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Compromise in screener flap

AMPAS members get tapes; others rip deal

ESPN, Cox swap blows in fees fight

By Andrew Wallenstein

Tense contract negotiations between ESPN and Cox Communications spilled into public view Thursday as both sides traded barbed accusations



Bodenheimer

over the license fees that the Walt Disney Co.-owned sports powerhouse charges cable operators.

"Cox continues to grossly overstate the impact of ESPN's wholesale cost on its retail pricing decisions," said George Bodenheimer, president of ESPN and ABC Sports, in an address Thursday at Washington's National Press Club.

See **ESPN/COX** on page 45

By Gregg Kilday

It's official: The MPAA has partially lifted its screener ban Thursday and will allow the studios to send encoded videocassette screeners, under strict guidelines, to the 6,000-plus members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

But members of other groups — such as the Hollywood Foreign Press Assn., the SAG nominating committee and the vari-



Valenti



Pierson

ous critics' associations — will not be given screeners this year.

The compromise, which was approved at a midday teleconfer-

ence by the heads of the MPAA member companies along with nonsignatories New Line Cinema and DreamWorks Pictures, was announced jointly by Academy president Frank Pierson and MPAA president Jack Valenti.

The plan, which is being characterized as a one-year experiment, would appear to bring to an end what Valenti described in an interview as "the toughest single issue I have ever faced in my 37 years at the MPAA. Trying to gather everyone in a circle and bring about a unanimous decision was difficult and ago-

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Cablevision OKs spinoff

By Georg Szalai

NEW YORK — Conceding that funding needs for its satellite TV business would be higher than originally expected, cable operator Cablevision Systems said late Thursday that its board has — after a review — approved a drastically altered plan to spin off the satellite operation next year along with cable networks AMC, IFC and

WE: Women's Entertainment.

Significantly, Cablevision said founder and chairman Charles Dolan will leave his position after the spinoff of Rainbow DBS to function solely as chairman of the new company, leaving his son to take over. Originally, Dolan was set to supervise both entities as chairman, which had raised some eyebrows in the traditionally compet-

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Writing team driving script for 'Love Bug'

By Chris Gardner

Red-hot comedy writing duo Thomas Lennon and Robert Ben Garant have been tapped by the Walt Disney Co. to pen the redo of "Herbie the Love Bug" in a deal that comes close to the seven-figure mark, sources said. Robert Simonds is producing.

The project has been in development at the studio for years, with various versions penned by

See **"LOVE BUG"** on page 45

Viacom posts record Q3 on ads, cable biz



Redstone

By Georg Szalai

NEW YORK — Entertainment conglomerate Viacom Inc. on Thursday reported a 9% profit increase for its third quarter, driven by another strong quarter at its cable networks business and improved advertising revenue.

While the financials marked a

new third-quarter record for the company, management — in line with a recent warning about 2003 growth rates — reiterated that local advertising continues to rebound at slower rates than projected at the beginning of the year.

However, ever-bullish management predicted that this would

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Online sales gain Wal-Mart prepaid boost

By Paul Bond

In an aggressive offline strategic move, some digital entertainment companies began selling their services this month at about 2,900 Wal-Mart stores nationwide.

The Walt Disney Co., SportLine, Shockwave and Cellus USA, which sells ring tones and



games for mobile phones, are using the Pre-Paid Web Cents technology from AT&T to create debit cards that Wal-Mart is selling.

Shockwave is selling via the cards a two-month subscription to its GameBlast Web site for \$14.95, while Disney is selling a month's access to its Blast and ToonTown Online for \$9.94 apiece.

Consumers who purchase their cards at Wal-Mart or other stores — such as Target and 7-Eleven, which have been selling some cards for a few months — register them online in a way similar to giving credit card information at an Internet site.

“Kids are our target audience, or adults uncomfortable with using a credit card online, or parents who want to indulge their children but put a limit on it,” AT&T spokesman Bob Nersesian said. “And they add some variety to store shelves.”

Disney said it launched a marketing campaign in August for its paid online services for children. This month, ToonTown boasted as many as 6,000 paid users simultaneously, up from only 2,000 in June, a spokeswoman said. ■

Convergence appears Monday and Friday. Information may be e-mailed to new media/technology editor Paul Bond at: PBond@hollywoodreporter.com

Convergence is also available on our Web site: hollywoodreporter.com/convergence

Writers get script-to-screen help

Net sites help new screenwriters pitch their projects

By Paul Bond

Hollywood is legendary in its ability to make things difficult for unproven screenwriters. So perhaps it's only natural that dozens if not hundreds of Internet sites sprang quickly to action to help struggling writers get their scripts read by the right people.

The problem now is in separating the useful online services from the useless ones.

“There’s a lot of scams out there,” said Chris Wehner, author of “Screenwriting on the Internet: Researching, Writing and Selling Your Script on the Web.”

Wehner founded ScreenWritersUtopia.com in 1995 after discovering how hard it was to pitch scripts to Hollywood while living in Grand Junction, Colo.

“I optioned a script to a producer, then he died,” he said. “So I wasn’t having much luck.”

Sympathetic budding screenwriters nationwide flocked to his site, and in 2001, he launched the Global Literary Market, where 400 people pay \$15 every six

months so that their work might be perused online by 500 registered agents and producers.

Wehner acknowledges he entered a crowded space populated by the likes of Inktip.com, ScriptShark.com, ScriptPimp.com and HollywoodLitSales.com, which he calls four of the better online script services.

What should one look for when choosing a service? “If you can’t get on the phone and talk to somebody, that’s a warning sign,” he said. Also, check out their “success stories,” which are usually posted at their sites for all to see, and make sure they haven’t changed ownership too often.

HollywoodLitSales founder Howard Meibach disagrees with the bit about the telephone. “I’d get calls at 3 in the morning, ‘Hey, I got a great idea for a movie,’” he said.

His company lists scripts for free, and Sony-based production company Escape Artists gets right of first refusal.

“We’re not in the business of selling dreams,” said Rafi Gordon, president of Baseline/Film-tracker, the well-used entertainment industry database and analysis firm that owns ScriptShark.

ScriptShark boasts one of the more expensive services, charging \$155 per script plus a 10% finders fee if a script is sold, but its users get lots of extras for their money, including professional, written analysis.

Some of ScriptShark’s cheaper competitors, however, “are taking advantage of screenwriters,” Gordon said.

One way of determining which ones he might be referring to is by crashing the message boards about the subject, like the one at ScriptSales.com.



Sara Rue, left, and Carly Pope in “This Time Around,” which was made from a script discovered on the Internet, as was “How Did It Feel?” starring Natasha Gregson Wagner and Blair Underwood, below.

process to be archaic.”

ScriptPimp doesn’t post scripts at its own site; for that, it has enlisted the help of Inktip.

Headquartered in Glendale, staffed by four employees and founded in 2000, Inktip has been profitable for one year, founder and CEO Jerrol LeBaron said.

There are 4,000 scripts at Inktip, about 500 of which were written by already-produced writers, and the scripts may be searched for by using dozens of descriptive elements. Need a coming-of-age thriller about terrorism written by a guild member? The Inktip search engine will locate a half-dozen such scripts.

LeBaron’s extensive list of successes consists of 200 scripts sold or optioned in three years. Users pay \$40 for six months at Inktip and are allowed to see who it is that is reading their scripts online, though only if they promise not to contact them.

“Writers deserve a paper trail as to what’s happening with their work,” LeBaron said.

“I was shocked at how fast it all came together,” said Nathan Nipper, an Inktip customer who posted his script for “This Time Around” in October 2002, sold it for \$22,000, then watched the finished product on ABC Family in June.

Marvin Acuna of Acuna Entertainment signed five writers from Inktip, including Daniel Faraldo, who authored the Blair Underwood vehicle “How Did It Feel?” now in postproduction. “Inktip works because it allows me to consider writers I wouldn’t have in the past,” Acuna said. ■

“(A producer) said I got ripped off and is going to do his best to shut them down,” one person wrote about a specific service she used. “The page looks like it was put together by a 9-year-old,” another wrote.

“Writers are incredibly frustrated, so it’s tough to find positive comments on that site,” ScriptPimp founder Chadwick Clough said. “Fortunately, though, they seem to like my company.”

His firm offers an option similar to that of ScriptShark but for \$10 less and without the 10% fee. The company also has built a writers database of 1,170 agencies, management and production companies and any other entity that writers might like to pitch their work to, complete with tips on how best to submit a script and what genres and budgets companies are interested in.

Clough founded ScriptPimp after working at three production companies where, he said, “I found the query submission