

The Revolution will be Televised

How the New York Television Festival is leading the independent television revolution. By Larry Getlen

AS RECENTLY AS THREE YEARS AGO, the notion that you, your friends, or your doctor, lawyer, acupuncturist or accountant could get a show on television was about as likely as any of you getting the chance to walk on the moon.

But the past several years have seen a stunning shift in the television landscape, as the iron-barred gates of the industry have been smashed through, opening the door for talented aspirants to get a foot in without a lifetime of experience – or, in some cases, any experience at all.

The leader of this independent television revolution is the New York Television Festival. The NYTVF, which takes place September 5-9 at New World Stages (50th St. btw. 8th and 9th Aves.), started two years ago, and has al-

ready seen entrants gain deals with networks including A&E, OLN (now VERSUS), and NBC Universal Television Studio.

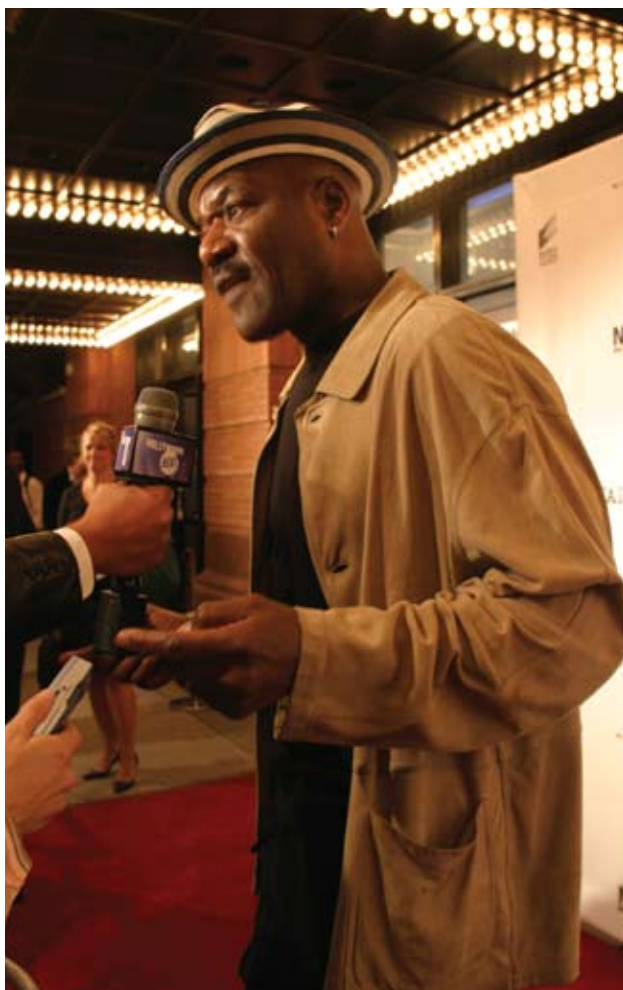
HERE'S HOW THE FESTIVAL WORKS. During the submission period, anyone can submit a self-produced pilot of 15-22 minutes (8-20 for animation) in the categories of comedy, drama, reality, educational, or animation. From those, about ten percent are selected for viewing at the festival, which is attended by executives from many of the major networks, as well as production houses, members of the media, and the general public. Last year, over 11,000 people attended the festival's panels and screenings.

For pilots that capture the viewer's imagination, the rewards can be significant. The first year, 2005, a reality fishing show called *Off The Hook*, featuring the fishing exploits of four regular guys from Brooklyn, won two awards at the festival - Best Reality Pilot, and the Audience Award. But the real prize came when the OLN cable network later purchased the show, and debuted it one year later, right after holding a special premiere at the 2006 festival. "It was a great pilot," says the festival's Director of Communications, Eben Russell. "They had these big Brooklyn personalities, and it was a phenomenal show, a great twist on a fishing show. Premiering the first episode at last year's festival was a tremendous success story for us." Two other shows from that festival got deals

as well, including the comedy pilot *Criss-Cross*, which was bought for development by A&E, and the animated *Back Brace*, which secured a deal in Europe. Then, in 2006, an ad-agency based comedy pilot called *Split the Difference* won the Audience Award – which seems to be the blessed designation at the fest – and was soon snapped up by NBC. And while not all pilots walk away with deals, there are other prizes as well. Best pilot winners in all five categories left last year's festival \$2,500 richer courtesy of *TV Guide*, and the animated pilot *Squid Dragon Legend* won the MSN Artistic Achievement Award, which included a development meeting with MSN Originals and \$10,000.

For the leaders of this revolution, these deals and awards represent nothing less than a sea change in the medium, and one that makes this the best time ever to wade into this creative field. "This is terrific time to be a television artist and creator, because there's so much new opportunity in the marketplace," says Terence Gray, the festival's founder, chairman, and executive director. "People have been extremely open to coming to communities like ours and saying, 'we believe in the value of your community, and we'd like to work with artists coming out of there.'"

In addition to the creators and TV executives clamoring toward the festival, advertisers are getting into the act as well. Proctor and Gamble has been sponsoring a search for comedic talent who will produce a live comedy pilot at the fest, and another contest allowed show creators to develop a pilot specifically for the Xbox LIVE gaming system. In addition to having their pilot shown at this year's festival, the contest's winning producer will receive a \$100,000 budget from Microsoft to develop the show, and a six-episode commitment to air it as the first series ever developed specifically for, and aired on, the gaming and entertainment platform. As with the Festival itself, the Xbox deal – which saw submissions from as far as Thailand – is just one more indicator of the remarkable ways the business of television is changing. "The number of platforms is never going to



Actor Delroy Lindo at the 2006 New York Television Festival. Photo: Michael Leonhard

go down," says Russell. "So as the money you can allocate for content goes up, producers are going to rely more on things like independent television for that content."

While the Festival is opening new doors for creators, and truly anyone can submit a pilot, it's still a competitive arena. Modest production values might be overlooked, but creative

DV (digital video) camera has gotten lower." "We've had people come to us and say, 'we've put this thing together for hundreds of dollars as opposed to thousands,' and those pilots have gotten a lot of recognition," says Russell. "In fact, our first big sale two years ago was a comedy pilot, *Criss-Cross*, which was picked up by A&E, and that was put together

a celebrity bowling show called *Up Your Alley* for Buena Vista Television. "The festival has led to just about everything great in my life at the moment. My career could not be where it is today, from executive producing a show to pitching new shows to networks and production companies, without it."

Gray, a former writer for *The Man Show* and *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, first sought creative ways to get original television ideas to the public in the mid-90s, when he formed an off-off-Broadway troupe that performed original sitcoms on stage. A decade later, inspired by film festivals such as Sundance, he realized that a festival for television could be just as viable, and secured the backing of The William Morris Agency. With their help, he established a high-powered executive board including former NBC (now Fox) president Kevin Reilly, Comedy Central president Doug Herzog, and veteran producer and current NBC chairman Ben Silverman. From there, the floodgates to industry acceptance flew open.

While it remains to be seen what new TV successes will be created this year, it's clear that the New York Television Festival is becoming a major player in the television industry, and one of the factors helping make television a more democratic medium. "There is value to seeing what people are producing on a modest budget in their garages, as opposed to what people on the highest rungs of



Actors Rosemarie DeWitt (L) and Ron Livingston (R) with NYTVF founder Terence Gray at the the 2006 New York Television Festival. Photo: Brandon J. Herman

quality is not, and making the jump from festival submission to network deal is still a challenging and noteworthy achievement. In fact, many of the pilots – which are created for an average of \$4,000-\$8,000 – are produced by people already in TV or film, who are likely to live in New York or Los Angeles, and who have access to equipment. But this doesn't exclude the true amateur with a great idea from getting in the door. "There are a lot more submissions coming from all different states, and technology is catching up with inspiration," says Gray. "Plus, the ability to make a pilot has gotten easier as the financial threshold for editing online and buying a



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for a few hundred dollars in a bar in the Lower East Side. That shows that if you're able to call in a few favors, you can really stretch your dollars."

And that ability, when mixed with talent, can change your life. The creator of *Criss-Cross*, James Murray, had some TV experience, as a former associate producer for *Saturday Night Live*. But at the time he submitted his pilot – which he filmed for \$400 – he was working in commercial and print casting, and a career as a TV producer seemed far off. The festival changed that. "The New York Television Festival is one hundred percent responsible for my current career," says Murray, who executive produced the *Criss-Cross* pilot for A&E, and is now producing



Split The Difference, an ad agency comedy purchased by NBC

the industry are capable of producing," says Russell. "We're sorting through pilots right now, and we're overwhelmed by the quality, which keeps getting elevated year after year. As the independent television movement gains firmer ground, the value of independent television for development executives is only going to increase." ■

Visit <http://nytvf.com> for tickets and information.