

Strike could cause more TV drama

Since television is amuser-in-chief for most of us, some worrisome news about series TV came out of Los Angeles the other day. Unless cool heads prevail, it's likely that future strikes by TV writers and actors will jeopardize the fall season and, perhaps, prime-time television as we know it.

We're told that network executives aren't worried. Why? Instead of paying for all those expensive writers and actors, they'll just sign up such celebrity wannabes as truck driver Susan Hawk of Eagle, Wis., for such "reality" series as her "Survivor."

Calling those voyeur shows "reality" is ridiculous. They're contrived to appeal to our baser instincts. Let's use the term "unscripted," which also includes game shows, mainly "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire."

Preparing for a walkout, the nets are stockpiling lots of both. That's bad news for people who believe the terms "quality" and "television" aren't mutually exclusive. These developments come during a critical period in a strong era for TV drama.

Every TV form has its golden age. Westerns peaked in the tube's early years, when every self-respecting horse in Hollywood had a series. In the 1960s, any performer who could carry a tune, and several who couldn't, fronted a variety hour. Situation comedy reached its zenith in the '70s, specifically on Saturday nights in 1973 when CBS' Mary Tyler Moore, Bob Newhart, "MASH" and "All in the Family," with a little help from Carol Burnett, kept millions home.

Television historians have celebrated the 1950s as the golden age of TV drama. Each week on "Playhouse 90," "The U.S. Steel Hour" and others, some of America's best writers, actors and di-

rectors created powerful original plays, many live. Lots of these talented souls, including two of Hollywood's best directors, Sidney Lumet and Arthur Penn, went on to impressive movie careers.



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Coincidentally this season, both men are back on the tube in what many of us consider an even brighter time for drama. Lumet ("Network," "The Verdict"), high on my list of best-ever movie directors, is writing, producing and directing "100 Centre Street," which premiered last week on A&E. Alas, it's below his usual standards. Penn ("Bonnie and Clyde") has produced for "Law & Order."

Viewed today, the 1950s dramas suffer by comparison, and not just technically, with the peerless "The West Wing" and often "The Practice," "Law & Order," "The Sopranos," "Judging Amy," "ER," "NYPD Blue" and three worthy newcomers: "Ed," "Gideon's Crossing" and "Gilmore Girls."

Enjoy them while you can. Even without the likely strikes and the rise of unscripted television, drama's future wasn't rosy. Every year, most producers pocket less profit. Costs keep rising and, with viewership either flat or declining, most dramas get into the black only after lots of syndicated reruns.

During television's last long strike, the networks sharply increased the number of newsmagazines. Some remain, though

our appetite is diminishing for yet another Cher profile or slapdash "expose." As scriptless hours keep proliferating and getting sleazier — "Temptation Island" hits a new low — one can only hope for viewer interest to diminish.

Drama is home to some first-class writers. Though their names aren't familiar to most viewers, David Chase, David Milch, David E. Kelley (detect a trend here?), Aaron Sorkin, Steven Bochco, Marshall Herskovitz and Ed Zwick, among others, demonstrate consistent writing/producing excellence. But if enough "Survivor" and "Millionaire" clones hit, the greedy networks figure they needn't pay for all that talent.

Also, Hawk and Richard Hatch, the "Survivor" winner, had better TV years in 2000 than Michael Richards, Bette Midler and other costly stars. Name actors also are expendable. So don't be surprised to see the networks play high-stakes chicken in strike negotiations.

If the walkout lasts 22 weeks, as it did in 1988-'89, it will keep new drama installments off the air until next year. Some producers won't be able to keep their companies together that long, and some good shows could vanish. Let's pray that, over time, drama and comedy are TV staples that will endure.

Meanwhile, what will we watch? When we're up to here with reruns, "Survivor 8" and nightly Regis Philbin, we can watch replays of ~~our~~ Super Bowls and cable wrestling. Don't expect Leno and Letterman to help us survive. Think they write their own jokes?

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