



CRISIS DU JOUR:
It's always
sweeps season
on the David
Andrejko Show.

[FIELD GUIDE TO THE DRAMA QUEEN]

Scene Stealers

THEY CAN SPIN RIVETING SHOWS OUT OF DULL MOMENTS—AND TEMPESTS OUT OF PEACEFUL TIMES.
BY JENNIFER MAGID

FOR NEW YORKER David Andrejko, nothing is worse than being bored—or boring. The 20-year-old actor, mime, and children's bookstore employee is always thinking of ways to inject excitement into life. "The other day I was so fed up with changes around the store that I tried to stage a walkout. Unfortunately, my efforts failed," he says. On the rebound from the

thwarted coup, Andrejko threw himself into a display table, causing a toy train to crumble into pieces. "I'm just lucky I am an excellent worker."

Each day, Andrejko swings from crisis to crisis. A recent trip to the video store called for an outburst: "The employees happened to close it a little early for their own convenience. Well let me

tell you, I was not having it," he says. "I was ripping hard on that handle, trying to open the door. I was *devastated*."

Drama queens and kings enliven dull parties and crack the best jokes during staff meetings. They add a welcome splash of color to a black-and-white scene. But their insatiable hunger for attention can look a lot like arrested development. If they don't keep in check their need for an adrenaline rush and a captive audience, they risk spinning themselves into caricatures—rarely respected and eventually resented for their selfishness and the chaos they create.

Baby Drama

HOW INTENSE YOUR feelings are is largely biological, says Drew Westen, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at Emory University in Atlanta. So drama queens and kings may be naturally emotional and expressive. But it's likely a combination of genes and family environment that foster this outré personality.

Do neglectful adults spawn little divas? "There is evidence that parents who are too attuned to their own emotions and not enough to their kids tend to produce children who are insecurely attached," Westen says. These kids will, understandably, make noise and flail around to get others focused on them and their needs, fearing that it is the only way they will be taken care of.

Andrejko doesn't remember being ignored as a child. But signs that a life of drama was in store for him appeared early on: "In the fourth grade I thought I was the reincarnation of Judy Garland on a mission to reunite the remaining cast members of *The Wizard of Oz*."

Played to the Hilt

ANDREJKO'S ANTICS CAN be destructive—at least to toy trains—but he's not terrorizing his relatives by throwing dishes against the wall at Thanksgiving. A glance at the clinically diagnosable varieties of dramatic personalities, though, can help us understand milder divas. The extreme drama queen likely suffers from histrionic personality disorder (which

affects about 2 percent of Americans). They require excessive approval and reassurance, and they may also exhibit dramatic speech.

"They tend to exaggerate their thoughts and feelings, making everything sound more important than it really is," says Sheri Spirt, an assistant professor of psychiatry at NYU Medical Center. "They are often extroverted. They throw tantrums if they are not the center of attention. It is very common in actresses, as this behavior is advantageous for them." They tend to be unaware of their real feelings, are usually overly concerned with physical attractiveness, and dress in a sexually seductive manner.

Our ways of talking about this sort of behavior are female-oriented, perhaps

pathological: the hysterical personality. "They can be cheerleaders who are overly enthusiastic and not terribly self-knowing, who keep negative emotions away by denying negative things, which makes them seem shallow or superficial."

A Bad Act

DIVA BEHAVIOR CAN be costly. Conjuring hectic scenes can make you feel alive, but could simultaneously be taking a toll on your health. Your entertaining fits are experienced as episodes of acute stress to your body; they leave you awash in chemicals such as adrenaline and cortisol, which speed up heart rate and suspend digestion. When you're pulling your stunts all the time, says Ellen McGrath, a clinical psychologist and life coach in

Wanted: a quick adrenaline rush and a captive audience.

because histrionic personality disorder is much more common in women than men. "Given that we socialize boys not to be terribly emotionally expressive, it takes something pretty strong to give a boy an overly dramatic style," says Westen. "One of the ways that you can get like this is if you are more effeminate. There is a whole literature on gay males and females having, as early as young childhood, more characteristics that are normatively of the other gender."

Drama queens also share some features of borderline personality disorder, which is characterized by instability in identity and relationships. These people experience intense mood swings. "You often feel when you're with them they're terribly engaged with you and as soon as you're out of sight, you're out of mind," says Spirt.

Westen points to another related personality type, one that isn't necessarily

New York, "it's like having a wave of Drano go through your body."

High drama triggers a fight-or-flight reaction in other people, notes McGrath. That means the drama queen's audience members tend to get riled up themselves or they shut down completely. "It's nice to discharge a lot of feelings and dump them on somebody else," McGrath says. You may feel better temporarily after an outburst, but leaving everyone else off-kilter is not an effective way to get your needs met, nor will it strengthen your connections to others. While those with strong emotions can be gripping, they also wear us down. "The tolerance for these people wanes," says Spirt. "Like the boy who cried wolf, after a while they become hard to take seriously."

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HOW TO DROP OUT OF THE DRAMA CLUB

"DRAMA IS A STATE YOU CREATE, NOT SOMETHING THAT HAS TO BE," SAYS ELLEN MCGRATH.

■ ACCEPT A NEW ROLE

Commit to dialing it down. Leave yourself "no more drama!" Post-it notes and tell friends you're working on becoming less hammy and demanding.

■ BECOME A SUPPORTING ACTOR

The next time you're in a social situation, pay attention to everyone else's (more subtle) dramas as they unfold. Try to enjoy the show, without inserting yourself into the spotlight.

■ RESIST GOING ON STAGE

Drama queens and kings are action people—they express feelings before they've thought about them. Notice when you're getting triggered into drama mode, take a deep breath—and be quiet.

■ PRACTICE YOUR LINES

Verbalize the problem that makes you feel like acting out, suggests McGrath. Instead of breaking into a rhapsody of insults about the rude bank teller, ask her to speak to you more respectfully. Instead of locking yourself in the bedroom and sobbing loudly, tell your partner how he's hurt your feelings.

■ DON'T MAKE DIVA DEMANDS

You may have learned that throwing a tantrum will eventually get you your way. Stop making unreasonable requests of those who comply because they're afraid of your antics.