

Cable sitcoms making their way into syndication

Number of comedies available in syndication could double over next few years if cable series are added

New half-hour off-network situation comedies, which are in short supply in syndication over the next several seasons, may realize a shot in the arm from an unexpected source: cable television. Comedies are the traditional lifeblood of independent stations in the early fringe (4-6 p.m.) time period, and the recent shortage of new half-hour off-network series has forced many stations to either recycle the old comedies they already own or program the time period with full-length hours instead.

But there are several comedies which, because they have been on cable television for more than one season now, are well on their way to building up enough episodes so that they can be stripped by stations in syndication or scheduled on a weekly basis. Moreover, the producers of these series say they either own the syndication rights or are negotiating with distributors with an eye to releasing these series in the syndication marketplace over the next couple of years. If this happens, it could more than double the number of comedies available to stations.

Three comedy series on superstation WTBS(TV) Atlanta may be syndicated: *Down to Earth*, *Safe at Home* and the soon-to-premiere *Rocky Road*. Los Angeles-based Procter & Gamble Productions owns the syndication rights to *Down to Earth*, while Turner Broadcasting System reserves the syndication rights to both *Safe at Home* and *Rocky Road*.

Pay cable service Showtime earlier this year renewed 50 episodes of *Brothers* from producers Gary Nardino Productions and Paramount Video on top of a previous order of 13 episodes. The total of 65 episodes of

Brothers will outfit Showtime with a two-year supply of the sitcom. In addition, there are 22 episodes of *Still the Beaver* produced by Universal Pay Television for The Disney Channel, which Disney recently said it was dropping from the service. (Universal Pay Television is looking for another outlet to pick up the series.)

Within the past couple of weeks, two other deals between producers and cable television services regarding first-run production of half-hour comedies have been announced. USA Network has ordered 22 episodes of a new sitcom, *Check It Out*, starring Don Adams. The series is jointly produced by D.L. Taffner, Canada's CTV Network and Program Syndication Services. It will premiere on USA Network next fall and be released into syndication on a weekly basis in the fall of 1986.

And Showtime has ordered seven episodes of *Washington* from Telecom Entertainment, the four-year-old independent production subsidiary of Benton & Bowles. The series is based on the cartoon of the same name which appears in *The Village Voice* and *The Washington Post*. It is scheduled to premiere on Aug. 15 behind *Brothers*.

No matter which of the above series enters syndication over the next few years, neither will be able to make the claim of being the first. That credit will remain with *Bizarre*, a comedy series Viacom released into syndication this past fall after four seasons on Showtime. (The series continues to be produced for the pay cable network.) Viacom sold *Bizarre* as a late-night vehicle for independents, and originally cleared 100 episodes on 51 stations. Since then, the series has been dropped by several stations so that it eventually fell to 27 stations. However, just last week it added two more markets where it previously was not cleared. It was picked up by RKO Television's KHJ-TV Los Angeles and WOR-TV New York.

One criticism some programmers have leveled against series moving from cable into syndication is that what plays in cable does not necessarily play in the broadcast television environment. The first national ratings for *Bizarre* might have supported that notion. According to Nielsen's Cassandra report on syndicated programming for November 1984, *Bizarre* averaged a 1.6 national rating, while during the February 1985 sweeps it increased slightly to a 1.9 average rating.

But in New York and Los Angeles, the first overnight ratings are encouraging. According to Viacom, *Bizarre* averaged a 3.8/8 in Nielsen's first night on WOR-TV, and a 2.1/6 on KHJ-TV. Viacom now hopes that the better ratings in New York and Los Angeles will renew station interest and once again boost sales.

Besides half-hour comedies, there are also at least two, hour-long drama series that have the potential of moving off cable into syndication. Twenty-six episodes of *Faerie Tale Theater* have been produced for Showtime by Gaylord Productions and actress Shelly Duvall's Platypus Productions. Three more episodes in addition to the 26 have been ordered, and Showtime has an "open-ended" agreement with the suppliers that provides for up to another 23 episodes.

There are also about 50 episodes of *The Paper Chase* in the can. The series, originally produced for CBS during the 1978-79 season by 20th Century Fox Television, was picked up by Showtime after CBS canceled the series.

There is little doubt that station executives will welcome the off-cable programs in syndication, especially the half-hour comedies. The only off-network half-hour sitcom to bow in syndication next fall is *Gimme a Break* from MCA-TV. And there is only one presently set for the fall of 1986 — *Facts of Life* from Embassy Telecommunications. After that, Paramount has already sold *Cheers* and *Family Ties* for the fall of 1987, and Victory Television announced that *Newhart* would be joining that class, too. In total, there are only five off-network prime time sitcoms scheduled to be released in syndication between 1985 and 1987.

In response, some syndicators have addressed the coming deficit with innovative marketing strategies, such as re-formatting formerly hour-long series. Columbia is distributing for release next fall vintage segments of Johnny Carson's late-night show titled *Carson's Comedy Classics*. In a similar vein, Metromedia Producers Corp. is offering half-hour versions of *Dynasty*. And Paramount has guaranteed an extra cycle of first-run production if *Cheers* or *Family Ties* is canceled by the network to insure enough episodes for stripping.



Brothers



Safe at Home