

*The seasoned pros at Bravo who bring the Real Housewives reunions to life reveal what it takes to pull off the dramatic, season-ending spectacles — a marathon of glamour, emotion and controlled chaos, all orchestrated by a sprawling behind-the-scenes crew and the steady hand of host Andy Cohen.*

# Reunion Tour

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT SICARI

**T**he day starts on a Los Angeles soundstage, where the set evokes a breezy lounge in a tropical paradise. At about 10 a.m., Andy Cohen, who is both the host and executive producer of Bravo's nightly talk show, *Watch What Happens Live with Andy Cohen*, and also the king of the Bravoverse, takes his seat at center. He's there to prerecord greetings to fans tuning in for the *Real Housewives* reunion, or as Andy calls it, "their Super Bowl." At 11:15, six ladies filter in, teetering on the highest heels and draped in white and gold bejeweled gowns. Each has her hair intricately arranged and her makeup camera-perfect — at least in these early moments, before emotions invariably rise.

Meanwhile, there's a completely different atmosphere outside, where eight producers, sound and lighting engineers and network executives are packed into two tightly tiered rows in a control-room truck. They face a wall of flatscreens bearing various camera angles and digital codes, in a setting reminiscent of a launch room at NASA. And indeed, not long after the director's first "Action!" cue into Cohen's earpiece, accusations will fly.

Cohen, an EP on the *Real Housewives* franchise, reveals that often, "I'll have producers saying in my ear, 'She did not say that!' or 'That did not happen!'" requiring him to intervene. Before long, one distressed diva will start to cry. A costar will scoot her tightly corseted midsection down the couch — inevitably smearing body makeup on its brand-new fabric — to offer a consoling hug.

All in all, it will take an 8- to 10-hour day of honesty and vulnerability to get these housewives of New York or New Jersey or Beverly Hills or Potomac or Orange County or Miami or Atlanta or Salt Lake City or Dubai to forge any emotional breakthrough — with the help of a whole village of artists and technicians. *Emmy* contributor **Jim Colucci** talked to Cohen and four others who help bring about the catharsis.





*The Real Housewives of Miami* season five reunion  
(from left): Marysol Patton, Alexia Nepola, Larsa  
Pippen, Lisa Hochstein, Andy Cohen, Dr. Nicole Martin,  
Julia Lemigova, Adriana de Moura and Guerdy Abraira

### The Origin Story

**Alex Baskin** (CEO, *32 Flavors*, executive producer of *The Real Housewives of Orange County* and *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*): Reunions started as a much simpler, smaller affair. The first reunion for *Orange County* [in 2006] was actually shot in [costar] Vicki Gunvalson's backyard.

**Cohen:** Then we started shooting in actual, "practical" locations. For the first *New York City* reunion, we shot at the Russian Tea Room, which was too small a space. For the first *Atlanta* reunion, we shot in the lobby of the Hotel Biltmore. The couches we had didn't really work, so we just grabbed some leather couches from another part of the lobby. And for both of those reunions, the women were wearing [business attire].

is to recreate the overall vibe of the show. In the beginning, everybody thought of *New Jersey*, which is where I'm based, as being about McMansions, so the feedback I got was to make it gaudier. For *New York City*, this past reunion was set in a recreation of a penthouse overlooking Central Park. But I also wanted to be specific to the season, which happened to have a pigeon theme running through the episodes. So I thought, "Let's decorate the set with pigeon portraits, as a nod to the silliness of the season."

I pick every detail — from the wallpaper to the props on the tables. Over the years, I've added different elements, from sand to water to live animals, to keep pushing the envelope. One of the shows that changed the game for me was the *Atlanta* reunion for season 11, where we wanted to reference



*The Real Housewives of Dubai* season one reunion (from left): Sara Al Madani, Lesa Milan, Chanel Ayan, Andy Cohen, Caroline Stanbury, Caroline Brooks and Nina Ali



*The Real Housewives of Salt Lake City* season four reunion

**Kathleen French** (SVP, unscripted current production, NBCUniversal): In more recent years we've been using soundstages. We try to make the reunion a continuation of the season. So thematically, what have they done over the season that we can recreate on a stage? My favorite of late was last year's *Miami* reunion, where they recreated a street in Mexico City, where the women had traveled. They were in Latin-inspired dresses, and it was really fabulous.

### The Set

**Scott Sicari** (set designer): Ideally, about six weeks before the reunion, we begin to brainstorm the look of the set. Sometimes, instead of evoking a cast trip, the harder challenge

is the cast trip to Japan. We were still shooting in the same hotel ballroom, and my challenge was to make it look different every year. So I ended up putting a Plexiglas pond in front of the ladies, in place of their coffee table, with live koi jumping around during the show.

### The Couches

**Sicari:** The one thing that has stayed the same is that there is an Andy chair and then two couches. That's where we started in season one, and it's the thing that now cements the *Real Housewives* reunions. The couches are just for the cast members — the husbands don't sit there, but on chairs behind. Once, for the season one *Married to Medicine*

reunion, we tried to put Andy at a desk; he hated it, and it was never done again.

The size of each show's cast varies, so sometimes it's dividing up as many as 12 people onto two very long couches. And some shows have friends who come for just a segment or two, so I'll pick a sectional where I can add and remove seats. All these requirements used to mean having custom couches built, but that was expensive and time-consuming. The challenge now is to make something look expensive — to evoke a glamorous moment on the show — but with a couch from Walmart or Target. Things have become so much more readily available in the nearly 20 years I've been doing the reunions, that now if I need two six-person couches that can be shipped in two days, I can

have a lot that you have to talk about, and maybe account for, that day.

### The Wardrobe

**Shenell Welch (stylist):** As a *Housewives* viewer, and now working with them, I see how important fashion has become over the years. The reunion is something fans look forward to, to see the cast members dress up and showcase their personal style. My challenge is to help each person execute that individually, but still have the cast look great as a collective.

I start by finding out what the production design will be for the season — the concept and the color palette. Then I take it up 10 notches. I create a mood board, then I add snippets of my inspiration and designs that can work on different body



The Real Housewives of Atlanta season 14 reunion

go to places like Wayfair.

### The Seating Chart

**Cohen:** We take the seating order very seriously. The cast members sit based on what they had going on this season, who they're in conflict with and how much they have to say about what's going on. It's definitely not random.

**Baskin:** It's a collective decision, between the network and production. The audience both gets the importance of the seating order and also reads into it too much. Sometimes the audience will think that the seat next to Andy is the "prime" chair, the place to be. No, that means that you

types. I provide a detailed guide for the ladies, so that when it's time to go shopping, they have a pamphlet they can work with. Some of the ladies will go shopping directly from the mood board, some have a design team they work with, some put all their trust in me. Ninety percent of the time, their reunion looks are custom designs, either by designers I have a history with from my work in the pageant world, or by designers they have longstanding relationships with, like Jovani.

Either way, they have to put together their looks within only about three to four weeks, and everything has to be approved by me — including hair, makeup and jewelry. The biggest challenge is not really the budget — they spend their own money — but organizing their ideas and getting some

people out of their comfort zone. I always say 80% of the job is talking them off a ledge. Because a lot of eyes are on the reunion, and they get a lot of press for what they wear. Each reunion look is kind of like their wedding dress, in that they will be remembered for it and want it to be custom to them.

**Cohen:** They tell me what color the set is and what color the ladies are wearing, and then I'll pick a gray suit or a blue suit. My outfits are very boring compared to theirs. I just try not to clash with the set or the women, and I basically figure it out myself.

**French:** My favorite wardrobe story is one Tamra Judge [of *Orange County*] told at our first BravoCon, in 2019. The

them, "This is the time to have that conversation." And I advise first-timers at a reunion the same way: "This is your day." I'll even role-play and say, "Tell me. Say the words and hear them out loud." Because the conversation moves fast, and we want to make sure they all feel they have a voice and know that they can even ask Andy to go back to a topic if they feel they weren't properly represented.

**Baskin:** Talking with the cast, we'll get some sense of what they intend to do. But they may make different choices in the moment. So there's a great, exciting tension. We have the day loosely scripted in terms of what we want Andy to bring up and what topics we expect to arise. Some of the day will be tense, for sure, but we also try to balance it by bringing

*The Real Housewives of New Jersey* season nine reunion



*The Real Housewives of Atlanta* season 11 reunion

moderator asked her why she'd worn a jumpsuit to one of the reunions. She said she'd had a really bad season, and she knew at some point she'd have to make a quick exit from the reunion stage. So she made sure to wear something she could easily run in.

### The Preparation

**French:** Putting together the content for the reunion, the production team spends weeks scouring social media and press about the show, and we also ask for questions from the audience. We learn how viewers are feeling about the season. I also talk at length with each cast member before we go into the reunion about what it is they want to [convey]. I remind

up moments that are more lighthearted. But the unknown of it all makes it very unpredictable. That's the fun of the reunion show. We, all together, are making this show, and it reminds me why we're in television in the first place. It's a real adrenaline rush.

### The Host

**Cohen:** My main job is to be the voice of the viewer and to navigate the women and make sure they all feel heard. On top of that, as a producer, I'm thinking about what will make the best show. In 18 years of doing this — between 200 and 300 reunions at this point — I think I've become a better moderator and better at bringing people together. I know

when to let them fight and when to break in, when we've exhausted a topic, when to home in on someone's question and when to leave them alone.

**French:** Andy is an amazing host. He's kind, he's thoughtful, he's funny and he's quick on his feet. And he can suss out when one of the women is not being totally truthful and is holding back. But he always does it with such generosity and kindness.

### The Edit

**Baskin:** As the tape day progresses, we start to get a good idea of how the show will edit together. There are milestones that aren't going to change, such as where additional guests come in and commercial act breaks. We know we have some funny

and, most important, revealing. We have to tell the audience something they don't already know.

### The Closure

**Cohen:** One of my jobs is to come out of the reunion in a better place than where we started. So hopefully we can move in a direction where we can pick up cameras in a few months and start shooting the next season. A lot has happened at these reunions. At one *Married to Medicine* reunion, we saved a marriage. The reunions have become kind of their own universe.

**French:** I don't think the season is really over until the reunion. I've seen people who I never thought would be friends again



*The Real Housewives of New York City* season 15 reunion (from left): Jessel Taank, Jenna Lyons, Brynn Whitfield, Andy Cohen, Ubah Hassan, Erin Lichy, Sai De Silva and Racquel Chevremont

packages to include, because we need tonal shifts so that the whole thing isn't intensely sad or dramatic. We end up with a roadmap, and days later, we're able to pitch the "grids" to the network, which lays out each act within each episode.

**French:** One of the decisions the producers and network make together is how many parts to divide the reunion into. It's almost always two versus three. Although there was the rare occasion, with *Beverly Hills*, where Erika Jayne spoke so openly [after season 11] for hours about what happened with the arrest of her husband Tom, where it warranted a part four. In general, though, I never want to water down a reunion. It needs to be quick, sharp, funny, entertaining, dramatic

come to a deeper understanding and really start anew, and it was the reunion that allowed them to have that dialogue.

**Baskin:** At the *Orange County* season 18 reunion, there was an exchange between Tamra Judge and Shannon Beador, who had been at odds, and they ended up in a hug that felt like a real moment. I always say the best reunions are the ones where the cast will go out to eat and drink after. Even people who start the day at odds do feel like they're a team, and that they participated in making great television together. I always refer to the reunion as the "final exam" for the season, meaning: Once you do it, move on and let it go. And then toast to the fact that you were on this intense ride together. ☺