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Newsletter

Minority hopefuls perform in CBS diversity showcase

By Greg Braxton

This article appeared in the LA Times

LMFAO's head-pounding "Party Rock Anthem" pulsed through North Hollywood's El Portal Theatre as a multiracial group of young performers stormed the stage, promising in song to provide a lively evening of laughs. They then launched into a rapid-fire parade of sketches filled with gleeful raunch and pokes at racial stereotypes.

The performance had the usual trappings of a night out at any comedy club around town. But little about this invitation only night was typical. The actors, writers and directors were all amateur, and they were mostly people of color — young blacks, Latinos, Asians, Indians — performing original material they had helped to develop before a crowd of managers, agents and creative executives from major networks and studios.

The event marked the culmination of this year's CBS Diversity Sketch Comedy Showcase, an annual talent forum that also functions as a three-month boot camp designed to boost the chances of minorities hoping to land roles on TV comedies and dramas.

The participants are schooled to collaborate with others as well as receive lessons in character development and voices, auditions and "cold readings." But the main focus is the showcase, said CBS diversity honchos.

"What we're putting on is much more than a showcase: This is a full-fledged show that we feel could be staged at any theater in Los Angeles," said Tiffany N. Smith-Anoa'i, vice president of diversity and communications for CBS. She pointed out that this year's event was a hot ticket: The 360-seat El Portal was filled to overflowing for four shows over two days last week. Many



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The entire cast of this year's CBS Diversity Sketch Comedy Showcase greet the audience at the El Portal Theatre in North Hollywood

attendees stood against the walls or sat in the aisles.

The showcase, now in its seventh year, is always scheduled in January, as networks and studios begin lining up their pilots for the fall season. NBC and ABC also sponsor minority showcases as part of their stated commitment to increase diversity in prime time. The four major networks have been grappling for more than a decade with charges from advocacy groups and critics that most prime-time series feature predominantly white casts and have largely excluded minorities from significant creative roles. Even some series that feature minority characters have been blasted — both CBS' "Two Broke Girls" and "Rob!" have been accused by critics of perpetuating negative stereotypes.

A survey conducted by the Directors Guild of America of more than 2,600

television episodes from 170 scripted TV series for the 2010-11 season found that white men directed 77% of all episodes, and white women directed 11% of all episodes. A report released by the Writers Guild of America, West in May found that the earnings gap between minorities and white writers more than doubled from 2007 to 2009.

Smith-Anoa'i said the criticisms have overshadowed significant gains on the diversity front: "People who are trying to improve diversity at the networks often hear about what is wrong. But with this showcase and our other diversity initiatives, we are attempting to put more of a spotlight on the positive progress that is being made. Increasing that level of awareness is more helpful in the larger scope of the issue."

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PRODUCTION SCHEDULE

CSI:NY <i>(CBS PRODUCTIONS/CBS)</i>
ENTERTAINMENT TONIGHT <i>(CBS TV DISTRIBUTION/CBS)</i>
THE INSIDER <i>(CBS TV DISTRIBUTION/CBS)</i>
LAST MAN STANDING <i>(20TH CENTURY FOX TV/ABC)</i>
DOWNWARDLY MOBILE - PILOT <i>(20TH CENTURY FOX TV/NBC)</i>
WHITNEY <i>(NBC STUDIOS LLC/NBC)</i>
UNTITLED JIMMY FALLON - PILOT <i>(OPEN 4 BUSINESS PRODUCTIONS/NBC)</i>
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UP ALL NIGHT <i>(OPEN 4 BUSINESS PRODUCTIONS/NBC)</i>
BABY DADDY <i>(PRODCO/ABC FAMILY)</i>
THE TALK <i>(CBS TV STUDIOS/CBS)</i>
HAPPILY DIVORCED <i>(HUDSON STREET PRODUCTIONS/TV LAND)</i>
THE EXES <i>(HUDSON STREET PRODUCTIONS/TV LAND)</i>
HOT IN CLEVELAND <i>(HUDSON STREET PRODUCTIONS/TV LAND)</i>
ONLY FOOLS AND HORSES - PILOT <i>(FTP PRODUCTIONS/ABC)</i>
THE SOUL MAN <i>(HUDSON STREET PRODUCTIONS/TV LAND)</i>
PARKS & RECREATION <i>(OPEN 4 BUSINESS PRODUCTIONS/NBC)</i>
UNTITLED MARTIN LAWRENCE - PILOT <i>(CBS PRODUCTIONS/CBS)</i>
THE SINGING BEE <i>(SINGING BEE ENTERPRISES/CMT)</i>
UNTITLED LOUIS CK - PILOT <i>(OPEN 4 BUSINESS PRODUCTIONS/CBS)</i>
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MARCH Women's History Month

- 8** Purim
- 11** Daylight Savings Time begins
- 15** The Ides of March
- 17** St. Patrick's Day
- 20** Spring begins

Minority hopefuls

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Instead of the usual showcase format of stand-up comedy routines or scenes from plays or movies, the performers, assisted by director Rick Najera (“MADtv,” “In Living Color”) and CBS Vice President of Casting Fern Orenstein, develop original material that allows them to improve their writing skills, show a range of characters and broaden their acting styles.

Almost 40 showcase graduates in the last seven years have won regular or guest-starring roles on series, while dozens of others have scored representation. One of the graduates, Affion Crockett, starred in his own short-lived sketch comedy series on Fox last year.

Julie Ashton, who runs her own agency and does casting for “Two Broke Girls” and Fox’s upcoming reboot of “In Living Color,” said she finds the CBS show a valuable resource for discovering talent. “It’s just a great arena to see so many talented folks at the same time.”

Several other participants this week told CBS they have booked auditions and meetings with agents following the showcase.

Asif Ali, 24, who appeared in several of the sketches, sounded relieved at the end of one of the showcases last week.

“We pulled it off,” he declared, saying he was ecstatic that the audience had responded so favorably to the material. “I didn’t even have butterflies.”



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On the birth of your son
Mason
November 20, 2011



Jose Reyes, Grip
Department, wife Wendy
& big sister Valentina
On the birth of your
daughter Camila Andrea
February 24, 2012

Know the Show

By Karla Karanza



Ross Martin (Artemus Gordon) and Robert Conrad (James T. West)
The Wild Wild West shot at CBS Studio Center from 1965 to 1969

A fellow named Michael Garrison purchased the film rights to Ian Fleming’s first Bond novel, “Casino Royale,” back in 1955. He intended to produce a film and shopped the idea around town in the late 50s. No one bought it (well, not from him, anyway). So, after his writing partner died, he sold off the rights and turned to TV. Michael still wanted to bring the super spy to life, but obviously he couldn’t just rip off the Fleming character. So instead, he decided to create James Bond... on horseback. And that’s how *The Wild Wild West* came into being.

The Wild Wild West was produced by CBS for four seasons from 1965 to 1969 and spawned a couple of made-for-tv movies as well as a 1999 ‘reimagining’ that was the stuff of nightmares (no, I mean that literally... thirty foot spider anyone?). It was one of the first genre bending shows on television, combining cowboys, mysteries, spy intrigue, comedy and steampunk (way before the word ‘steampunk’ even existed).

James T. West and his partner, Artemus Gordon, were Secret Service Agents, assigned to missions directly by President Ulysses S. Grant. The show took place just after the end of the civil war (somewhere in the 1870’s, the historic dates get a little inconsistent, but just go with it.) And while the war between the states was over, it seemed a new problem had arisen in the U.S. A never-ending line of super villains just waiting to take over the world. The villains were often played by some pretty big stars, including Agnes Moorehead, Victor Buono, Pernell

Roberts, Peter Lawford, Sammy Davis, Jr. and Carrol O’Connor just to name a few.

Robert Conrad is one tough dude and did most of his own fight choreography, as well as his own stunts. Until he took a fall off a chandelier (told ya he was hardcore) that nearly killed him. But eventually, all the machismo bit the show in the butt. Although the show rated pretty well for four years, CBS ended up cancelling it because the execs became concerned about excessive violence. Can you imagine how those guys would react to *Sons of Anarchy*?

WWW is available on DVD and is really worth the view. It’s one of my favorite shows of all time and holds up reasonably well to this day. Smart, funny, clever and delightfully absurd at times. Give it a shot if you haven’t already.

Here’s are a few fun pieces of trivia to wet your interest.

The actor Rory Calhoun was originally cast as James West. All you horror fans might remember Mr. Calhoun as the bloodthirsty farmer from *Motel Hell*. For everyone else, he was *The Texan* (1958). Right before production began, some executives saw a screen test and decided to fire 6’3” Rory and go with 5’8” Robert Conrad. Calhoun’s cowboy-like wardrobe had already been chosen for him. In walks Conrad—and the costumer decided right then and there that James T. West would dress a little differently than your average cow-poke. Hence the very fitted signature blue suit with waistcoat.

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Know the Show

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Jim West was a captain in the army before he joined the Secret Service. They gave him the cover of the president of a railroad, which is why he and his partner, former Shakespearean actor turned spy, Artemus Gordon, travelled around in their customized train. The train, by the way, was called The Wanderer 1.

Ross Martin, (Arte), would actually design all the masks/makeup he would wear when going under cover. He would read the script, sketch how he thought the character would look and work with the makeup artist to bring the disguise into being. Martin got to play over 100 different characters over the course of the show.


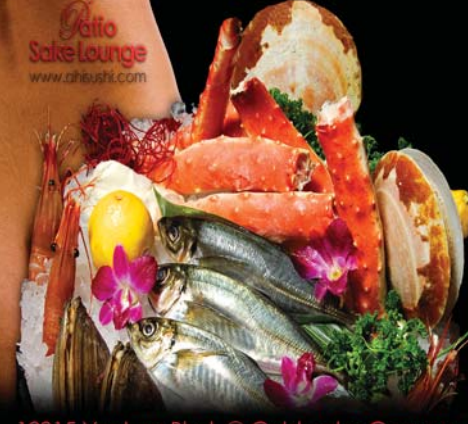
Suzanne Pleshette, of *The Bob Newhart Show* fame, starred in the pilot episode "The Night of the Inferno".

Arch-villain, Miguelito Quixote Loveless, a brilliant and quite maniac dwarf portrayed by Michael Dunn, appeared in 10 episodes of the show. He was, at first, accompanied by his huge henchman, Voltaire, played by Richard Kiel. Kiel played Jaws in a couple of the James Bond movies. See how small the world is? In the follow up, made-for-TV movies, singer Paul Williams plays Miguelito's son out for revenge on James and Arte for his father's death from ulcers. Yup. Ulcers.

And finally, the extremely cool customized train the guys rode in? It was also the Hooterville Cannonball in *Petticoat Junction*.

Hope you enjoyed!

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