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TV Eye
My NYTVF Notebook

BY BELINDA ACOSTA

Sure, we're on the brink of the conventional fall TV season, and the review screeners are piling up, but that didn't stop me from making a last-minute trip to my favorite city in the U.S. for the New York Television Festival. Now in its third year, the festival features a pilot competition – reality, drama, and comedies – discussion sessions, and for the 28 producer/creators whose pilots made it into the festival, meetings with industry representatives to demystify the "How do I break into TV?" question. Three new network series were screened prior to their TV debuts: *Pushing Daisies* (ABC), *New Amsterdam* (Fox), and *Chuck* (NBC). All of this kept NYTVF attendees scuttling between screens in the New World Stages theatre space on West 50th Street during the five-day festival.

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Pushing Daisies' Lee Pace
Photo by Belinda Acosta

The quick highlights: Got some chat time with **Matt Roush** of *TV Guide* and **Virginia Heffernan**, the outgoing TV critic for *The New York Times* (she's moving to *The New York Times Magazine*). The booze flowed freely at the A&E-sponsored happy hours. The early buzz about *Pushing Daisies* has merit. The eccentric comedy stars **Lee Pace** as Ned, whose ability to bring back the dead has some serious caveats. The packed audience (which included nonfestival participants) responded enthusiastically. How it fares in prime time is another matter.

The overall vibe of the NYTVF was good. The preponderance of competition entrants from the New York area, as well as the size of the festival, pales when compared to the behemoth that is South by Southwest. This sometimes made me feel as though I'd walked into a high school reunion at a school I didn't attend. Past NYTVF alums returned to support the new entrants, making for largely friendly audiences, a nice departure from the frost that can blanket other festivals, which take themselves oh so seriously. Which is not to say that the NYTVF is not a serious and important festival. Where else can aspiring TV makers show their work, gauge audience response, make connections with industry folks, and have a good time while doing it?

The NYTVF is the festival for independent television. But "independent," in this context, is not synonymous with leaning toward the edgy or experimental; rather, it merely defines the creator/participants who are not affiliated with the TV industry in any way. This made for some safely conventional work, some of which had

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promise, some that wouldn't have an adoring audience outside the festival. My hands-down, overall favorite of the festival was *Gnome* by New York actor **Will Janowitz**. Based on his stage play that played off-Broadway a few years ago, *Gnome* is a comedy about a once-celebrated writer who is facing an identity crisis when he realizes he has become irrelevant. Oh, did I mention that he's the progeny of a Jewish mother and a forest gnome father and lives as a recluse in the wilds of Central Park? If this sounds absurd, it is. It's also enormously funny. Janowitz says the BBC's *I'm Alan Partridge* inspired him, but I think of *Gnome* as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* crash-landing in *Fraggle Rock*.

Alas, *Gnome* didn't get any love from the NYTVF ballot box or the \$10,000 Artistic Achievement Award from MSN Originals. That went to *The Gauntlet*, a reality pilot by **Scott Patterson**. But Janowitz remains unfazed. He still contends that the NYTVF is "a good springboard for anyone to do their work, and there should be more like this."

"It's really what happens afterward that makes the festival," says NYTVF founder and Executive Director **Terence Gray**. Last year's NYTVF entrant, *Split the Difference* got a development deal from NBC Universal. This year, I'm hoping Janowitz will get a call from Cartoon Network to do an animated version of his offbeat comedy: I see *Gnome* as an Adult Swim series or as a live-action series for Comedy Central. Another valuable prize of the NYTVF went unawarded until after the festival, the NYTVF Fellowship. For this, five distinguished TV producers will handpick a NYTVF entrant to mentor them on their next TV project. The mentors include **Michael Davies** (*Wife Swap*), **Tom Fontana** (*Oz*), **Mitchell Hurwitz** (*Arrested Development*), and **Phil Rosenthal** (*Everybody Loves Raymond*). I know who I'd pick.

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