

Winners and losers as writers strike rolls on

by Karla Peterson - CNS

The Writers Guild of America strike is just wrapping up its second week, and the casualties are starting to pile up. Late-night talk shows are in reruns, "The Office" has closed shop, and "24" is off the grid.

But while the networks worry about further audience erosion and viewers worry about the fates of their favorite shows, reality-TV is preparing for a windfall, and Fox TV is probably erecting a mirror-ball shrine in Simon Cowell's honor.

Every battle has its winners and losers. If the strike continues, the partial list of TV victims and victors could look like this:

LOSERS: Fans of 'The Office'

The last fresh episode of NBC's beloved cubicle comedy aired Thursday night, leaving the fates of the Dunder Mifflin masses and the people who love them dangling like the last bag of Corn Nuts in the break-room vending machine. Desperate fans can get a small fix with "The Office Is Closed," a strike-related salvo from the show's writers and actors airing on YouTube's new strike channel: youtube.com/user/wgaamerica.

WINNER: TV on DVD

If network television becomes a wasteland of reality and reruns, rut-bound viewers could explore the wonders of the DVD universe. You can bone up on the first three seasons of "The Wire" before the stunning HBO drama starts its final installment in January. (Season four comes out Dec. 4.) Also available now for your total-immersion pleasure: The Discovery Channel's "Planet Earth"; the first season of HBO's "Flight of the Conchords"; all six seasons of "The Sopranos"; season one of "Friday Night Lights"; and the single perfect season of "My So-Called Life."

WINNERS: The Fox and CW Networks

With the strike-impervious "American Idol" starting Jan. 15 and one less prime-time hour to fill, Fox should stay in fighting shape longer than its network brethren. "Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles" will debut in January, and fresh episodes of "The Simpsons," "American Dad" and "King of the Hill," "Are You Smarter than a 5th Grader" and "Don't Forget the Lyrics!" are ready to go.

Meanwhile, the underdog CW network may finally have its day, thanks to a mid-season schedule packed with reality shows and many new episodes of "Aliens in America" and "Everybody Hates Chris" in the hopper. And with enough reruns, maybe viewers will realize how good "Supernatural" and "Gossip Girl" really are.

LOSERS: Late-night talk shows

With their topical sketches and ripped-from-the-headlines monologues, the late-night talk shows went into reruns as soon as the writers went on strike. But with their staffs being laid off next week, hosts such as Conan O'Brien and Jay Leno will be getting a lot of pressure to get back in the game. In 1988, Johnny Carson and David Letterman went back on the air after two months.

WINNERS: News and reality TV

ABC's "Nightline" is already benefiting from the absence of new shows from Dave and Jay and other late-night competitors. If the strike drags on, you can expect NBC and ABC to patch their leaking prime-time schedules with extra installments of "Dateline" and "Primetime." (But if CBS' news writers, producers, editors and artists vote to strike, you may not be seeing more of "48 Hours Mystery" or "60 Minutes.")

And because most reality-show writers aren't represented by the guild, the "alternative programming" shows will go on. And on. And on. In addition to the return of "American Idol," you can look forward to new installments of the CW's "America's Next Top Model" and "Beauty and the Geek," along with the debuts of "Crowned: The Mother of All Beauty Pageants," "Farmer Wants a Wife," "When Women Rule the World" and many others.

TOSS-UP: Mid-season replacements

The premieres of ABC's "Cashmere Mafia" and "Eli Stone" have been postponed, and Fox opted to pull "24" off its upcoming schedule altogether rather than risk starting a season it couldn't finish. And with only half of "Lost"'s 16 new episodes shot, ABC could be in a pickle, too.

Which leaves the field wide open for the returns of "Jericho," "October Road" and "One Tree Hill," and for the debuts of such newcomers as Fox's time-traveling drama "New Amsterdam," the Farrelly Brothers' comedy "Unhitched," and "The Return of Jezebel James," a comedy from "Gilmore Girls" creators Amy Sherman-Palladino and Daniel Palladino.

TOSS-UP: Newbies

With the strike-rattled networks afraid to cancel anything, freshman duds like "Cavemen" and "Carpoolers" have stayed on the air in spite of themselves. But promising newcomers like "Pushing Daisies" and "The Big Bang Theory" could run out of new episodes before viewer loyalty really kicks in. In their case, reruns might actually help.

LOSERS: Shows on a Roll

"Desperate Housewives" and "Ugly Betty" are better than ever, and "Heroes" may have finally kicked its sophomore slump. But these and other scripted favorites such as "House" and "Grey's Anatomy" will run out of new episodes within the next month, leaving all that creative steam to dissipate in the cold strike air.

TOSS-UP: Viewers

The bad news is, less new television. The good news is, less new television. Whether you use your time to discover oddball cable shows, explore the vast YouTube universe or watch the "Friday Night Lights" episodes you've been saving since last year, the strike could be beneficial to your entertainment health. We also hear that books can be quite enlightening. Not to mention commercial-free.

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