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Hollywood's Holy Week

Joe Ferullo | May. 18, 2009 NCR Today

For at least one week each year, everyone in the television business gets religion.

Starting today, executives from Los Angeles will fly in to New York for the annual ?upfronts,? glitzy presentations of the new network fall schedules made in front of the Madison Avenue advertising industry. Throughout Southern California, people are praying. If Hollywood has a holy week, this is it.

For more than a month now, several current shows have lived ?on the bubble? ? the networks have made it known these lower-rated programs may not survive into the 2009-2010 season. At the same time, dozens of hope-fueled pilots were shot all around town. These past few weeks have been, in some ways, television?s version of spring training: which rookies will make it to the majors? Which veterans will be told it is time to pack it in?

This annual rite is indeed something of a sport for newspapers and entertainment publications. But Holy Week -- solemn and spiritual ? seems the better analogy. Thousands of real lives are in the balance; this is a week that has genuine meaning.

My parish in the San Fernando Valley is home to a chunk of the entertainment industry?s ?working class:? cinematographers, sound engineers, set designers -- and those steadily-employed character actors who are the staples of TV shows and commercials. Walk down Ventura Boulevard, the Valley?s main commercial drag, and your neck will snap from passing by so many faces who are vaguely familiar: isn?t he the guy who says that thing for AT&T? Didn?t she have a six-episode arc as the girlfriend, Wednesday nights at eight?

No one in this category is covered in cash; everyone does nicely enough, thank you, but a cancelled series or a pilot not placed on the schedule means a mad-dash for a new gig ? to keep the mortgage paid, keep the kids in school, keep gas in the car.

Last year, a strike by the writers? guild went on for close to four months, shutting the television business down. A friend of mine, who works sound on a major network drama, scrambled to find some commercial shoots. During the five-month writers? strike in 1988, he had to work on porn films to pay the bills. He didn?t want to go there again ? thankfully, this time the commercials came through.

But at my parish, donations plummeted while the strike was on, and ? like the television business itself -- never fully recovered. Parish staff was reduced, programs were cut back. Volunteers stepped in to fill the void, as they do at parishes all over the country ? and a nervous equilibrium was finally found.

Now, this week, the anxiety level will spike again. Everyone from actors and directors to grips and production assistants will sit by the phone. Gossip and rumor will take on the patina of clairvoyance ? until each network in turn steps up on a stage in New York and rattles off the names of next season?s winners.

Winners, yes ? but only until the first few weeks? worth of Neilsen fall ratings are in. Then the worry, and the

praying, will start all over again.

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