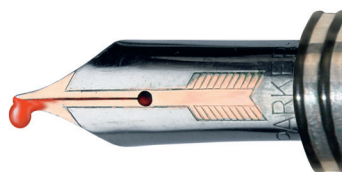


UK broadcasters are having to rearrange their schedules as the Writers' Guild strike spikes blockbuster shows already ordered from the US, reports **Kate Bulkley**

Writers' block



When the members of the Writers' Guild of America (WGA) downed pens last November, British TV executives put on a brave face. There were no signs of instant panic among programme directors or schedulers, while viewers seemed unconcerned about the strike unfolding 12,000 miles away.

But just over two months and one non-televised Golden Globes ceremony later, the repercussions are having a real impact on UK TV screens and on controllers' strategies.

At Sky One the latest tales of Jack Bauer on *24* have been postponed for a year; huge audience generators such as *Lost*, *House*, *Prison Break* and the *CSI* franchises will stop abruptly after they run out of the handful of episodes produced before the strike began; UK channel bosses are re-jigging their schedules and searching for new content to fill the gaps left by these American-scripted blockbusters. The pen has proved to be a mighty weapon in TV-land after all.

But not only is the suffering just beginning to be felt on this side of the pond, the repercussions of the WGA dispute over new-media revenues will be felt long into 2008 and beyond, and some channels in the UK may never look the same again.

"Back in November nobody knew how long this strike would last," says Richard Woolfe, controller of Sky One. "Now we know that we are not going to get dozens of hours of programming. We are not going to have the best of US drama so we've had to make alternative plans."

Although most UK channels are affected to some degree by the strike, it will be a particular blow to Five, which is heavily dependent on US fare, both for the main channel and its Five US digital off shoot.

Five owns the rights to the *CSI* franchise as well as *House*, *Law & Order*, *Grey's Anatomy* and *Shark*. The channel does have 11 episodes each of the new *CSI: Vegas* and *CSI: New York* that it intends to show and once these run out repeats will kick in.

The good news for Five is that *CSI (Vegas, New York and Miami)* all tend to do quite well as re-runs. Also, the chan-

nel is a full series behind the US on both *House* and *Grey's Anatomy*.

As to what happens in the longer term, Five is still looking for a replacement programming head after the recently installed Jay Hunt defected to the BBC.

"We are closely monitoring the situation in the US and we will be putting some films into some of the slots where US series would normally run," says a Five spokesman. He adds that the channel is looking to commission "high-concept factual" series to help fill any gaps in the schedule, but cannot say how many of these will be ordered. "We will also look to put a bit more investment into the 10pm weekdays slot and into weekends," he adds.

At Sky, Woolfe has decided on a two-pronged strategy: beef up promoting the episodes of *Lost* and *Prison Break* that he has to hand, while simultaneously ramping up UK commissioning. "The upside for me in all this is to be able to fast-track some great pieces of factual programming, family entertainment programming and event-led programming – basically unscripted stuff that our viewers will see in the next few months."

Because UK broadcasters only pay for the Hollywood pro-





Five/BSkyB

grammes that they air, there is some money "freed up" that controllers like Woolfe are re-allocating.

So will Sky One forever be changed by the writers' strike? "We want to have those fantastic US dramas. They are part of Sky One's unique DNA but needs must at the moment," says Woolfe. "But I am sure that once the writers' strike gets resolved – as I am sure everyone wants it resolved – we will then re-distribute the balance again but also keep that broader church."

Desperate Housewives just have to sit and knit

Channel 4 has decided to delay airing a truncated season 4 of *Desperate Housewives* in the hope that the strike will end soon and the missing episodes can then be added on. "We have 10 episodes of *Desperate Housewives* but the order was for 23," says Jeff Ford, C4 head of acquisitions.

Ford wants to try and hold several of the biggest US series for as long as possible in order to give the strike time to resolve itself and for the production cycle to start turning again. Consequently, the scheduling is somewhat flexible for programmes such as new shows *Dirty*, *Sexy Money* and *The Big Bang Theory* as well as proven hits such as *Desper-*

Spiked series (from Left):
House, *24* and
CSI: Miami

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Richard Woolfe

ate *Housewives* and *Brothers and Sisters*. "We don't want to have 13 episodes aired and then a big gap before we show another 4 episodes," says Ford. Fans of *Ugly Betty* got to see 10 episodes before Christmas and there are three more set to run in the US that Channel 4 will air soon after, but that is all that were made before the strike.

As part of a policy shift unrelated to the writers' strike, Channel 4 had already cut £10m from its acquisitions budget last August. Ford says the strike has led to even more emphasis on UK-commissioned shows and acquisitions from countries other than the US.

"At a time when the prices for US shows were already really high, this strike has just put more pressure on us to look elsewhere," says Ford. "If we find a commissioned show that works better than the acquired one that it has replaced, we are likely to stay with that."

Despite a shift in acquisitions' strategy Ford says that Channel 4 is still interested in good US fare: "We will remain in the market for US shows because they provide a unique viewing experience but we are certainly going through a very interesting time."

Heroes endure an extended cliffhanger

Meanwhile, ITV hopes that a decision to delay airing the nine finished episodes of the much-anticipated drama, *Pushing Daisies*, until late March or early April will allow any new episodes to come on stream in the event of a settlement in Hollywood.

The same thinking means that ITV has decided to delay showing two other new US acquisitions, *Bionic Woman* and *Gossip Girl*, until well into the spring. "These are important headline shows for ITV2 so we wanted to give them as much time as we could to see how the strike resolves," says an ITV spokesman. "We want to have every opportunity to run as many continuous episodes as possible."

At the BBC, controller of programme acquisition George McGhee says he is "less reliant" on US fare and has material stockpiled, including season 2 of both *The Tudors* and *Heroes* (a truncated 11 episodes). This means there is less pressure on when the channel controller decides to schedule them. The BBC also has 13 episodes of *Mad Men* ready and waiting.

Says McGhee: "I am assuming there will be no May screenings and that the 'up-fronts' (where the US networks showcase their upcoming season pilots to advertisers) won't happen, but we already have four of the best US shows and are likely to continue with them for the coming season. I think this strike will be sorted out soon. I just can't believe that season 3 of *Heroes* won't be there."

The pain for UK broadcasters is likely go beyond present difficulties because, as the writers' strike has dragged on, the studios have been busy cutting their development slates for the 2008-09 season. This is why the May LA Screenings and the up-fronts are threatened.

One consequence, concludes Channel 4's Ford, is that "if there's more reality and content that is American re-makes of UK formats, then that will be less interesting for us as buyers." ■