Fox stations roll the dice with ‘Tribes’

Soap opera, aimed at young adults, is latest production of seven owned stations, which hope it does well enough to be syndicated

After producing some notable hits and some forgettable flops, the Fox-owned station group’s in-house production unit is now taking the biggest gamble of its short life—the production of a younger-skewing soap opera called Tribes.

The risk is heightened by the fact that the seven Fox O&O’s are programing the soap, which centers on the lives of a group of small-town high school students, in time periods where the form has yet to prove it can work—early fringe and prime access.

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The program is the costliest pure entertainment program that Fox Television Stations Productions Inc. has taken on to date. Sources say the program has a $12 million budget for the first six months, or close to $500,000 per week.

The show debuted on March 5 and the ratings in the seven markets have been mixed. In its best performing market, New York, on WNYW, the show is generally fifth among six stations, with around a 5.5 rating/share at 5:30 p.m. In Washington, on WTTG, and in Chicago, on WFLD-TV, the program has been moving upward, and last week turned in some 8 share performances. And sources outside Fox say the show is turning in saleable demographics, particularly young women.

As one Fox insider put it: “The show is at a critical stage right now. We’ve seen progress in the ratings. Not dramatic progress. But we believe in the genre. How much time will it have to prove itself? I don’t know.”

The biggest problem market is Los Angeles, where at 6:30 p.m., Tribes has been turning in a 1-plus rating and a 3 share on KTTV. While Fox officials stress that

soaps typically need more time to catch on than other program forms, others wonder just how much time KTTV can afford to give a slow-growing program like Tribes in a bread-and-butter time period such as 6:30 p.m.

Sources said KTTV’s share of the cost of the show is close to $25,000 a week. “The question is, would they be better off taking that money and spending it on a game show that delivers a saleable rating?” asked one program analyst at a rep firm. “You just can’t make money with a 1.3 rating in access. Not when you’re spending the kind of money they are to produce that show.”

Don Tillman, program director at KTTV, said it was “too early” to comment on the
games and movies as the emphasis increases to both produce in-house and build up FBC.

“I think you have to question whether they’ve gone too far,” said one observer. “Sure, they obviously have a unique agenda, but there has to be a balance between what they’re trying to accomplish with FBC and using their stations as a production source, and the traditional role of the counterprogramming independent station.”

According to Steve Leblang, vice president, programing, Fox Stations Inc., that balance is there. “We haven’t bought too many expensive programs lately. But we will continue to make program acquisitions where we think it makes sense. It all

depends on the programs and the price. Our mandate is to put the best TV programs on the airs.”

Leblang points out that the station group bought Cosby in two markets, recently bought Who’s the Boss? in Washington, and struck a deal with MCA to acquire two new shows it’s developing, Harry and the Hendersons and What a Dummy. Sources say the group is in hot pursuit of the FBC hit Married...with Children, just introduced into the syndication market by Columbia Pictures Televisi
tion. Leblang declined to comment on the matter.

According to Chao: “That tension has always existed and is the strength of the group. And the traditional or standard measures don’t really apply. Cops and America’s Most Wanted obviated the traditional buying process.”

Also, said Chao, the current output of Fox Television Stations Productions is five and a half hours a week, including the Tribes strip and a one-hour weekly rap video show called Pump It Up, which debu
ted on KTTV about five months ago. The show has expanded to the other Fox stations, and will also be syndicated nation-

Left: Cast of soap opera ‘Tribes,’ which airs in early fringe and access. Below: Stephen Chao, Fox stations in-house production chief.