

NATPE ROCKS AS FLOPS PILE UP

Stations look for replacements as syndie casualties mount

By JOHN DEMPSEY and ELIZABETH GUIDER

It was as much about the no-shows as the shows at last week's NATPE. Programming vaulted to a more prominent place at the intense three-day confab (Jan. 18-20) than at any other time in the

last decade due to a record number of series cancellations in the last month.

TV stations were beating the bushes in Vegas for both first-run strips and off-net sitcoms at the National Assn. of Television Program Executives to fill these newly vacant timeslots.

At least three existing syndie shows that distribs insisted were still alive were getting dissolved by stations that have already committed to replacements, said Petry rep firm VP Garnett Losak.

A consensus of NATPE-goers identified the three en-



PARTY POSSE: From left, King World topper Roger King, CBS chief Les Moonves, "Everybody Loves Raymond" exec producer Philip Rosenthal and star Ray Romano at KW's NATPE party.

dangered series as: Sony's "Ricki Lake," Warner's "Sharon Osbourne" and King World's "Living It Up With Ali and Jack."

If they disappear from the skeids, these three will join the five officially canceled strips: Sony's "Pyramid," Universal's

"Crossing Over With John Edward," Disney's "Wayne Brady," King World's "Hollywood Squares" and NBC's "John Walsh."

"Stations coming into my hotel suite were complaining that they had all these open time periods but not a wide selection of shows to replace them," said Chuck Larsen, whose October Moon syndie company was racking up station sales at NATPE for the strip "That's Funny," made up of video clips and pranks put together by Vin Di Bona ("America's Funniest Home Videos").

As Larsen, a veteran of more than two decades of NATPE marts, put it, "I can't remember the last time that that happened at a NATPE convention."

Unlike the traditional NATPE sales bazaars, in which distribs try to shovel as many first-run projects onto stations' lineups as possible (and stations resist because they have almost no available

timeslots), this NATPE was a reversal of fortune.

Syndicators, in short, were caught napping at this 41st annual confab, unprepared for the sudden availability of so many timeslots.

As a result, projects that were hardly more than a glint in the eye of syndie development execs a week ago suddenly took shape in Vegas to meet the ramped-up station demand.

With "Sharon Osbourne" a likely cancellation, Warner Bros. is toying with jump-starting either a vehicle with radio commentator Larry Elder or one with comedian Steve Harvey.

Similarly, Universal moved to the forefront a still-gestating vehicle for Jennifer Lopez's sister Linda, hoping to convince the powerhouse Tribune group to come aboard if its stations do indeed scuttle "Sharon Osbourne."

Warners is also pitching Elder to the CBS-owned stations, which are currently saddled with

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sibling KW's "Ali and Jack."

Rumors of these backroom calculations ricocheted through the Venetian hotel suites and onto the main convention floor — though, not surprisingly, most execs steered clear of publicly discussing the maneuvers.

As for sitcoms, KW was pitching the second cycle of "Everybody Loves Raymond," and Sony Pictures TV the third cycle of "Seinfeld," both anticipating big bucks from station execs, who are staring at a dearth of good comedies coming down the off-net pike. Buena Vista TV's "According to Jim" looks like the best of a mediocre lot, some stations lamented.

As for previously announced first-run hopefuls, a handful continued to rack up clearances during the market, making them sure-fire prospects to get on the air in the fall. They are Paramount's "The Insider," NBC's "Jane Pauley," Disney's "Tony Danza," Universal's "Home Delivery" and Twentieth's "Ambush Makeover."

NBC Enterprises saw brisk business, offering up not only its talker with Pauley but also "Fear Factor," the first network primetime reality series to be made available off-net, and the sophomore strip "Starting Over." Pauley herself made two appearances at the market, helping to clear San Antonio, Anchorage and Erie stations for her troubles. Strip is now sold in more than 95% of the country.

NBCE senior VP of domestic sales Sean O'Boyle said that a concurrent cable/broadcast deal was the plan for "Fear Factor." Cable and broadcast would each

strip "Factor" simultaneously from Day One, which would be a TV first for an off-network series. (For high-visibility sitcoms like "Friends," cable doesn't get them for sharing with TV stations until Year Four of the syndie run.)

NATPE prexy-CEO Rick Feldman was ubiquitous during the three-day confab, making all-out efforts to keep the mood upbeat and the trains running on time.

"I'd say it's really promising and encouraging," Feldman told *Variety* at the close of proceedings Jan. 20.

Judging by comments from

the convention arena, instead holding court in suites arrayed on several floors of the adjacent Venetian hotel. A number of buyers felt that the liveliness of the convention floor made the Venetian contingent look like spoilsports.

Few, however, went home dissatisfied with NATPE's modest comeback.

"I saw more happy faces than gloomy ones, especially from the station contingent," Katz TV's head programmer Bill Carroll opined. "If the biggest complaint is sore feet, you know the show is a success."

As for the international contingent, August Rinner, a top exec with Germany's RTL station group, summed up a common reaction: "I was absolutely surprised by how good this NATPE was. I was sure that it was a dying market; instead, I saw a lot more people with really interesting things."

The NATPE board will do a post-mortem in a few weeks and is still considering options for the precise timing and venue of next year's gathering. Most probably: Vegas again and slightly later in January.

"We're still evaluating and looking at a whole bunch of things," Feldman said. "Nothing is set in stone."

Pamela McClintock, Lily Oei, Barbara Scherzer and Eileen Tusca contributed to this report.

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an assortment of indie distribs and Hollywood heavyweights as well as station execs and foreign buyers, his assessment was not overstated.

Kevin O'Brien, head of Meredith Broadcasting, applauded the reinvigorated NATPE: "Feldman is a magician. He's brought energy, competence, organization and a positive direction to NATPE. It feels like the old days."

But, he added, "as a senior citizen, I wish some of the studios would move to the floor — or give us roller skates."

O'Brien was jokingly referring to the clutch of Hollywood biggies that rejected a return to

