



TV

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Reality TV's Millionaire Matchmaker Is An Unlikely Feminist Icon

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Photo: Frazer Harrison/Getty Images Entertainment

“You’re on your death bed,” Patti Stanger says, looking me in the eye across the breakfast table. “Are you going to remember your career advancements, or are you going to remember who loved you?” Stanger has made her name issuing abrasive advice and warnings like this on her popular Bravo reality TV show, “The Millionaire Matchmaker.”

The show, which Stanger has starred in since its premiere in 2008—and which will air its 100th episode next month—was built on the idea that rich, hapless men need help finding a suitable mate, and that their attempts to meet The One might be both entertaining and instructive. Stanger is something like a Jewish mother crossed with a Beverly Hills real estate agent: meddlesome, demanding, but extremely polished and strangely professional.¹ She matches her millionaires—and, more recently, her “millionairesses,” as she calls them—with generally younger, hotter, and poorer mates.

The camera films as Stanger interviews potential matches and introduces them to the millionaires; the millionaires choose one candidate and organize a date, where they put Patti's lessons into practice.

Stanger counsels the women on her show to be coy, not to call, never to take the lead. Sometimes, her advice to women is sensible: Take care of your appearance. Sometimes, it is sexist: [Dumb yourself down](http://www.thefrisky.com/2011-09-30/patti-stangers-relationship-theories-debunked/) - <http://www.thefrisky.com/2011-09-30/patti-stangers-relationship-theories-debunked/> - . Sometimes, it is ridiculous: Do not have red hair. The complexity of dating is reduced to a numbers game: Let the man do three-quarters of the talking on the first date. Don't have more than two drinks. Every four times he takes you out, do one nice thing for him.

Though its star endorses a gender code most feminists would scorn, "The Millionaire Matchmaker" has a surprising number of reluctant fans among the same liberal-feminist types who wouldn't be caught dead reading *The Rules* (the 1995 dating manual with chapters like "Don't Stare at Men or Talk Too Much" and "Always End Phone Calls First") or *Marry Smart* (which suggests that co-eds who don't find a husband on campus are doomed). For the record, Stanger says she is "not opposed to the MRS degree" —i.e., graduating college with a husband.

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"I love 'The Millionaire Matchmaker,'" [confesses](http://www.bustle.com/articles/21525-are-any-millionaire-matchmaker-couples-still-together-we-assess-patti-stangers-success-rate) - <http://www.bustle.com/articles/21525-are-any-millionaire-matchmaker-couples-still-together-we-assess-patti-stangers-success-rate> - Jodi Walker, a writer for the feminist website Bustle; "I hate that I love 'The Millionaire Matchmaker,'" she quickly follows. "Can I continue to watch this show and write for Bitch in good conscience?" [wonders](http://bitchmagazine.org/post/true-confessions-millionaire-matchmaker-wtf-am-i-watching) - <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/true-confessions-millionaire-matchmaker-wtf-am-i-watching> - previously closeted Patti Stanger fan Anna Breshears, in a post subtitled, "WTF Am I Watching This?" "Patti doesn't take any shit," says Jessica Grose, who writes for feminist publications like Jezebel and "Double X." "I appreciate any woman who takes no shit."

But while Stanger has become something of a guilty pleasure among contemporary feminists, she resists the F-word. When a *New York Times* writer [asked](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/24/fashion/24Stanger.html?pagewanted=all) - <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/24/fashion/24Stanger.html?pagewanted=all> - her, in 2010, whether she considered herself a feminist, she recoiled: “I didn’t pick Gloria Steinem to be my poster girl.” Five years later, feminism has gone mainstream, at least as a label.

Glamour [has proclaimed](http://www.glamour.com/inspired/2013/09/the-new-do-calling-yourself-a-feminist) - <http://www.glamour.com/inspired/2013/09/the-new-do-calling-yourself-a-feminist> - calling yourself a feminist “the new ‘do.’” British Prime Minister David Cameron provoked a minor scandal when he [declined](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/27/david-cameron-feminist-t-shirt-refusal) - <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/27/david-cameron-feminist-t-shirt-refusal> - to wear a T-shirt identifying himself as a feminist. But Stanger continues to demur. “I’m not anti-feminist,” she told me when we met in February. “But I’m not, like, a lesbian granola-muncher from San Francisco.”

Her own biography reveals a level of ambition and independence she’d likely criticize in a woman on her show. A self-made businesswoman, she’s a brand unto herself: She has published three self-help books, produced and starred in a DVD, and gotten her show renewed seven times. She’s the spokesperson for a weight-loss company and the face of a jewelry line. This month she announced that she has lent her name to a new line of wines, “PS Match,” and plans to open a bar in Los Angeles. When she talks about her family, she betrays a source of this ambition. “My mother was a lady who lunched,” Stanger says. “My father went up and down with money, and yet he never wanted my mother to work. Which blew my mind, because my mother had a college education.”

Stanger exemplifies feminist ideals in more than just her career. At 53, she has never married.² She defies any expectation that women should be humble or soft-spoken. Any man or woman who signs up for Stanger’s services risks getting yelled at or thrown out of her office. She refers to her business as an “empire.” She tells reporters she has a “[gift](http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703559004575256760383984280) - <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703559004575256760383984280> - .” She believes that dispensing her wisdom is a kind of public service; “[educate the world](http://collegecandy.com/2009/03/18/the-5-questions-we-ask-everyone-millionaire-matchmaker-patti-stanger/) - <http://collegecandy.com/2009/03/18/the-5-questions-we-ask-everyone-millionaire-matchmaker-patti-stanger/> - ” about dating is on her ten-year to-do list. She sees her show, and the network that hosts it, as pioneering. “Everybody’s copying us now,” she tells me. “We are the gold standard.”

And Stanger’s rules for men are no less stringent than her rules for women. They must not pursue women who are too young. They must plan a thoughtful activity for their date and pay for it. They must follow up promptly. They must not cross any

boundaries—physical or conversational—without clear signals.

“There is something truly satisfying about the equal opportunity shredding that's going on,” Jezebel writer Tracy Moore says in an email. “Yes, the women have to be perfect specimens—what else is new? But for once in the universe, men don't simply get to be rich and get whatever they want. They still have to act right! Make an effort!”

Part of Stanger's appeal, though, has nothing to do with politics or ideology. If dating ever had rules, Tinder, Match.com, Twitter meetups, Facebook stalking, Craigslist NSA posts and #YesAllWomen have pretty much atomized them. For every so-called dating “expert” offering women advice, another advocates its opposite. Play hard to get; don't play games. Don't make him do all the work; don't make the first move. Put yourself out there; stop looking and you'll find The One.

Patti's rules are steadfast, if unfounded. “Science has proven to us ... wealthy men love straight hair,” she says, when I question her infamous curly-hair ban. The world she creates—where men and women are honest, and men make extra effort, and a powerful woman reigns—is a pleasant female fantasy. And with 99 episodes under her belt, Stanger is more than just a guilty pleasure. She's an icon.

- 1 Stanger grew up in a Jewish family in New Jersey and bills herself as a third-generation matchmaker. Her mother and grandmother built up a reputation for introducing singles at the local temple, though they never charged for their services.
- 2 She recently spent six years dating a real estate executive she met online, even though she counsels women to break up with men who don't propose within a year.

[This post has been updated.](#)