardino airport—passes uneventfully, and Fielder gets his chance to play Captain Allears to his First Officer Blunt, who tentatively points out some minor errors on the captain's part. Fielder approaches the final descent with some trepidation, offhandedly asking his first officer if the process works in real life the way it works in the sim, but he nails the landing—both literally and figuratively. The assembled actor-passengers applaud him from the tarmac. He muses, in voice-over, that "no one sees what goes on in the cockpit, and, as long as you get everyone down safely, that's all it takes to be their hero." The principle of the rehearsal has been vindicated by ground truth.

As the winner of "Wings of Voice" sings Captain Sully's favorite Evanescence song, Fielder receives a voice mail about his fMRI results. He stares at the screen for a few seconds before deleting the message. The outward competence he

demonstrated as a pilot renders any diagnosis irrelevant. It's not just that he doesn't care whether he has been deemed autistic or not. It's that the mysteries of interiority are entirely beside the point. What the show ultimately stages is an unsentimental rejection of the entire edifice of authenticity, and the cult of identity it inspires. He might be autistic and a comedian, but he's also now a pilot, one with a new side gig for a company that transports empty 737s. The series ends with a montage of his cockpit adventures. He has spent his career trying to figure out if he's O.K. inside, and now that burden has been lifted. "They only let the smartest and best people fly a plane of this size, and it feels good to know that," he concludes. "No one is allowed in the cockpit if there's something wrong with them. So, if you're here, you must be fine." ♦

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