

flight from Peru to the U.S. It airs Jan. 21 at 9 p.m.

Other original USA movies scheduled for the first half of 1997 include *The Member of the Wedding*, Jan. 22, 9 p.m.; *Anyplace but Home*, Jan. 22, 9 p.m., and *Breaking the Surface*, a docudrama about Olympic champion diver Greg Louganis, March 19, 9 p.m.

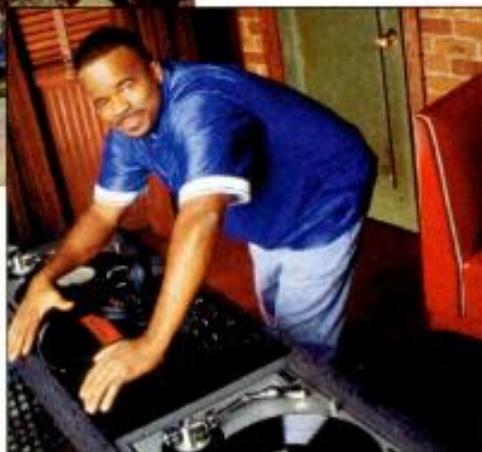
USA has opted to introduce shows in January and June rather than during September, the traditional launch time of broadcast networks. "It's increasingly difficult for us to premiere head-to-head with the six broadcast networks in terms of the blitz of advertising and promotional messages," says Perth, "so we've carved out an off-the-clock strategy.... We hope to be able to launch *Walker, Texas Ranger* as well as acquisitions *Saved by the Bell: The New Class* and *USA High* before September."

Perth acknowledges that USA's original program strategy will inevitably produce some duds. "When you're in the business of original programming and weaning yourselves away from the acquisition pipeline, you're going to have failure. It's network R and D."

USA has already fired a couple of blanks with Saturday prime time shows *Campus Cops* and *Weekly World News*. The two shows, introduced last January, were dropped in October after posting disappointing ratings.



'Lost on Earth' (above) features a TV show within a TV show and puppets who are actually aliens. 'Claude's Crib' stars Canadian producer Claude Brooks



Perth encourages other cable networks to increase original program spending. "I want to kill them competitively, but the more original, innova-

tive initiative that basic cable networks take, the more we will be able to convince advertisers to pay higher CPMs [cost per thousand] for this original programming."

The current legal battle between USA Networks' owner-partners Viacom and MCA Corp. hasn't squelched its new program development or budget, says Perth. "[Viacom and MCA] absolutely believe and sanction USA's continued investment in original programming."

Regarding recent published reports that NBC is interested in acquiring

USA, Perth says he knows of no talks going on between the two. Perth speculates that the NBC takeover story was the product of the current recess in the Viacom/MCA Chancery Court trial.

"There's been such a lull in activity in terms of what's coming out of the trial in Delaware that someone had to write something," he says. ■

TCI move not so super for superstations

Drops WGN-TV and WWOR-TV; observers divided over long-term implications

By Jim McConville

Tele-Communications Inc.'s decision to drop WGN-TV and WWOR-TV from many of its cable systems may not signal the end of the superstation concept, but it does point up its vulnerability in an era in which cable operators are willing to swap networks as a way to drum up cash.

As part of its cable network overhaul announced late last month, TCI is dropping the superstations from many of its systems as of Jan. 1. The networks will be replaced by new networks that will pay TCI upfront launch fees of \$5-\$8 per subscriber.

Industry observers are divided on whether other MSOs will follow TCI's lead and drop superstations to cut costs

or generate cash.

"It depends on how MSOs perceive what subscribers in their market want and what their own economics are," says Tom Wolzien, financial analyst for Sanford C. Bernstein. "You have to look at it on a case-by-case basis. What TCI does doesn't necessarily mean a trend."

Dennis McAlpine, analyst for Josephthal Lyon & Ross, says future MSO actions may be shaped to some degree by the reaction to TCI's move. "If TCI can do it without a lot of heat from local government, subscribers or the networks themselves, then you may see other cases."

"The heyday of the superstation seems to be past," says Harold Vogel, financial analyst for Cowen & Co. "It

was a very innovative concept for its time, but with the arrival of home satellite and the Internet, that advantage has diminished."

Superstation executives, not surprisingly, discount TCI's move as the start of a trend. "I've seen no indication that it is the start of anything bigger," says Peter Walker, general manager of WGN-TV. "All we've heard from are some TCI systems."

TCI is replacing WGN-TV, WWOR-TV and other networks—including E! Entertainment Television and Comedy Central—with Discovery Communications' Animal Planet (part owned by TCI's Liberty Media) Turner's Cartoon Network and Home & Garden Television (HGTV).

In addition to launch fees, TCI