

The Rebel Yell

News

Strike raises questions about future of entertainment

Pickers mingle with tourists in New York, celebrities join protest to show support

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NEW YORK – A crisp breeze blew through the narrow street. Only slivers of clear blue sky peeked through stony buildings. Bustling black suits exited and entered the glass doors. Tucked away in a side street off of 5th Avenue were protestors at the Rockefeller Center.

At the “Top of the Rock,” tourists crowded around the ice-skating rink and gleaming golden statues. They paid little attention to the placard holding Writers Guild of America strikers merely 20 feet away.

On Nov. 5, the WGA officially announced they were striking after unsuccessful negotiations over the weekend. Tina Fey, executive producer and star of NBC’s “30 Rock,” grabbed a picket sign and joined the protest. Comedian and actor John Leguizamo showed up in solidarity.

Although the tourists weren’t paying attention on that cool November morning, they would notice when they cozied up on their couches and turned on their televisions.

According to the A.C. Nielsen Co., 99 percent of Americans own a television and the average American spends six hours a day in front of the boob tube. The WGA’s website lists 2,014 struck companies – a list that breaks a web browser’s scrollbar. That’s a lot of TV shows we may never know the ending to.

College student favorites like “The Daily Show,” “The Colbert Report,” and late-night talk shows went dark. Local New York news channels bandied about the threat of turning to arcane forms of entertainment, like reading. CNN said if the strikes last long enough, the only thing on TV will be reality shows.

At the heart of the issue are residuals. The Directors Guild beat the WGA to the punch during early negotiations with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers on DVDs, giving only 0.3 percent of the profits. Now that companies are offering TV episodes with advertisements online, guild members don’t want to make the same mistakes.

But many are disappointed about the strike, mostly because of the collateral damage. “I am disappointed for the crews. I can’t justify putting people out of work,” said Carla Kettner, writer on the FOX series “Bones.”

“The Office” recently shut down and “The Daily Show” head writer Steve Bodow expressed guilt in New York Magazine for non-union workers. Alex Taub, a writer on the not-yet-aired ABC series “Eli Stone” just wants to get back to work.

“I want a quick deal that everyone is disappointed with,” Taub said jokingly.

In the meantime, when writers aren’t picketing 20 hours a week, they are looking to other creative venues like novel writing and prose. Kettner is thinking outside the box.

“I baked 300 pumpkin breads with my daughter to feed the homeless.”

But what effect will this have on future writers?

Sean Clark, associate professor of the UNLV film department, thinks that writers need to get ahead of the curve.

“Writers need to look to the music industry on downloads, videos, and digital platforms,” he said.

In fact, the film department is holding forums with recent graduates all working with digital media. They are also developing courses where students write for mobisodes and webisodes - TV episodes aired on a cell phone or website.

Kim Oshea, a senior in film, is optimistic about digital media. “It’s the way of the future. I feel like this is going to be our generation’s contribution,” she said.