

September 25, 2005  
Small-Screen Sundance  
By BRYAN REESMAN

Terence Gray was trying to come up with a clever way to pitch shows to television executives when he started an Off Off Broadway troupe called Brownstone Productions in 1994 to perform two unproduced sitcoms he had written with Jon Dell'Olio. It didn't work, but it did encourage Mr. Gray to create the New York Television Festival, which makes its debut on Wednesday and runs through Oct. 3 at several Manhattan locations.

Using the Sundance Film Festival as a model, Mr. Gray's television festival is a bid to break out of the traditional pitching process by letting independent producers showcase finished pilots for programmers. "Independent film infused a bloated Hollywood landscape with compelling stories and fresh ideas from new artists," said Mr. Gray, 35, whose credits now include writing for "The Man Show" and "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" "They gave artists an influential voice to inspire the film industry and drive a new creative spirit. I think the time has come for that in television."

The festival received 230 pilots from around the world, including "Heads or Tails," a reality dating show for pet lovers that features their pets' point of view; "Artistic License," a comedy about a Department of Motor Vehicles photographer who treats his work like art; and "Nelson: Rock and Roll Detectives," an animated show reinventing the 1980's pop duo as unseasoned sleuths.

The entries will be judged in five categories: drama, comedy, animation, documentary and reality. Many events will be open to the public. Festival sponsors include the William Morris Agency, NBC, Fox, MTV Networks, A&E Networks, Rainbow Media, Court TV and TV Guide magazine.

"I think the festival is going to be a great effort to generate new kinds of television; new ways of doing it, new ideas, new producers," said Andrea Wong, executive vice president for alternative programming, specials and late night at ABC, and an executive board member for the festival. "I'll take a great idea from wherever it comes."

Screenings will include the director's cut of the pilot for Fox's "Arrested Development," as well as the series' Emmy-winning "Righteous Brothers" episode and a special 3-D presentation of VH1's "I Love the 80's." A number of screenings will take place in specially designed living rooms at Milk Studios and at the Phillips Lounge in the Phillips, de Pury & Company building in Chelsea. Industry panels will be held at SoHo House.

"Independent television is really almost like the Wild West," said Matthew Strauss, executive producer of the pilot for "Nicky's Game," a drama about Manhattan's underground poker scene. "It's definitely brand-new territory, and from what we've heard from executives, they are sick and tired of people coming in and just pitching ideas. The idea of them sitting back and watching an example, rather than just hear the idea of it, is really something new for them."