

# TNT revamping its image

Network promotes top-drawer films, originals, 'ER' in aiming for upscale demos

By Donna Petrozzello

Turner Network Television pitched itself as a blue-chip cable network to advertisers and media buyers at its upfront sales presentation in New York last week.

"TNT's programming is boutique, not mass production," says Bradley Siegel, president of TNT and Turner Classic Movies. "In a lot of ways this is more desirable product than is on the broadcast networks."

TNT is offering premieres of theatricals including "Fargo," "Shine," "Mighty Aphrodite" and "Hamlet" during its 1998-99 season. Siegel says TNT expects these films will draw viewers who have slightly higher incomes and more education and who are more likely to live in urban regions than the typical cable viewer.

TNT also is counting on *ER* to attract affluent viewing households when it debuts weeknights this fall at 7 p.m. TNT is expecting the drama to drive viewers to the network's prime time block as well.



'Wag the Dog' with Dustin Hoffman is one of 17 movies acquired by TNT. It will air in 2000-01.

"TNT represents a more eclectic viewing audience who are somewhat better educated, somewhat above average income and who generally have a greater number of persons living in their households," says Joe Uva, president of entertainment sales and marketing at Turner Broadcasting Sales. While TNT's mainstay audience is still adults 25-54, the network is trying to skew toward the younger end of that spectrum, Uva says.

"ER is the most desirable off-net

drama on television, not just on cable," Siegel contends. "Seinfeld is way up there, but right behind it is ER." TNT will offer seven minutes of inventory to national advertisers during *ER* and three minutes of local avails to operators.

For the 1998-99 season, TNT's original movies will include performances by actors such as Kathleen Turner, James Garner and Burt Reynolds and involve producers such as Quincy Jones.

In 1999, TNT will debut an original series from director/producer Oliver Stone. TNT also will replace its sci-fi series *Babylon 5* in prime time next year with the new *Crusade*, which is expected to draw a similarly "smart, young, above-average-income" audience, Siegel says.

"Our four-part strategy involves getting more premium, high-quality audience favorites in terms of theatricals, airing more specials and more network premieres," Siegel says. "That's how we'll capture more of the advertising dollars aimed at broadcast TV, and that's how we'll claim higher rates. It's not just about reach—it's about the quality of the environment in which the program is shown and the quality of the network that advertisers are in." ■

## Turner pumps up original production

Turner Network Television has pumped up its original-production budget by 146% and has announced plans for two new series and more than two dozen original movies during the 1998-99 season. TNT's production costs over two years are expected to be \$175 million-\$200 million.

In 1998, TNT will premiere 13 original movies—and at least that many in 1999, says Julie Weitz, TNT's VP of original programming. Some of TNT's selections for the upcoming season are a departure from the programming norm, according to Weitz; the network is taking on dark comedies, thrillers and controversial subjects.

NBA great and future TV host Earvin "Magic" Johnson makes his debut as executive producer with Quincy Jones on the original TNT feature *Passing Glory*, which tells the true story of a black priest who uses basketball to challenge the conventions of a segregated town. The program is based on scripts by John Sayles and Harold Sylvester.

Film director Oliver Stone marks his entry into TV drama with *Witchblade*, an action/adventure series depicting a New York City detective whose search for justice brings her into contact with a living weapon. TNT will introduce *Witchblade* with a feature movie in early 1999. The series

will premiere as a weekly one-hour series in fourth quarter 1999.

Other feature movies include *Legalese*, about a high-profile murder case, starring James Garner, Kathleen Turner and Gina Gershon; *The Color of Water*, about a black man's exploration of the life of his white, Jewish mother, based on James McBride's best-selling memoir; *Purgatory West of the Pecos*, a western-style thriller starring Sam Shepard and Eric Roberts; and *Hard Time*, the first in a trilogy of films from Larry Levinson Productions that will star Burt Reynolds.

TNT also will debut the sci-fi thriller series *Crusade*, which will replace its *Babylon 5* in prime time, starting in 1999. *Babylon 5* will continue airing at 6 p.m. ET on weeknights next year. *Crusade* launches with aliens seeking revenge and aiming their wrath at human beings by releasing a biogenetic plague. TNT will continue producing *Babylon 5* through 1999, Weitz says. —Donna Petrozzello



'Magic' Johnson will serve as executive producer, along with Quincy Jones, of a TNT original feature.