

CTTD pitches classic TV

Studio packages gems for daily service; would you believe Larry, Curly and Moe in late-fringe—nyuk, nyuk?

By Joe Schlosser

It's got big-ticket movies, classic TV shows with hip intros and retro commercials, and a variant on professional wrestling. A new cable channel? No. It's Columbia TriStar Television Distribution, which is coming to NATPE with some shows it hopes will help TV stations beat cable at its own game.

The Sony-owned studio is going to tap into its rich television library next fall and offer stations The Screen Gems Network, a daily hour satellite-fed broadcast consisting of two classic Columbia shows, trivia, old advertisements (Swanson TV dinners, for one) and a number of different themes. The first few months of The Screen Gems Network (Screen Gems was the original name of Columbia Pictures' television division) will feature classic episodes of *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Bewitched*.

Columbia TriStar executives have also repackaged The Three Stooges and are offering 130 half-hour episodes for next fall. In addition, the studio is selling a new movie package to stations entitled *Showcase Six*, with such titles as *Men in Black*, *Air Force One* and *Starship Troopers*.

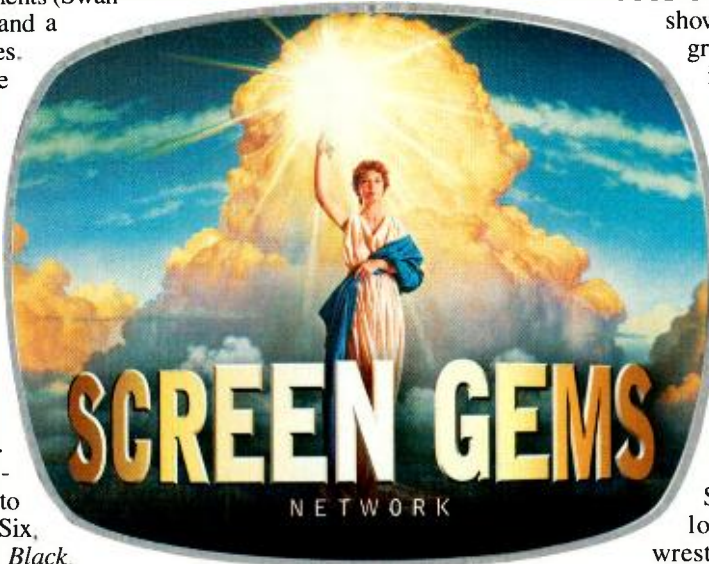
CTTD executives also announced last week they will be bringing back *Ricki Lake* for a seventh season, freshman talk show *Donny & Marie* (which already had an initial two-year commitment) and action-hour *V.I.P.* with Pamela Anderson for a second season.

Its new, first-run entry for fall 1999 will also take a page from cable. It's an hour weekly sports entertainment series, *Battledome*, that is billed as a mixture of professional wrestling and the former weekend show *American Gladiators*.

The Screen Gems Network is what really has the Columbia executives excited about going to the NATPE convention in New Orleans in two weeks. The hour feed will get national advertising support and will likely be

expanded to a two-hour feed in its second year. CTTD executives say they are taking Screen Gems to stations in search of two-year commitments.

"This is something that has never been done before in syndication and that we have been wanting to do for some time now," says CTTD President Barry Thurston. "We were watching what the cable networks have done over the years and how they have created their network by buying products from us and other studios and putting it all together—and suddenly they have a network. We said, 'Why can't we do the same thing for tel-



levision stations and give them the ability to compete in their marketplace with something that is different?"

To capitalize on what might be called the *Nick at Nite* model, Columbia will be able to tap into its 50-year-old library, which consists of 58,000 episodes of sitcoms and dramas. *Barney Miller*, *All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons* and *Charlie's Angels* are just a few of the shows that will likely be included in Screen Gems' rotation.

A station advisory board is being set up by CTTD executives (who helped pioneer the practice) to gain input on promotion and possible marketing plans for the fledgling network. Thurston says the hour feed will likely be sold in daytime, early fringe and late fringe time

periods. The hour Screen Gems Network will generally consist of two half-hour sitcoms and, when it expands to two hours the following year, will tap into Columbia's library of one-hour dramas.

As for The Three Stooges, CTTD executives say demand from station owners for the show has been overwhelming. In all, The Three Stooges produced 190 original short films of varying lengths. CTTD has put them into themed half-hours. Newly produced interstitials have also been added to the packages.

In addition to the usual complement of nyuk-nyuks, "each half-hour will feature things like the eye-poke or the best pie fights," says Russ Krasnoff, CTTD's head of programming. "The show is so rich in history, people grew up with The Stooges, and it's just part of the culture."

Following up on the studio's successful first entry into the weekly hour business last fall with *V.I.P.*, CTTD executives believe they can continue to attract male demos with *Battledome*.

"It's a sports entertainment show that has physical competition in a larger-than-life setting with larger-than-life characters," CTTD Executive Vice President Steve Mosko says. "We have looked at the success of wrestling and how it has become almost mainstream these days, and we believe that there are opportunities with *Battledome* not only in the TV marketplace, but in merchandising and other business opportunities."

Battledome will feature two teams, both composed of a male and female contestant, battling it out in four or five different athletic events. Both teams will be hand-picked from local market tryouts that CTTD executives will be setting up as the season goes forward. A group of *Battledome* warriors will be featured in each event and their job is to slow down the contestants. At the end of each show, one team will be awarded a cash prize and will move on to the next round. The end of the broadcast season will feature a Super Bowl-like finale. ■