STRIKING HOME
WALKOUT PUTS NEXT FALL'S TV SCHEDULE IN PERIL

By HOLLY M. SANDERS

November 19, 2007 -- The Hollywood writers' strike, which is bringing a premature end to the current TV season, now threatens to delay development of next fall's schedule, too.

Industry observers predict that if the walkout doesn't end within weeks it will disrupt the entire program-development process for the 2008-09 season.

"The strike needs to be resolved no later than mid-January or the traditional timetable for network concept development, script writing and pilot production will unravel," according to veteran industry analyst Jack Myers.

The Writers Guild of America and its network and studio bosses agreed to resume negotiations next Monday. There have been no talks since Hollywood scribes walked off the job Nov. 5.

Now is the time when TV writers are supposed to be pitching ideas for new shows as part of the annual "pilot" process. Instead, they are walking the picket lines over how they are paid for shows streamed or downloaded from the Internet.

If the situation persists much longer, the strike will prevent pilots from being shot in the spring, which means the networks will have no new scripted comedies and dramas ready for the fall.

"A multi-month strike could truncate not just the current television season but at a minimum significantly delay the next," said John Rash, head of broadcast negotiations for ad agency Campbell Mithun.

To complicate matters, the networks would have no new series to trumpet at their "upfront" ad-sales presentations in May, when advertisers buy the bulk of commercial time for the upcoming season.

With the walkout heading into its third week, the current TV season is rapidly coming to a close. The strike has halted production on dozens of shows, and the networks are running low on their supply of fresh episodes.

The strike has inflicted the most damage on TV, although it claimed its first film casualty Friday when Sony Pictures said "Angels and Devils," adapted from the novel by Dan Brown ("The Da Vinci Code"), would be delayed because the script wasn't ready.

Even before the strike, most new TV shows were struggling to find an audience. The few that did will still find it tough to reconnect with viewers after a long hiatus, judging by the backlash against "Lost" after the ABC mainstay took too long to return to the air.

This has led some industry observers to believe the networks have already written off this season and are willing to wait it out in hopes of coming to more profitable terms with the writers.

"For the past 10 years, people in the business have been saying the fundamental model is broken," said Myers, the industry analyst. "Maybe the networks look at this as a chance to reinvent the model."
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