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TV: Fuzzy forecast for the new year

By Paul Lane

NIAGARA GAZETTE (NIAGARA FALLS, N.Y.)

NIAGARA FALLS, N.Y.— While the nation's television writers and producers remain at odds on a number of financial issues, those charged with filling the airwaves have their hands full as the new year begins.

Most series stopped airing new episodes some time ago and have lingered in rerun limbo for weeks. A few shows such as Fox's "Prison Break" pulled a few original episodes early so that they'd have something fresh to broadcast this month.

For the most part, though, the viewing public will get a heavy dose of gladiators, game shows and other unscripted fare, which does not fall under the umbrella of the Writers Guild of America's strike against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers.

In all, 27 variety series will be on the air within the next few weeks. Among those is NBC's "American Gladiators," a remake of the early 1990s game show pitting people against each other in various obstacles debuting at 9 p.m. Sunday, Jan 6 and a Fox show with the working title "When Women Rule the World" that will premiere in March and have females control a group of unsuspecting males in a primitive location.

All of this has Elayne Rapping searching for alternatives.

"People who actually interested in anything that isn't totally stupid, they're just going to watch movies," said Rapping, an American studies professor at the University at Buffalo who recently increased her Netflix subscription. "None of the shows are really what I consider quality shows."

One saving grace for Fox is the singing competition "American Idol," which returns at 8 p.m. Jan. 15 and has spent five straight seasons in the Nielsen top five. With competing networks' Sanjayas airing against this Carrie Underwood, Fox figures to dominate the ratings even more than it has.

Several other series are also set to make midseason debuts. Fox's "Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles" (debut 8 p.m. Jan. 13, then will air at 9 p.m. Mondays thereafter) follows the heroine from the movie trilogy in the time period in between chapters two and three, while CBS' "Jericho" returns in February.

NBC brings back "The Apprentice" in celebrity form and "1 vs. 100" this week, while ABC will premiere "Cashmere Mafia" this week and reintroduce "Lost" on Jan. 31, even though only half of the season's 16 episodes have been shot; Fox, not wanting to break up its real-time thriller "24," will not run it until the strike is over.

Rather than lose viewers to cable, meanwhile, some networks are using their connections to bring cable viewers to them. NBC, for example, will air episodes of "Monk" and "Law & Order: Criminal Intent" that originally aired on sister station USA Network. CBS will air some programming from sister station Showtime, but has yet to announce what shows.

A recent report from TNS Technology and Media North America finds that any significant impact has yet to be felt. The research found that 22 percent of Americans are watching far less television than they were before, WKBW-TV reported, but that number may soon grow.

"While the effect of the strike has not affected mainstream viewing habits, the decline is quickly approaching," said Don Ryan, TNS vice president. "We will begin to see an overall cut in TV viewing by 10 to 20 percent in the next few weeks, once many shows begin airing reruns of recent episodes."

Late night returns

Night owls were reintroduced to new episodes of most of their favorite shows last night. Series on three networks went back into production this week. NBC's "Tonight Show with Jay Leno" and "Late Night with Conan O'Brien," as well as ABC's "Jimmy Kimmel Live," came back without writers, citing the need to keep the shows' other staffers working.

CBS' "Late Show with David Letterman" and "Late, Late Show with Craig Ferguson," meanwhile, are back with writers thanks to a deal between the guild and those shows' production company, Worldwide Pants. Comedy Central's "The Daily Show" and "The Colbert Report" are set to return Monday without writers.

NBC's "Last Call with Carson Daly" returned without writers Dec. 3, a move Daly said was made because of an ultimatum the network made to either return to work or have 75 staffers laid off.

While the guild was displeased with Daly's decision, its membership does not blame the stars of the other shows, many of whom are also WGA members. Even so, many Hollywood stars are reluctant to appear on these shows for fear it will look like they're crossing the picket line.

"NBC forcing Jay Leno and Conan O'Brien back on the air without writers is not going to provide the quality entertainment that the public deserves," the guild said in a statement. "The only solution to the strike is a negotiated settlement of the issues."

Forcing the issue

Strike negotiations have been stalled since Dec. 7, when the producers gave a list of demands and said they wouldn't talk until those demands were met. That's left little hope of a resolution, but Rapping sees a couple events on the horizon that may push things.

The WGA announced that its members may not write for the Golden Globes ceremony Jan. 13 nor the Academy Awards ceremony Feb. 24. Members of the Screen Actors Guild, most of whom support the writers, said they won't cross the picket line and appear at these ceremonies. That means, Rapping said, that the shows will not go on and producers will be hit where it hurts most.

"Those are big money-makers," she said of awards ceremonies. "The other shows don't make them as much money as these big awards shows do. I'm hoping that this will persuade them to go back to the bargaining table."

If not, though, this strike figures to last a lot longer than the WGA's last walkout, a 1988 standoff that went nearly 22 weeks. Just as networks in that strike used clip shows, reworked scripts and other alternatives to continue broadcasting, so too will they adapt this time.

The only question is at what cost.

"There's some of us who still want quality, but most of America is hooked on these reality shows," Rapping said. "I think (the strike) could be the end of quality TV."

Paul Lane writes for the Niagara (N.Y.) Gazette.

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