



Tuesday, August 18, 2009

'Project Runway's' new catwalk

Hit reality show moves over to Lifetime, L.A. for its sixth season

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For far too long, Lifetime has been viewed as the victimized women's network.

That should change Thursday when Lifetime fights back with its biggest acquisition ever -- "Project Runway" -- which will strut out with a highly buzzed-about sixth season packed with location and production changes.

Lifetime bought the rights more than a year ago, but NBC, which owns Bravo, fought the purchase in court until a resolution was reached this past spring. While some fans are grumbling about the network switch, critics are hailing it as a long-overdue move.

"I think it's a perfect fit," says Elayne Rapping, a pop culture expert, author and professor who teaches television and society courses at the University at Buffalo-SUNY. "Lifetime is known as a women's channel -- Bravo still seems arty. Women watch these kinds of shows, and Lifetime has a brand name connotation, especially for older women who have watched Lifetime for years."

A new basic-cable home isn't the only change of note.

The sixth season will take place in Los Angeles instead of New York for the first time in the show's history, a move made to accommodate the familial needs of co-host and supermodel Heidi Klum. Like the switch from Bravo to Lifetime, fans have bemoaned the relocation in countless blogs all over the Internet.

On the Diary of a Mad Fashionista blog, for instance, the site's host called Los Angeles "the land of the lost."

Ever the optimist, "Project Runway" mentor and co-host Tim Gunn is making the move work. Although he had reservations initially, over time Gunn has tried to allay fears by presenting La-La Land as a logical choice because of the entertainment-driven city's red-carpet and TV and film costuming culture.

In an effort to retain loyal fans and attract new ones, too, Lifetime is celebrating the premiere of "Project Runway" with four hours of programming dedicated to the brand. The night will begin with a two-hour special called "Project Runway: All-Star Challenge," a TV event that will pit eight former fan favorites against one another for a \$100,000 cash prize and bragging rights. The list of names includes costumer and human-hair lover Chris March from season four.

The second-chance special will be followed by the premiere of "Project Runway: Season Six" and that will be followed by a brand-new spinoff called "Models of the Runway." The latter will give the perspectives of the women who wear the show's fashions on the catwalk.

Lifetime has promised not to tamper with any of the elements that have made "Project Runway" a 4-million viewer success. While the production company has changed -- the folks at Magical Elves have been replaced by Bunim-Murray of "The Real World" fame -- both the cable network and the new producers have made a vow of continuity.

"Lifetime has to do all of these things and more to achieve great success," says Mike Bernacchi, a marketing professor at the University of Detroit Mercy. "And it has to be a great success. Anything less than a great success would make the whole move a waste."

6 changes to season six

1. "Project Runway" has moved from New York to Los Angeles (but just for one season; it will return to New York next year).
2. The show has switched networks and is no longer on Bravo but Lifetime.
3. The team putting the show out has changed from the Magical Elves production company to Bunim-Murray, the folks who brought us "The Real World." Can you say hot tub?
4. A new spinoff called "Models of the Runway" will air immediately after "Project Runway" at 11 p.m. It gives the perspective of the women who wear the fashions.
5. The nucleus will no longer be New York's Parsons but L.A's Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising.
6. With the show's new Los Angeles location, the number of A-list celebrity guest judges has increased. Expect appearances from the likes of Lindsay Lohan, Christina Aguilera and Eva Longoria Parker.

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