



TRADES

Friday, March 12, 2010

OWN undergoing executive reshuffling

Four months after she was brought in as chief creative officer at OWN: The Oprah Winfrey Network, 15-year Harpo Prods. veteran Lisa Erspamer is rearranging the upstart's development executive structure. Deals are still being finalized, but unscripted executives Rod Aissa, Michele Dix and Drew Tappan are expected to oversee development for the cable network, a joint venture between Discovery Communications and Harpo. All three will hold senior vp titles, reporting to Erspamer, with Aissa and Dix focusing on primetime and Tappan concentrating on daytime. Jamila Hunter, who joined OWN as head of programming in June, will step down from the position and serve as a development exec under Aissa and Dix. The purely development position is considered a better fit for the young executive, who had been loaded with a lot of administrative responsibilities in the top programming job. This is the latest executive realignment at OWN, which replaced its original programming team of president Robin Schwartz and her top lieutenants — senior vp programming Maria Grasso and senior vp creative affairs Nina Wass — after MTV Network veteran Christina Norman took the reins of OWN as CEO a year ago.

NBC pilots flesh out casts

Patrick J. Adams and Danneel Harris have landed the leads in NBC's comedy pilot "Friends With Benefits," and "Firefly" alum Alan Tudyk is set to co-star opposite Dermot Mulroney in NBC's pilot "Rockford Files." "Benefits," directed by David Dobkin, explores romance through the eyes of five friends, each looking for "the one" but in the meantime settling for "friends with benefits." It centers on Ben (Adams), an Everyman who, while waiting for Ms. Perfect to come along, enjoys a relationship with Sara (Harris), a doctor trying to find Mr. Right. Adams is repped by Gersh and Generate. Harris, an alumna of the CW's "One Tree Hill," is repped by Gersh and Untitled.

Showtime, Starz ink output deals

Pay cable networks Showtime and Starz have lined up a slew of theatrical movies through separate output deals with Disney-ABC Domestic TV. Showtime has inked a pact for as many as 35 films from DreamWorks Studios to be released from this year through 2015, and Starz has extended its output deal for Walt Disney Studios releases through 2015. Disney-ABC Domestic handles TV distribution for DreamWorks under that indie's output agreement with the Disney Co. Following Showtime's loss of longtime feature suppliers Paramount, MGM and Lionsgate, which together launched rival pay cable venture Epix, the network has slowly built a movie slate through deals with production companies -- including Summit Entertainment and the Weinstein Co. -- as well as fledgling sibling CBS Films and a deal with Miramax that includes unreleased titles from the Disney-owned specialty division that is now for sale.

Fox mulling 'Avatar' summer re-release

Get ready for "Avatar"-plus. James Cameron and Fox are in discussions about rereleasing "Avatar,"

primarily in 3D theaters, in late summer -- and, tantalizingly, with additional scenes that had been left on the cutting-room floor in the rush to ready the epic for its Dec. 18 release. The impetus for a rerelease is the feeling that, even though "Avatar" is the highest-grossing movie of all time, producers could have raked in even more money had they been able to hold on to the digital and Imax 3D screens that were lost when Disney opened "Alice in Wonderland" in 3D on March 5. As for how much additional footage Cameron might add to "Avatar," the guessing began early Thursday when Imax CEO Richard Gelfond said during a Gabelli & Co. investor conference in New York that Cameron had about 40 minutes of additional material that didn't make the theatrical cut. He also predicted a rerelease, which he said probably would occur in the fall.

Jon Voight joins Fox's drama pilot 'Midland'

In his first regular TV series role, Jon Voight has signed on as a lead in Fox's drama pilot "Midland." David Keith also landed co-starring role on the pilot, directed by Marc Webb. "Midland," from 20th TV, centers on Bob (Jimmy Wolk), a con artist juggling two lives in two Texas cities with two women (Adrienne Palicki, Eloise Mumford), one of whom (Palicki), is the daughter of a Texas legend (Voight), described as a gravely voiced titan equally at home in boots or a three-piece suit.

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