

VARIETY WEEKEND
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VARIETY



L O S A N G E L E S ■ F R I D A Y , M A R C H 3 , 2 0 0 6 ■ V A R I E T Y . C O M

Can content ring in revs?

By STEVEN ZEITCHIK NEW YORK

Networks are scrambling to sign deals for mobile phone content, but will there be anything worth watching—and will consumers be able to find it if there is?

In the last few days, CBS and ABC unveiled plans for news segments on mobile phones, Viacom debuted a service that makes available clips from a vast catalog of MTV and Comedy Central shows. Fox started a branded store that puts everything from original programming to clips of "Family Guy" and theatrical movies on the sliver-screen.

Add this to ESPN's new mobile service, Verizon V Cast and startups like MobiTV and Amp'd that sell bushels of programming and you have a content bonanza.

All this activity may seem counterintuitive. Cell phones aren't exactly designed for pleasurable viewing, and all the deals in the world won't matter if consumers don't want to see, let alone pay for, the shows the deals cover.

In fact, in some cases, caution and fewer deals may be the wiser strategy.

"It's like satellite radio," said media analyst Bruce Leichtman. "Every company is afraid to miss



Fox changed its mobile content strategy with "24," switching from original "mobisodes" to more popular clip packages.

something. So they spend all this money adding all this content when nobody knows what consumers really want."

There are signs that the networks realize they can't just throw spaghetti at the wall, especially if the noodles all look pretty much the same.

"We'll never be successful until we think of this as a new medium," said CBS Mobile veep Cyriac Roeding. "No one would think of putting a newspaper on television. Why would you just put television on a cell phone?"

So CBS is creating an original mobile soap opera; while the details are unclear, Roeding says it will build the device's interactivity into the narrative.

Others nets agree they need to exploit the medium's strengths. *Turn to page 58*

GETTING A HOLD ON 'HAIRSPRAY'

New Line firms up cast, dates

By MICHAEL FLEMING and DAVE McNARY

"Hairspray" is starting to gel.

New Line Cinema has made pay-or-play deals with John Travolta and Queen Latifah to star in the Adam Shankman-directed musical, which will begin production in Baltimore and Toronto in September. Craig Zadan and Neil Meron are producing.

Deals were completed late Wednesday evening for Travolta to play downtrodden housewife Edna Turnblad and for Latifah to play Motor-



Travolta



Latifah

mouth Maybelle, a civil rights activist and dance show host in the 1962-set musical.

The pic is set for a summer 2007 release.

Now that those deals are set, focus turns to the lead ... not an easy task. *Turn to page 58*

'Sparrow' in Warners nest

By PAMELA McCLINTOCK

Warner Bros. Pictures has acquired the rights to sci-fi book "The Sparrow" for Brad Pitt's Plan B and Industry Entertainment to produce. Pitt has a longtime interest in the project, a potential starring vehicle for him.

Scribe Michael Seitzman ("North Country") is adapting Mary Doria Russell's debut novel of the same name. Project was originally set up at Universal, but Warners picked up the rights to the book after U let them lapse. *Turn to page 56*

Spotnitz reups shop of horrors

By JOSEF ADALIAN

Frank Spotnitz, the horrormeister who was showrunner of "The X-Files" and creator of "Night Stalker," has scared up a seven-figure overall deal at Touchstone Television.

Pnet kicks in this summer and runs through 2008. It continues a relationship that began in 2004, when Spotnitz left longtime home 20th Century Fox TV to set up his *Turn to page 12*

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Inside

Oscar drama

Questions persist about the eligibility of "Crash" tune.

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\$3.50 NEWSPAPER



Night Before ups its score

By NICOLE LaPORTE

The annual Night Before party, held on Oscar eve at the Beverly Hills Hotel, continues its ascent as the hottest pre-Academy Awards ticket. This year's event has raised more than \$6 million, up from \$4 million last year.

Proceeds from the party benefit the Motion Picture & Television Fund. *Turn to page 58*



Indie kudos
Independent Spirit Awards play the match game with Oscar.
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Fun behind the ficus: all-natural privacy screens

By ALISON MANHEIM

Jory Burton, an agent with Sotheby's International Realty in Beverly Hills, has a celebrity client who won't look at a property unless it meets one very specific qualification.

GO HOME "It has to pass the sex-by-the-pool test," he says.

Whether they're game for paparazzi or just don't like tan lines, industry buyers place a premium on privacy. However, 20-foot stucco walls are tacky; barbed wire is unseemly.

And then there are the folks who have never faced an unwanted camera flash, but want more privacy because their homes' small lots mean close neighbors.

"People want to reclaim their yards as an outdoor room," says Michael Schneider, a landscape architect and principal of Hollywood's Orange Street Studio. Among its specialties is constructing urban jungles that help clients elude the gaze of telephoto lenses. "People are willing to pay the money for more (immediate) mature growth."

For example, a privacy-craving actress recently craned in 40-foot palms to shield her home in the celebrity-heavy "bird streets" above Sunset Strip. Less drastic measures include using plants to create hedges, screens and canopies.

For a West Hollywood couple, Schneider devised a solution that shielded the views from the three-story condo complex overlooking their space.

Other clients have bigger issues than aesthetics. For an actor who found that sitcom success meant being inundated by overzealous fans, Schneider employed fencing, plantings and large gates to keep them at bay.



Greg Salmeri, a landscape designer and owner of Culver City nursery Rolling Greens, recommends ligustrum (aka privet), a flowering evergreen shrub that can be shaped into a hedge or screen.

Also favored are thick timber varieties of bamboo that put on height quickly and can grow as high as 30 feet. "They'll screen out everything," he says.

Salmeri also suggests planting ficus hedges, which can be shaped into a canopy that shields views from above, not just at street level.

However, Santa Monica denizens must keep an eye on the shrubs. A revised 1948 city ordinance limits the height of hedges in the front yard to 42 inches; back and side hedges to 12 feet. Landscaping renegades face fines up to \$2,500 a day.

But plants don't have to be tall to be a deterrent. Cacti and iceberg roses are a good plan for the equally thorny problem of intruders.

Ready to shield yourself? Variety Weekend took a look at the more popular options.

PLANT

WHY YOU'D WANT IT

HOWEVER...

Bamboo (Golden, Timber)

These are clumping bamboos, meaning they won't spread across your backyard. Melds well with more minimalist and modern homes. Modest water needs once established.

Make sure you have the space. These varieties quickly reach 25-30 feet in height and aren't meant for clipping. Perfect for shielding tall buildings, but could annoy a neighbor. Will suffer without full sun.

Ficus

This shrub's deep green leaves provide a Mediterranean look. Says Schneider, "They all want to be trees." A good backdrop for other, more vivid plants.

Ficus loves water and the roots can be very invasive. Like paparazzi, it should be kept away from your house.

Ligustrum

A traditional plant that can grow into a solid green wall. Small flowers have a pleasantly sweet scent.

You've seen it so many times as a clipped hedge that it can make a bland choice. Also noted: Its leaves and berries are poisonous.