

Lynda Hirsch on Soaps: Q&A

by *Lynda_Hirsch*

Q: I keep reading about "pilot season." What is it? Why is it so important for soap opera actors? â€” Clarice in Baton Rouge, La.

A: Pilot season is not just important to actors who toil on soaps. Think of pilot season as a television industry job fair. It is a four-month period (January to April) that has every actor drooling.

Actors think of pilot season like sugar plum fairies dancing over their heads. During that time of year, networks are deciding which new series they will buy. Actors love it for many reasons. For some, it is their ticket to steady work. For others, it means getting a hefty check so that they will not seek any other employment.

When a pilot is made, studios want to ensure that the actors they hired are available if the show is picked up. To do so, they pay lots of money to keep the actor from seeking other employment.

One actor on a soap has made over 20 pilots. He did not want his name used, as he is hoping to get that 21st pilot next year. "I got a big chunk of change from the studio to stop going to any other auditions. I can take a month off from auditions, live off the pilot check and save money to do those theater projects I love."

Two of his pilots sold, but he was recast before the first episodes aired. One show flamed after airing one time. The other is still on the air after a five-year run.

So what is a pilot? According to the Museum of Broadcasting, a television pilot program is a sample episode of a television show that acts as a model for new programming which may be chosen by networks for the following fall's schedule.

Pilot season is a frenetic, competitive time in Hollywood. Prominent producers, reputable writers, and experienced directors design and showcase their wares for network executives, with each "player" hoping for the next hit series.

Pilots are expensive to produce, and shows that are not purchased by a network have no value. Since the new season is planned using pilots, and the entire offering of a network is usually in place by mid-May, the careful selection of pilots is crucial for designing a competitive lineup of shows. Shows made as pilots during this period are frequently the culmination of long-term preparation, sometimes spanning years.

The process begins when a writer or producer "pitches" an idea to the networks. Pitching may occur year-round, but the most likely time occurs in autumn, shortly after the fall season premieres. By then, network executives have already begun to consider the success or failure of new programming, and have charted trends in topics, types of characters and other information pertinent to development.

If a pitched concept is given a "green light," the network will commission a script, to be written by the series' creator or a well-known writer. After reading the completed script, the interested network offers extensive notes on changes as well as positive elements. Few scripts are commissioned, and fewer still lead to the production of a pilot — estimates suggest that out of 300 pitches, approximately 50 scripts are commissioned, and of those, only six to 10 lead to the production of a pilot.

Because pilots may take months or years to develop, casting becomes a primary concern during the actual pilot-making process. The first quarter of the year is often the busiest, most lucrative time for actors, agents, producers and casting directors. Networks like projects that come with a known star attached and are willing to pay a studio more if a potential program contains an actor with a following or name recognition.

A pilot that is also a star vehicle generates more publicity. The press increases its commentary and gossip about the star or show; fans of the star already exist, thereby building a core audience for the show's debut; and the presence of a star gives a show an advantage over competition in similar genres or opposing time slots.

Network executives are aware, however, that known stars often fail to carry shows. Recently, shows topped by Jenna Elfman, Roseanne and Bette Midler were axed in the middle of their run. A 1990s trend involved the casting of performers, especially stand-up comedians. Unknown to most viewers, but with solid track records in clubs or other venues, such actors cost less initially but have enhanced potential for becoming successes. Roseanne, Jerry Seinfeld and Tim Allen illustrate the intelligence in this strategy.

The choice of leading players also influences later casting of supporting actors. Appealing, marketable pilots may sell based on the "chemistry" between the star and members of the supporting cast. In the case of situation comedies (sitcoms), such interplay is often a deciding factor in choosing one pilot over another.

Producers spend a disproportionate amount of money on pilots relative to series episodes. In the early 1990s, the average cost for a half-hour pilot ranged from \$500,000 to \$700,000, and hour-long pilot programs cost as much as \$2 million if a show had extensive effects. If a show is not contracted, "picked up" by a network, producers or studios are not reimbursed for costs.

A pilot concept deemed unacceptable by network executives in one year may be suitable as tastes and mores change. Writers and producers may also design potential shows based on the popularity of programming from a previous season – the final fall 1995-96 season contained several programs that resembled the 1994-95 sleeper hit "Friends" (NBC), for example. Youth-oriented nighttime soaps such as "Melrose Place" (FOX, 1992) and "Central Park West" (CBS, 1995) trace their lineage to the unexpected popularity of "Beverly Hills 90210" (FOX, 1990).

This year, I have noticed that mind-reading cops like "Medium," "The Mentalist" and "Lie to Me" are the hot idea. With show like "Knight Rider" and "Bionic Woman" flopping, do not look for any more makeovers from the 1970s.

By the way, "Lost" was to be a movie. ABC executives, except Michael Eisner, decided it should be a series. No one listened to Eisner, who is no longer associated with ABC. But he was not told to get "Lost" because of his mistake about "Lost" – it was a variety of things that caused him to lose his job as head Mouse.

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