

WHEN AND FOR WHOM? SCREENINGS' HISTORY HARD TO POINT OUT

Precisely when the Los Angeles Screenings started and for whom they were set up, no one is quite clear about, but it's safe to assume that this year marks their 30th anniversary.

For some, it was in the early 60's that Jack Singer, then at ABC International, came up with the idea of inviting foreign stations in which ABC had an interest, to come to Hollywood for a first-hand look at programming that was to become available for the new season. The first group to be invited, as Singer recalled, it was comprised of a small number of Latin Americans.

Others, like Alan Silverbach (then at Fox), believe that the first group to come consisted of Canadians, and that they arrived in February (whereas the Latin Americans came in May).

"ABC in those days had quite widespread investments in stations abroad because [ABC's owner] Leonard Goldenson thought it was a great idea," said Singer. "We had interests in Venevision in Venezuela, and in stations in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Japan, Australia, etc. Of course, it was in our interest to make these stations as profitable as possible, and so ABC set up a program buying department. That led me to suggest that we bring the buyers to Los Angeles, simply to give them a jump on the competition. We

were helped a lot by the fact that executives like Michael Solomon, then at MCA, embraced the idea enthusiastically, and made the necessary fuss with receptions, meeting stars, touring the studios and all that. It gave the buyers a big psychological impetus. It was the Hollywood treatment, and the stations loved it."

Singer, who today still represents a large group of Latin American buyers and coordinates their L.A. Screenings arrangements, recalled that the first contingent — probably in 1963 — was put up at the Beverly Hills Hotel. "They weren't happy there," he remembered. "They felt isolated, partly because the hotel is too far from the shopping area. More important, though, they didn't feel comfortable because they were used to wearing suits and that made them stand out at the Beverly Hills Hotel where everyone else tended to walk around in leisure clothes.

"So the next year we switched to the Century Plaza, which was logical because the ABC affiliates met there — and they still do. We remained at the Century Plaza even as the Screenings grew and grew. They always found rooms for us."

Singer and others, like Silverbach, his long-time partner Herb Lazarus, and Sammy Gang of Hearst Entertainment, recalled the early days, when the Screenings took place in May, and are amazed at how much the L.A. Screenings have expanded until, today, they rate among the top TV program markets in the world.

Thirty years ago, Singer recalled, the production companies welcomed the concept of the L.A. Screenings, and so did the foreign stations. Opposed to the idea were NBC and CBS, which naturally felt that they

didn't wish to help the competition. NBC to this day doesn't arrange for screenings. Eventually, of course, things changed as Viacom split off from CBS and ABC Films turned into Worldvision.

Another important change in the L.A. Screenings has been the timing. They used to be known as "The May Screenings," which meant that buyers had to sit through hours of pilots which the networks ultimately didn't select. In deference to that situation, the Screenings have now shifted to June, coming at a time when the networks have basically made their choices.

Today, the L.A. Screenings are still in a state of flux though the basic procedure of studio and network screenings is well established. "It's still 'organized chaos'," said Singer. "It's tough on first-timers, which is where I come in by organizing the schedules, transportation, etc. It can be confusing."

One of the problems is the tendency for screenings to overlap, forcing international buyers to send enough personnel to cover all bases. There have been attempts to organize the L.A. Screenings along the lines of the Monte Carlo Convention, but Singer, Silverbach and Gang all agreed that this is hopeless. "The thing is simply not organizable," said Singer, "NATPE tried it a couple of years ago and got nowhere."

Where, in the past, studios tended to have many screenings, today they attempt to corral everyone into a single session, though buyers with clout can still see programs on request. ●