

HBO developing Chicago-made comedy pilot for Web streaming



Sarra Jahedi, the co-star and co-creator of "Single Long,"...

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Looking to challenge Netflix in the streaming market, Comcast announced this week that it is launching its own video-on-demand streaming service called Streampix. One wonders how niche these streaming offerings will get — and how many subscriptions one might feel compelled to buy.

Just two years ago HBO began dipping its toe into the streaming market with HBO GO (available only to cable subscribers), offering much of the same content it makes available on TV. But as early as this summer, HBO is looking to start offering original content for the website itself, and if things progress as hoped, a couple of Chicagoans might be in that mix.

The cable channel is developing a sitcom from Jack Mayer and Sarra Jahedi based on a pilot they created last year. Centered around the career-and-romantic mishaps of a group of 20-something Chicagoans, "Single Long" — which the two recent University of Chicago graduates co-wrote, co-directed and starred in — won the 2011 Chicago Comedy TV Pilot Competition held last summer.

"One of the judges was from United Talent Agency, and she independently contacted us and said that she loved the show and asked for permission to shop it around," Mayer told me. "We didn't really know what that meant, so we said, 'Yeah, sure.' And then 24 hours later she got back to us and said that HBO's new online division had seen the show, and they were interested in developing it."

That's a significant milestone for the competition, which began in 2007. This is the first time a winner has seen results that can be directly attributed to exposure in the competition. (The submission deadline for this year's competition is March 5, with a screening of the top contenders July 20 at the Chicago Cultural Center.)

Mayer and Jahedi's winning pilot is available on Vimeo (just plug in "Single Long" with names of the show's creators in the search box). The writing has moments of spiky wit ("I cannot emotionally manipulate a thing that's battery-powered and pink and glittery," Jahedi's character says of her preference for human contact versus sex toys), and Jahedi has a restless, Sarah Silverman-like quality that jumps off the screen.

"The pilot was very much what the year of being out of college felt like," said Mayer, "when you're really at the end of your rope — lacking in resources, lacking in direction, frustrated. And you can either feel down on yourself, or you can laugh at it. So we were laughing at the things that were actually making us miserable."

Mayer and Jahedi are looking to retain the show's Chicago viewpoint. "I've lived here my entire life," Jahedi said. "I live on Taylor Street in Little Italy right now, and it's so old-school Chicago, and it's so interesting because you don't see that in other places. And I'm like, 'How do I capture that energy in this series?' Because I haven't see it anywhere else. It's a cool energy. Chicago's a huge city and yet it barely gets airtime on TV." (Although MTV will be here in the spring shooting the similarly themed ensemble comedy "Underemployed" from "Lost" producer Craig Wright.)

Mayer said: "HBO wants to start doing some low-budget, more experimental series for the website, especially focusing on comedy. It's kind of like a minor-league system, where they give us very little money but a fair amount of creative control to develop a show. If they like it, they'll put it on their website. And if it hits, they've developed something (for TV) for next to nothing."

HBO has no shows set in Chicago. But the local texture captured in "Single Long" (not dissimilar to "How to Make It In America," which HBO recently canceled) "was one of the things that excited the producer we're working with at HBO."

Mayer and Jahedi are still in the script-writing phase, and it's possible that HBO will decline to go any further. But things are looking positive. And, yes, the idea is to shoot it locally.

That's one of the stipulations for the pilot competition: All submissions must be Chicago-made. I caught up with local improviser David Pasquesi, whose pilot "Cop Show" (which he co-wrote and co-starred in with a pre-Pulitzer-winning Tracy Letts) won in 2007.

"We tried to sell what we shot, and no one bought it," Pasquesi told me from Los Angeles, where he is camped out for the month, auditioning for pilot season. "So after we won the competition, we ended up just going out and pitching the idea of it in person. And we actually had success doing that. We sold it to Lionsgate, and then HBO." Last spring, HBO decided to pass on the show. (A grainy version of the "Cop Show" pilot, with a cameo from Danny Pudi, is on YouTube.)

In the meantime, Pasquesi has teamed up with filmmaker Ron Lazzeretti and actor Christian Stolte for a Web series called "Graveyard" (thegraveyardshow.com), a piquant collection of knucklehead conversations described thusly on its website: "While the rest of the world sleeps, Pete the Custodian and Damon the Security Guard share late-night revelations, epiphanies, confessions, lies and whatever else they can think of to keep from dying of boredom before the sun comes up." Every couple of weeks a new episode is posted. (So far eight are up.)

"We shot them from dusk until dawn one night at the front desk of an office tower in a business park in Lombard or something like that," Pasquesi said.