A season to forget for TV networks

SICK? “Grey’s Anatomy” is suffering post-strike malaise.

Even hits shows are suffering from viewer erosion, making the fall schedule tougher to assemble.

By Scott Collins, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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AS REAL-LIFE broadcasters get set to announce their fall schedules next week in New York, they’re still scratching their way out of a trench, otherwise known as the worst season in the history of the network TV business.

Not a single one of the new fall series broke through to a big audience, even the ones that looked can’t-fail on paper, such as ABC’s spinoff “Private Practice” and NBC’s now-dead revival of “Bionic Woman.”

Every network except Fox has posted significant ratings declines for the season so far, according to data from Nielsen Media Research.

Even as existing series have gradually returned from the three-month writers strike, viewers have, to the surprise and dismay of network executives, stayed away.

Through the first week of the May sweep, all the broadcasters, including Fox, have suffered double-digit leakage; ABC alone lost 24%.

Thursday brought another basket of ill tidings, with ABC’s once-formidable “Grey’s Anatomy” and NBC’s “ER” retreating to record lows. Meanwhile, the number of people watching TV overall is up 2% compared with last year -- which means that people haven’t switched off their sets, they’re just watching “other things” (the broadcasters’ code language for “cable”).

If all that weren’t bad enough, programmers are nervously eyeing the possibility of another strike,

http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/tv/la-et-channel5-2008may05,0,4064534.story
as contract talks between the Screen Actors Guild and the studios appear nowhere near a resolution. A work stoppage could shut down production during the summer, throttling the networks' comeback efforts. That threat gives extra leverage to advertisers, who can argue that they're not about to spend top dollar buying advance ads for shows that may appear months late, or never.

Meanwhile, executives are often having to make their decisions about which new fall shows to pick based not on completed pilots, but rather quickly thrown-together "presentations" that are roughly half the length of a normal pilot.

OK, that's a lot of glumness. But it's a safe bet that viewers will slowly filter back next season, as long as the networks give them something compelling to watch. Even as the general picture is one of decline, each network does have hidden strengths -- some of which suggest a shifting long-term dynamic for the industry. More of that in a bit.

To get a better sense of what's at stake for the networks as they face next week's schedule announcements, I had off-the-record conversations with executives at ABC, CBS and Fox (a spokeswoman for No. 4 NBC said top executives felt this column had been overly negative toward the network and declined to participate).

In the past, network officials have at this time of year spoken more freely, or at least bragged about successes, with the exception of those at CBS, who have always maintained a "cone of silence" before unfurling their schedule. But in this depressed environment, it seems, not many folks feel like lifting their noggins above the sandbags. Too risky.

Even rivals seem to agree that Fox ends this season in the strongest position. The network will be No. 1 for the fourth consecutive year in the crucial demographic of adults ages 18 to 49, perhaps by more than a full rating point over its nearest competitor.

The network has solved a lot of problems by limiting its coverage of postseason baseball games, which had tended to interrupt the fall rollouts and deliver inconsistent ratings. That couldn't help a critical dog like the cop drama "K-Ville," but Fox has a hit in "House" and reliable if not stellar performers in "Bones" and even "Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles." So look for the network to bring back the fall schedule relatively intact, with an added boost from the strike-delayed return, in January, of "24."

Fox's biggest question mark, in fact, may be "American Idol," which, as this column reported last month, has eroded in the Nielsons this season. There remains a chance that the network may fiddle with the show's schedule in a bid to stabilize ratings, but rivals tend to discount that possibility. In any case, continued decline for TV's No. 1 hit will create many opportunities for competitors in the months and years ahead.

Despite its unimpressive standing in the ratings, NBC has made some progress in stabilizing its losses. Sunday football has helped, and during the strike the network was able to pivot quickly to reality shows such as "American Gladiators." Execs already unveiled a "52-week schedule" last month that included a few new shows such as the revival of "Knight Rider" and an Americanization of the Australian comedy hit "Kath & Kim."

Rivals are skeptical, though, that NBC will stick to its announced schedule in the coming months and also note the erosion this season for the network's biggest hit series, "Heroes."

ABC and CBS are currently tied for second place among young adults. Both networks are heavily dependent on scripted series such as "Desperate Housewives" and "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation," so both got hammered during the strike layoff.

Unfortunately for ABC, fans' obsession with "Grey's Anatomy" looks to be cooling. But otherwise, the network's female-skewing lineup, led by "Housewives" and "Dancing With the Stars," has weathered fairly well. Expect the Sunday, Monday and Wednesday lineups to return as they are. But there will probably be a couple of openings for new dramas, in the 10 p.m. slot on Tuesday (assuming "Boston Legal" is, as many believe, a goner) and Thursday. And ABC needs some new comedies, with Tuesday the likeliest proving ground.

CBS may require some aggressive changes. Last year's development was a big disappointment ("Viva Laughlin," anyone?), and the lineup is overstocked with aging crime shows, including the two "CSI" spinoffs. Sundays and Tuesdays look ripe for reinvention. Monday's comedies are a bright spot, yet the network still hasn't renewed "How I Met Your Mother" or "The New Adventures of Old Christine." And with "Survivor" getting creaky and "Kid Nation" proving a bust, the network is on the hunt for the next great reality concept.

The Channel Island column runs every Monday in Calendar. Contact Scott Collins at scott.collins@latimes.com
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