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Tyler Labine is a surrogate father in "Sons of Tucson."

TELEVISION

Networks are on a laugh track

Of 71 scripted pilots in contention for slots at the five networks, 33 are half-hour comedies and 19 of those are multi-camera formats.

By Maria Elena Fernandez >>>
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America: Do you feel like laughing?

The television industry hopes so because a slew of family, buddy and workplace comedy pilots might be coming to a small screen near you later this year. Despite the cloud of anger and anxiety hanging over the nation because of the ailing economy, the broadcast networks believe the genre is poised for a comeback.

That there is even a pilot season -- the annual springtime ritual of dashed hopes and broken dreams as networks test potential new shows -- is notable. Last year, some networks declared that the writers strike had pushed the industry into a year-round model and would force them to abandon the usual winter and spring

development season. And although the recession can be largely blamed for about 40 fewer pilots this season than in recent years, there are still more scripted shows in the works than most industry insiders expected.

The mad scramble ends in mid-May with the "upfronts" in New York City, where network executives unveil their fall season lineups in hopes of attracting billions of dollars in Madison Avenue advertising.

"I know that people are still trying to play with the model, but what I think we all realize is that even though it can be somewhat dysfunctional, we're all competing for the same thing at the same time," said Suzanne-Patmore Gibbs, executive vice president of

drama development. "Here at ABC, we do well with deadlines. We like to see things in context."

Of 71 scripted pilots in contention for slots at the five networks, 33 are half-hour comedies and 19 of those are multi-camera formats -- shows taped before a live audience, and sometimes enhanced by laugh tracks. Today, only CBS airs multi-cam sitcoms.

The multi-cam sitcom, such as legendary hits "I Love Lucy" and "Cheers," was once the dominant format in which to televise comedies, as much for conveying a theater-like intimacy to home audiences as for its relatively cheap production costs. But within the last decade, multi-cam sitcoms began to disappear, while single-camera comedies like "30 Rock" and "The Office," with its movie-like freedom, started to rise in prominence.

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"The industry had been moving away from multi-cameras out of a sense that other formats offer more creative freedom," said Jamie Erlicht, president of programming at Sony Pictures Television. "But there's room for both and there's a real appetite in these economic times for the tried and true multi-camera format."

Sony, which produces the multi-cam "Rules of Engagement" for CBS, is also behind 10 of the comedies under consideration this pilot season. A year ago, Sony commissioned a study to determine how a change in government or the economy could affect television habits. Its conclusion was that this pendulum would swing away from dramas. Six of the shows on Sony's slate are traditional sitcoms, including "AB FAB," a remake of the popular British series "Absolutely Fabulous" for Fox.

While Fox has a healthy animation comedy block on Sunday nights, it has failed to successfully develop a live-action series for some time. Its pilot slate includes two multi-camera comedies, two single-cameras, one hybrid, and a one-hour comedy.

"Post-9/11, reality TV was very, very fresh to the audience and took up a lot of the space that comedies did," President of Entertainment Kevin Reilly said. "Right now, people are angry. That's where comedy historically has come into play -- when you need someone to voice something in a way that you can hear it."

ABC, which lately has provided most of its lasting laughs on one-hour shows like "Desperate Housewives" or "Ugly Betty," wants to invigorate its family comedy brand, according to executives. Half of ABC's 14 comedy pilots are multi-camera.

"We strongly believe in the benefits of the communal feeling you get watching a comedy with an audience and I think some of the stigma has eroded," Samie Falvey, senior vice president of comedy development at ABC, wrote in an e-mail to The Times.

NBC is committed to a full night of comedy on Thursdays, built around the critically acclaimed shows "30 Rock" and "The Office." The network, which has been taking a beating in the ratings, is producing five comedy pilots, including two traditional multi-cam sitcoms.

"We love that genre and we would have made more but we just didn't have as many strong multi-camera scripts as we did single-camera," said NBC President of Primetime Entertainment Angela Bromstad. "When you look at what's working and what is standing in a very crowded environment, the multi-cameras on CBS are doing very well and prove that it's not a dying format."

In fact, CBS' Monday night lineup helped launch a second comedy hour on Wednesday nights this season. CBS President of Entertainment Nina Tassler said she expects to keep both comedy lineups next year.

The network is producing seven multi-camera pilots and one hybrid, "The Fish Tank," that will be shot multi-camera, but without an audience, like "How I Met Your Mother."

"It took us a long time to get to the place where we could have a second night of comedy," Tassler said. "And we're going to support that."

The CW, where the hip kids live, is bucking the trend altogether and did not order any comedy pilots this year. Instead, the network for 18- to 34-year-olds will offer laughs on its dramas, a "Gossip Girl," and reality shows. It is producing six dramatic pilots.

"I think it's really hard to get it right," CW President of Entertainment Dawn Ostroff said. "They need to be very unique and different and we just haven't been able to make enough noise."

One factor moving the networks toward sitcoms was cost. Because a half-hour single-camera comedy is filmed like a drama and costs almost as much as a one-hour show to produce, it makes sense to gamble on more sitcoms in lean financial times, Reilly said.

"Multi-cameras are cheaper," said Zack Van Amburg, president of programming at Sony Pictures Television. "But I promise you this: While everyone is being saner and smarter and the economics are more pressured than they ever have been, it's still a hit-driven business. I don't think if they didn't believe and we didn't believe that good multi-cameras can still break out that you'd be seeing this trend."

There's no doubt cutting costs is a paramount consideration this season. Cash-strapped networks have taken a number of steps to lower their expenses, including filming outside of Los Angeles to take advantage of tax incentives, reducing license fees, or asking talent to accept lower fees.

"It's a healthy and good shift in perspective," said Warner Bros. Television President Peter Roth. "All industries, including our own, are looking at costs more carefully and diligently, with greater scrutiny than ever before."

To that end, the networks also have developed more procedurals, that is closed-ended narratives for cop, medical and legal dramas. Fox and CBS are looking to expand their female audiences, while CBS and ABC executives hope that NBC's decision to schedule Jay Leno at 10 p.m. five nights a week will give their dramas an opportunity to flourish. (With fewer slots on the schedule to fill, NBC will probably order only 13 episodes of some shows so that two shows can share time slots over the course of the year, said Bromstad.)

ABC also is searching to fill the pop culture crater that will be left by "Lost," which concludes next season. They have two candidates at the moment -- either "Flash Forward," which centers on an international event that enables people to see their future for two minutes, or the remake of "V," a sci-fi show in which humans battle alien invaders.

"Whatever it is doesn't need to be that serialized," Patmore-Gibbs said. "But it needs to feel like a global event of import that hopefully gets people just as emotionally invested."

At the CW, Ostroff admits it will be difficult choosing half of six drama pilots to pick up. Two of them, the "Gossip Girl" spinoff, starring Brittany Snow, and the "Melrose Place" spinoff have generated a lot of buzz. The others include "Lux," about a girl (Brittany Robertson) who emancipates herself from foster care on her 16th birthday and hunts down her biological parents, and "Vampire Diaries," about a heroine caught between two vampire brothers.

"This is my favorite time of year: when everything seems possible," Bromstad said.

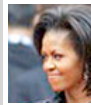
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