



Tuesday, December 8, 2009

Oprah names Harpo, Inc. co-presidents

Oprah Winfrey didn't stray far in choosing the new co-presidents of Harpo Prods., tapping "Oprah Winfrey Show" exec producer Sheri Salata and Harpo exec veep Erik Logan. Salata and Logan will report directly to Harpo Inc. chair Winfrey. Their task will be to develop new programming for primetime, syndication, cable, radio, digital and emerging platforms -- while also overseeing original programming on the air. In addition, Salata will retain her leadership role with "Oprah" through the show's scheduled farewell in September 2011. Harpo Prods. "will continue on after 'The Oprah Winfrey Show' sunsets," Winfrey said. "Under Sheri and Erik's leadership, I am confident in Harpo's future and know that we will continue to create quality programming with compelling content for all platforms." In addition to "Oprah," Harpo has had a development or production role in "Dr. Phil," "Rachael Ray" and "The Dr. Oz Show."

Powerful PR shops merge

A pair of powerful praiseries -- BNC and PMK/HBH -- are merging operations by the end of the year to form what's likely to be Hollywood biggest PR shop. Though no official announcement's been made, employees at the companies -- both owned by advertising/marketing giant InterPublic Group of Companies -- received word Monday. Both are located at the Pacific Design Center in West Hollywood, one floor apart. Insiders said InterPublic told top brass at the companies several weeks ago to begun work on merging operations. Key details of the planned combo, such as the name, executive structure and titles, haven't been sorted out yet. At present the two companies have a combined headcount of about 160 employees but there's already been fallout. PMK/HBH prexy Nate Schreiberhas departed; managing partners Robin Baum and Stephen Huvane ankled Monday along with execs Andy Gelb and Shawn Purdy to join PR vet Ina Treciokas.

Focus to film 'Fela' feature

Focus Features has set Steve McQueen to direct "Fela," a feature film based on the life of African musician and activist Fela Anikulapo Kuti -- the subject of the recently opened Broadway musical "Fela!" McQueen, the British artist who made his feature directing debut last year on the Irish hunger strike drama "Hunger," will write the script with Biyi Bandele, based on the Michael Veal book "Fela: The Life and Times of an African Musical Icon." Cine Mosaic's Lydia Pilcher and Leigh Blake are producing. The musical has spurred a resurgence of interest in Fela, who died in 1997, and his Afrobeat musical style, which is a fusion of American jazz, funk and West African drums. The musical is not connected to the film project: Focus is basing its pic on a rights package consisting of screen rights to Fela's music and his life story, plus Veal's book.

VH1 takes shot with 'Wives'

VH1 is bouncing into the NBA world for the latest in sports spouse skeins, concocting "Basketball Wives" for a March 15 premiere. Half-hour series, which received an eight-episode order and

begins production this month, will focus on the glamour as well as the jealousy and emotional concerns of being married to NBA greats. Shaunie O'Neal, separated from 15-time NBA All-Star Shaquille O'Neal, is an exec producer and cast member. Other wives participating include Meshia O'Neal (wife of Jermaine O'Neal), Evelyn Lozada (ex-fiance of Antoine Walker) and Jennifer Williams (wife of Eric Williams). Nick Emmerson, Jennifer O'Connell, and Alex Demyanenko of Shed Media are exec producing the series with Shaunie O'Neal.

CBS Films takes 'Vengeance'

CBS Films has made a preemptive deal to acquire "Vengeance," an action pitch by scribe Robert Mark Kamen. Erwin Stoff will produce. While material sales are few and far between in the waning days of 2009, CBS Films prexy Amy Baer stepped up to the chance at an action genre entry with a modest budget that is very much in the vein of "Taken," the 2008 sleeper hit Kamen wrote with Luc Besson. "Basically, it's a contemporary revenge love story -- what happens when violence meets love," Kamen said. "The main characters are 20 and Italian, and there are themes that echo films like 'The Godfather.' It's about family loyalty and how much someone owes their family and the past. It's not set in the gangster milieu but just outside it." Kamen, who said he and Besson have scripted a sequel to "Taken" that will get made based on star Liam Neeson's availability next year, is working with Stoff for the first time since they started out together with the intention to become writing partners.