

Diversity for the Fun of It

NBC looks for minority talent to help create sitcoms

By Paige Albinak -- Broadcasting & Cable, 9/17/2007

NBC Universal's hunt for diverse new talent is meant to get a broad range of people in front of and behind the camera, but it's a key way for NBC to discover original content for its many networks and online portals. Right now, NBC Universal is hosting its second annual Comedy Short Cuts DiverseCity Festival, with screenings in both New York and Los Angeles.

The company sought submissions of films less than 30 minutes in length, but preferably five to seven minutes long, from "ethnically or culturally diverse writers, producers, casts or themes," according to the festival's Website at comedyshortcuts.net.

"This festival aligns all of the NBC Universal networks and entities," said Damona Resnick, NBC Universal's director of talent diversity initiatives. "It's an innovative way to look at diversity and approaches it creatively, rather than forcing a change. It highlights the work people are already doing."

The Short Cuts festival is one of the ways NBC Universal is adding diversity to its programming mix and to its work force. NBCU joins Time Warner, CBS, Viacom, News Corp., Walt Disney and virtually every major media company in offering initiatives that identify and recruit people of color, including acting showcases, writing workshops and fellowships.

If anything, the emphasis has increased as the search for diverse programming has gone from being considered a nice do-good goal to an economically logical pursuit.

A committee comprised of executives from the NBCU's many networks and television and film studios—including NBC, Universal Media Studios, Sci Fi, Bravo, USA, Focus Features, Rogue Pictures and the Sundance Channel—selected the semi-finalists.

Those short films were screened during a session at the New York Television Festival on Sept. 6, hosted by cast members of NBC's *30 Rock*. Finalists were announced last week. They are: *The Sunday Man*, Danielle Shamash, director; *Aquarium*, Rob Meyer, director; *El Chisme*, Miguel Beccera, director; *A Fat Girl's Guide to Yoga*, Tajamika Paxton, director; and *Bitch*, Lilah Vandenburg, director.

The finalists will be screened in Los Angeles on Oct. 3 at an event at Universal Studios, then go up on www.DotComedy.com for online voting.

NBCU has made it worth filmmakers' while to give this festival a shot: The finalists will meet with Universal Media Studios' comedy development team, and one will be offered a pilot script deal. Last year, the winner scored a digital development deal with the company and is currently developing an original digital series.

"We want to platform these artists and find opportunities for them," said Resnick. "We are inviting agents, managers, producers, casting directors—any industry players who are interested in coming to check these out."

This is the second year NBC Universal has hosted the Short Cuts festival, and the company already has learned that creativity can come from anywhere. Last year, one of the winning submissions was created with nothing but a Webcam, according to Resnick.

"These are more about the content and creative voices behind them," she said. "Obviously, production value counts for something, but the most important thing is finding artists who have a unique voice."

NBCU is looking at comedy shorts for several reasons.

"It tends to be easier to find a fresh voice in comedy," said Resnick. Moreover, NBC has the fewest comedies on its air that it's had in years, and is looking for its next big comedy hit (it hasn't had one of those for a while, either). Finally, with its comedy portal DotComedy.com and the arrival of video site Hulu.com, in conjunction with Fox, NBC needs all the original content it can find.

"We are a network that's been known for comedy, and we don't have as many comedies on the air as we've had in the past," said Resnick. "Finding innovative voices is something that is a focus for the company."