

The Hollywood Reporter Emmy Wrap: Final Cut

By T.L. Stanley
Aug 18, 2009, 03:27 PM ET



More stars. More nominated shows. More viewers?

That's the idea, at least, behind the changes ordered up for next month's telecast of the 61st annual Primetime Emmy Awards. Even after abandoning a plan to "time-shift" eight categories to pretaped segments, there will be plenty of new elements. Instead of the usual five nominees, there will be six stars waiting to hear if their names are called in several major categories. With the full casts and creators of seven comedies and dramas (because of a tie) vying for the series statuettes, the Nokia Theatre at L.A. Live will be even more packed Sept. 20 than it was last year.

But, while the efforts to freshen up the Emmys have added an element of controversy to this year's event, the question remains whether the shift will reverse the show's recent ratings slide.

According to the Don Mischer, executive producer of the CBS telecast, a shake-up was necessary to ensure the continued appeal of the show.

"The intent is to make the show more accessible and entertaining without losing the gravitas," Mischer says. "If more people watch, the Emmys win and the whole business wins."

Specific plans are still in the formative stages but could include additional viewer-friendly changes such as showing trivia and factoids about the nominees and winners to better acquaint the audience with some of the lesser-known honorees. That will cut down on comments like, "Who's that?" emanating from living rooms across the country when such stars as Elisabeth Moss ("Mad Men") and Jemaine Clement ("Flight of the Conchords") are onscreen.

"All this is about connecting the viewer at home to what's happening at the Nokia Theatre," Mischer says, "and to give them a reason to stick around."

Definitely part of the show: Highlights from the year in television, possibly even sports broadcasts that were big ratings moments. The segments will be broken into genres -- comedy, drama, reality, longform and variety -- and will contain "the most riveting, outstanding, hilarious, gut-wrenching moments" from TV's past year whether they are nominated or not, Mischer says.

To say the efforts at changing things have been met with criticism would be an understatement. The DGA, WGA and SAG all released harsh statements condemning the plan to "time-shift" certain categories. And cable networks, led by HBO, suggested that the producers were attempting to use the Emmys to promote broadcast programs at the expense of cable. Even now that the idea has been dropped, some are questioning the strategy of chasing ratings at the expense of giving TV business insiders a night to celebrate.

"If the purpose of the awards is to honor the best in television, that should be the objective, not to make money," says

Pete Sealey, an entertainment marketing consultant and former Columbia Pictures executive. He says he sympathizes with the TV academy's effort to boost ratings and keep the show relevant. But "it's not a producer launching a new reality show. It's the industry recognizing its best and brightest."

Painting a doomsday scenario at the recent Television Critics Assn. summer press tour, Mischer wondered aloud whether the Emmys would one day be a nontelevised dinner in a hotel ballroom.

"We're trying to keep the Emmys alive as a major television event," Mischer says. "We want to maintain the profile so it's a broadcast, not a narrowcast."

The Emmys aren't alone in struggling with viewers' blase attitude toward awards shows. The Academy Awards, Grammys and Tonys have all gone through revamps in recent years to pull people back to the programs -- with varying degrees of success.

"The writing is on the wall," Mischer says. He isn't complaining about the academy voters' nominations, which include relatively little-seen shows like Showtime's "Weeds," Discovery's "MythBusters" and HBO's "Big Love" and only a few mainstream hits like ABC's "Lost." But now it's the producers' job to make the telecast itself more inclusive, he says.

"Hopefully it'll make a difference that there are more nominees," Mischer argues. "But the TV academy is celebrating excellence; it's not the People's Choice Awards. The show will look at the broader picture."

The fact that there are still debates about what was and wasn't honored means people still care, according to Robert Thompson, Syracuse University professor of pop culture.

"In a way, the Emmys are more important now than they were years ago when people were only watching a few channels," Thompson says. "The awards promote shows that some viewers have never heard of and can introduce them to things like 'Mad Men.' "

But the show itself has been woefully out of touch, he adds. "I'm very interested in TV and I've dedicated my life to its study, and even I do not find Emmy night a pleasurable experience."

A record-low 12.3 million people tuned in for last year's much-maligned show. Many blamed the audience tune-out on the five reality show hosts, but about 65% of Emmy awards last year went to niche shows, Mischer says, and TV's top 12-rated shows took home only two awards.

In post-show research commissioned by the TV academy, that's why those polled said they didn't watch: they weren't familiar with the nominees. The expanded categories this year tried to address that and to "put our arms around the broader pop culture," academy president John Shaffner says.

Time is at a premium. The Emmys will have 2 hours, 9 minutes, 35 seconds of air time, Mischer says, down from 2 hours, 20 minutes five years ago, to present 28 awards.

Host Neil Patrick Harris tried to calm protests during an Emmys TCA panel by saying the show might feel a little different but it is still the best outlet for TV to celebrate itself. Harris said he'll focus on being funny and keeping the action moving, which might end up helping ratings more than format changes or more nominees. "It's like hosting a big dinner party, Dean Martin-style," Harris says.