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# Pre-buzz buzz

■ Reaction is already crackling on the Web as bits of NBC's coming 'Studio 60' series get leaked. It's enough to fray even Aaron Sorkin's nerves.

By Maria Elena Fernandez, Times Staff Writer

IN Hollywood, there used to be a period of time called the "bubble," which described the quiet months between the making of a television pilot and the launching of it as a new series.

That bubble has burst. And no one is feeling the ramifications more than Aaron Sorkin and his new series, "Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip."



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Set designers are still at work building a massive theater inside a sound stage for his drama about a troubled sketch comedy series set in an old vaudeville house. Production on the show begins today. And yet, two months before NBC premieres it, vocal segments of its not-yet-existent audience are divided: Chatter on the Web has declared alternately that "Studio 60" is the fourth-place network's savior and that Sorkin's return to TV is dead on arrival. To Internet bloggers, it is both "the biggest hit of next season" and "an underwhelming disappointment."

For Sorkin, 45, who has been away from television since he left "The West Wing" in 2002, the experience has served as an

education in the new, bumpy world of promoting a show.

"It's unusual for backlash to begin before the show starts," said Sorkin, sitting in his office with his longtime producing and directing partner, Thomas Schlamme. "But I'm hoping now that the timing will work out that there will be a backlash against the backlash by the time we open."

"Studio 60" is not alone in such scrutiny. TV is being filtered, analyzed and debated on the Internet like never before, resulting in savvier viewers who feel fully invested in even the smallest of programming decisions. Already there are dedicated fan sites for another upcoming NBC drama, "Heroes," created by viewers who are hailing it as "the next 'Lost.'" In an attempt to keep up, networks and studios are developing new levels of fan interaction using a variety of digital platforms.

"The Internet has created something that didn't exist five or 10 years ago, a direct dialogue with the creators or actors of a show," said "Lost" co-creator Damon Lindelof. "For fans, they feel they have this access and they are empowered. When we do our podcasts, and we explain what we're doing, they disagree with us and they tell us, 'Well, it's my show too.'"

It would seem to be a network's dream to have people identify so closely with a show, to hear them debating the finer points of a pilot episode around the water cooler. But in the case of "Studio 60," the premature analysis is making an already struggling network's job even harder.

Someone leaked early drafts of the script for the show's pilot to the Web before a single scene had been shot. Casting announcements were disseminated on the Web faster than you can say "Get me Matthew Perry." Things spun further out of the network's control when NBC decided to parade the cast to advertisers at a development session in March, then showed a six-minute trailer to advertisers and reporters at the television preview conferences in May. Those clips hit the blogosphere in nanoseconds, as did a rough cut of the pilot. Reviews popped up immediately.

Even in the age of the Internet, the focus on "Studio 60" seems unusually sharp, undoubtedly because of the involvement of Sorkin, its award-winning creator. "Studio 60" would be just one of dozens of television series launching in the fall if it weren't for the writer whose past is as colorful as the words he puts on paper. A playwright and screenwriter ("A Few Good Men" and "The American President"), Sorkin, a recovering cocaine addict, has stayed away from television since he left "The West Wing" under a cloud of NBC complaints that he was delaying production by routinely turning in scripts late. So intense interest from the media, especially from television critics, was to be expected.

Still, he could not have envisioned that the script he wrote almost entirely in a London hotel while he was performing in a revival of "A Few Good Men" last summer would generate this kind of fury from so many pajama-clad bloggers months before viewers get to even see his new show, which stars Perry, Bradley Whitford, Amanda Peet and Steven Weber.

"I try not to look at it," Sorkin said, and then half-joked: "It scares me."

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But, like it or not, this modern court of public opinion isn't going anywhere. As NBC President of Entertainment Kevin Reilly warns, "We've only just begun on that front."

The early feedback was a virtual love fest. One 35-year-old blogger at craigbe.com declared he was "fully prepared for an embolism to hit" after reading a draft of the script. "It's like 'Entourage' meets 'Larry Sanders' meets 'The West Wing' all wrapped up in 'Sports Night.' Good God, this is going to be amazing," he wrote.

Then came the clip presentation for advertisers and a self-deprecating skit that Sorkin wrote for the actors designed to mock their own heady buzz, and the rumbling began.

The characters seemed as smart and as fast-talking as Sorkin usually draws his players, and Schlamme's 360-degree camerawork, with its famous "walking-and-talking" sequences, were on hand too. But advertisers and reporters didn't know what to make of the trailers: The clips were clunky, not catchy. There was Perry falling out of a chair, a stuffy-seeming rage against reality television and insider-y executive power talks. Was it a comedy or a drama?

Bloggers jumped into the fray: "Every second of 'Studio 60' sounds like Sorkin and looks like Schlamme and thus it's all familiar and reassuring and intelligent and nowhere near as smart-seeming as it was back when 'The West Wing' premiered," wrote Dan Fienberg of Los Angeles on his blog, [fienprint.blogspot.com](http://fienprint.blogspot.com).

Reilly spent a lot of time at the NBC party after the trailer presentation — and in the weeks following — pleading with ad buyers and the media to wait until they saw the entire pilot. But, he said, "I'd rather see some dialogue, even if it's not all positive, rather than no dialogue."

For his part, Sorkin is learning what a few in the industry already know about Internet fans: They may bark loudly, but there's not that many of them. Yet.

Craig Beilinson, a father of two, is the Sorkin fan who predicted he would be struck with an embolism. "The Internet is causing public opinion to spread faster than ever, but it's not clear that it's having an impact on the viewing habits of the general population yet," he said. "Look at what happened to 'Arrested Development.' No amount of rabid blogging about how it was the greatest comedy on TV could get more people to watch it."

Reilly appreciates the closer relationship with the audience that the Internet affords, figuring it can only help programmers and marketers target more efficiently. But in the case of "Studio 60," viewers may have gotten a bit too close for comfort, he said.

"One of the dangers of the Internet is any sort of work getting out prematurely or any sort of early judgment before anything is ready to be hatched," Reilly said. "When you have perfectionists like Aaron and Tommy, they want you to see their finished product."

Sorkin seems to be a quick study: "We can't let this affect us because if it does it will only affect it badly. So you have to believe in what you start out doing, believe in what you've got and keep going forward."

The characters of Matthew Albie (Perry) and Danny Tripp (Whitford) are best friends and partners, much like Sorkin and Schlamme, who, in addition to "The West Wing," previously collaborated on "Sports Night." Matthew is the offbeat genius writer and Danny is the brilliant director-producer, but it's Danny's — not Matthew's — misstep that finds them running a 20-year-old sketch show that is lagging in the ratings.

"The idea of what happens in the pilot is based on the idea of what would happen if once, just once, it was Tommy who screwed up instead of me. Where would that land us?" said Sorkin, who is divorced and shares custody of his 5-year-old daughter, and who no longer talks publicly about his addiction recovery.

In truth, Reilly wasn't dying to launch a series about show business when others set in the industry were failing or succeeding only marginally, but the Sorkin-Schlamme pedigree tempted him. When he read the script, Reilly said, he thought "Studio 60" would be a talent magnet that could help him revive NBC, which with its falling profits continues to be a drag on parent company General Electric. And so, the bidding began. NBC and CBS were neck and neck, both offering big bucks and promising huge promotional launches.

The producers chose NBC because "it felt a little like home, and we felt it's still the place you'd expect to find a show like this," Sorkin said. The show's budget is big: NBC is reportedly spending between \$2 million and \$3 million on each episode.

And it did lure in the talent, spurring Perry to return to TV, Whitford to stay in it and Peet to give it a try. In interviews, most of the cast said they have deliberately avoided reading early reviews of the show because, as Whitford put it, "show business is like dating a schizophrenic: I love you, I ignore you, you're fantastic, you're terrible. I don't need that. I just want to wear makeup and be funny."

But Weber, who plays the chairman of the show's fictional network, NBS, said he has absorbed almost every syllable.

"It's the equivalent of a baby being born and ... everyone is shouting at it, 'Come on, grow already!'" Weber said. "The element of time is the most important thing: time to gather an audience or time to repel an audience, time for people to draw conclusions."

While the pilot clearly takes aim at television's current lowbrow factor, Sorkin promises he is not raging against the medium that pays his bills. The characters of Matt, Danny and Jordan are all driven by the legacy they have inherited, the "medium of Sid Caesar and Jackie Gleason, Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite, and it's ours now, and it matters what we do with it," Sorkin said.

The same could be said for Sorkin and Schlamme, who as they begin toiling on their third series together, are surely mindful of the fact that none of those luminaries had to contend with the Internet.



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