

# PROGRAMING

## SYNDICATION 1991-92: SLOW BOAT TO NEW ORLEANS

*Less-than-stellar track record for current shows and tough economic times ahead contribute to smaller crop of proposed new programs*

**W**ith the apparent failure of just about all of the new adult first-run shows in syndication this season, fewer syndicators are proposing fewer new shows for the 1991-92 season.

Many of this season's new programs were launched on the basis of tiered deals so that the shows are airing (or have aired) in various dayparts. Thus, their failure has not left gaping holes in particular dayparts and has left some distributors a little gun shy about spending millions in a tough economy to launch new shows against proven competition.

So far, only three new games have been proposed for next fall (*Scrabble*, from Group W, *The Puzzle Game* from Tribune and *Love Bugs* from ITC) compared to seven in the market a year ago at this time, five of which were eventually launched. "I'm not seeing a lot of new product," said Judy Girard, director of programming and broadcast operations at WNBC-TV New York. "With so many shows coming back, I don't know that there are enough access clearances available, or fringe for that matter," said Girard. "Unless you're a major syndicator with leverage it's going to be real tough to launch anything new. It's

been that way for a while, but I think it's worse than ever."

Station and rep officials agree there are fewer new programs being proposed, but there are some differences of opinion on what impact that fact will have on the buying and selling of shows for the 1991-92 season.

"Development has slowed down this season," said Jim Curtin, vice president, director of program services, Harrington, Righter and Parsons, the New York-based rep firm. He noted that some distributors that usually offer new strips, such as Worldvision and Buena Vista, have not been making the rounds with new projects. And other companies, he noted, such as Guber-Peters Television and MGM/UA Telecommunications, may be out of business altogether (and certainly out of the first-run syndication business).

"There is certainly less product at this point in the game than last season," said Dick Kurlander, vice president, programming, Petry Television. "I think distributors are being a little more realistic about their chances of success in launching a new show when there are so few holes."

In terms of general interest adult strips

or weekly shows, Kurlander estimated there are about 20 new projects currently being presented to station and rep executives, down from about 35 a year ago. He estimated there will be about one-third fewer such shows at NATPE in January, compared to a year ago. "Normally there tend to be about 60 new [general interest shows] at NATPE," he said. "This year I don't think there will be more than 40."

And from the programers' perspective: "It is a very difficult market right now," said Samuel Goldwyn Television President Dick Askin. "The advertising climate is pretty depressing. Distributors are much more bearish on the market than they were this time last year. In some cases, the upside is better, but the downside is substantially worse. The economics has increased substantially for a fall launch. There were many companies in the past who just went ahead with a number of development projects and pilots, just to have a presence at the NATPE convention. Those five new games [which premiered this season] have realized multi-million dollar losses."

"The marketplace is in such disarray," said Michael Gerber, president, first-run syndication, Viacom enterprises. "It is so fragmented, and it has been an abysmal development season, with few new programming alternatives for next season. Having developed under half the number of programs that were in the market at this time last season only exacerbates the situation for stations and syndicators. It's the haves and have nots. However, it is our conviction that there is still room out there for new talk shows. We're still bullish on the 1991-92 season. The action genre continues to be a very successful niche for us [with *Superboy* and *Super Force*]. We have created and nurtured what we think will be a strong franchise for us through the 1990's." [*Lightning Force* will be added to the action block next season.]

"This business has been very uncreative for last several years," said Mi-

### THE WONDER DEAL

**N**eal Marlens and Carol Black, the Emmy Award-winning husband and wife creators of ABC's *The Wonder Years*, have signed an exclusive multi-million dollar, four-year agreement with The Walt Disney Studios, in what one competing Hollywood studio source termed "a very sweet writer-producer-studio deal." According to that source and others, Marlens and Black will receive \$18 million-\$22 million over four years to develop new TV and theatrical projects, in addition to possible gross revenue profit participation in those feature film projects. The pair, who were recently rumored to be close to making a similar deal with MCA Inc., bring at least three series commitments from ABC with them. A Disney spokeswoman said Marlens-Black projects could fall under either Touchstone Television or Walt Disney Television labels. Marlens and Black created, wrote and were executive producers of New World Television's *Wonder Years* (which launched on ABC in March 1988) during much of its first season, as well as writing and executive producing Warner Bros. Domestic Television's *Growing Pains* (ABC, 1985-present), which Marlens created.