‘Lipstick’ Fans’ Delayed Gratification

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The voice on the phone was unmistakably that of Brooke Shields, but a listener would have been forgiven for thinking he had been accidentally connected to a wonky, network television statistician.

During an interview this week about “Lipstick Jungle,” the teetering NBC drama in which she stars, Ms. Shields embarked on an arcane discussion of the show's performance in the Nielsen ratings, specifically its gains in the category of “live plus 7,” when measured against “live plus same day.” Translation: Among viewers 18 to 49, the group prime-time advertisers most wish to reach, the show’s ratings increase by about 29 percent — or by 652,000 viewers, to 2.3 million, according to the most recent Nielsen figures — when the numbers include people who take as many as seven days to watch an episode on digital video recorders as opposed to those who watch it live or within hours of its broadcast.

No prime-time program gets a bigger boost in viewership from long-range DVR viewers, according to an NBC analysis of the Nielsen data. And that has been something of a lifeline for the series, which chronicles the ups and downs of three stylish, high-achieving New York friends played by Ms. Shields, Kim Raver and Lindsay Price.

In sparing “Lipstick” from what was thought to be certain cancellation in mid-November — it ranks 85th among prime-time shows — NBC executives cited those DVR figures as a measurement of the series’ firm hold on a loyal fan base. (Some of those fans demonstrated their ardor by sending tubes of lipstick to Jeff Zucker, chief executive of NBC Universal, the network’s parent company.) NBC has said it will broadcast the four remaining episodes (of the 13 it ordered for this year), staggered through mid-January.

But whether the series returns later this season or next season will largely depend on whether it increases its overall audience, and not just among those watching on a delayed basis.
delayed basis. That’s because advertisers strongly prefer to reach viewers seeing a program live who can’t fast-forward past their ads.

“There is incredible passion for this show at NBC, and there is incredible passion from fans,” said Teri Weinberg, executive vice president of NBC Entertainment. “But we need to find some evidence in the numbers as we go forward. We have a magnifying glass on the show.”

In a sign of the series’s limbo, NBC has ordered that its stage sets remain up and intact in New York City, though there are no immediate plans to return to the studio for production.

Even before its first episode was broadcast in February, “Lipstick” seemed to generate as much drama off camera as on. Based on the book of the same name by Candace Bushnell, an executive producer of the series who also wrote the book “Sex and the City,” “Lipstick” inspired high hopes. It probably didn’t help that, like “Sex and the City,” the series centers on an ensemble of friends who speak openly of the challenges in their sex and work lives.

“For a while I don’t think people were sure what they wanted the show to be,” Ms. Shields said. “The word from the network was that we were not ‘Sex and the City.’ Then word came down that we needed to be more like ‘Sex and the City.’ Once the discussion stopped, we were able to be our own show about these three women.”

Along the way the series pilot was reshot, with several cast changes among male co-stars. Production was also delayed by the writers’ strike. Between the end of last season and the beginning of this one the writing staff was largely overhauled, with Oliver Goldstick, whose previous credits include “Ugly Betty,” installed as an executive producer and show runner. Ilene Rosenzweig and Rick Marin, a married couple who had worked for the Style pages of The New York Times, were hired as executive story editors.

Through their keyboards and others, the show has become more like a campy soap opera, while continuing to explore serious issues like honesty in the workplace, sexual satisfaction and fidelity, mostly from a female perspective. This season Ms. Shields’s character, Wendy, a married mother of two, has lost her job as a film executive after forging a doctor’s signature on the insurance form of an actor with brain cancer. Her ruse was discovered when he died soon into shooting.

“She was an executive who got power crazed and thought she could do whatever she wanted,” Ms. Rosenzweig said. “But her temptations were kind of feminine. It wasn’t that she used her power to sleep with hookers. Her temptation was to do something nurturing and artistic, but nonetheless wrong. She has to pay for it.”

In the first episode of the second season Ms. Raver’s character, Nico, editor in chief of a glossy magazine, gets an injection intended to increase her ability to feel sexual pleasure, as a means to reconcile with her college professor husband, on whom she had been cheating. But that plan goes awry when he informs her, in bed that night, that he is going into the hospital the next morning for a heart operation.

He dies in surgery just as Nico discovers that he too had been unfaithful and impregnated one of his students.

In coming episodes Nico will continue to have to deal with the baby her husband left behind; Ms. Price’s character, an established fashion designer, will weigh whether to pose nude for a magazine to draw attention to her career; and one character — the
writers won't identify which one — will experience a money crisis.

In the meantime NBC and the show's executives are trying to increase the series's financial fortunes. During several recent episodes, for example, advertisements featured Ms. Price, in character, pitching Maybelline cosmetics.

The biggest strike against the show may be that it has been hard for viewers to find. It began the season on Wednesday nights and was later moved to Fridays, at 10 p.m. It will move again, to 9 p.m. Fridays, beginning with its next new episode, on Dec. 5. One idea is that its target audience, high-income women, including mothers, will be more awake and alert at 9 than at 10. But the show's nomadic existence — and its relegation to a weekend night — remain of concern to those who care most about it.

“There is a frustration at the lack of promotion, and the move to a deathly time slot, without any fanfare at all,” Mr. Goldstick said. “That's like disappearing off the face of the earth.”

Asked if he saw any silver lining in the series's relocation one hour earlier on Friday nights, Mr. Goldstick added: “It's a move from Siberia to the Ukraine. It's still not where you want to be.”