CBS Projects Stability With Fall Schedule—As Long as Production Can Resume

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Key insights:

- While Fox and The CW assembled mostly pandemic-proof fall lineups, CBS opted to stick with its tried-and-true slate.
- The network has contingencies if production isn’t able to resume this summer, but isn’t sharing those plans yet.

Celebrating its 12th consecutive season as the No. 1 broadcast network in total viewers, CBS has unveiled a fall schedule that emphasizes strength and stability—that is, assuming TV production is able to resume this summer.

While CBS’ new schedule leaves four nights untouched from this season, it is also entirely dependent on its shows being able to return to production, which has been shut down since March as a result of the pandemic. Unlike Fox and The CW, which pushed most of their scripted shows to midseason and created largely pandemic-proof fall lineups packed with acquired series and other already-filmed shows, CBS opted to stick with its tried-and-true slate.

“We are still very hopeful that we can start production at some point this summer and that we can get shows on the air this fall,” said CBS Entertainment president Kelly Kahl. “Obviously, nobody knows for sure when things can get back to

‘normal.’ We are making preparations so that when we do get a green light to go into production, we will be ready.”

Even if production isn’t able to start in the usual July/August timeframe, “a lot of these shows can turn around episodes pretty quickly,” Kahl said. “So even if it is a slightly later start in the summer, we are still hopeful we can have the majority of our shows on in the fall.”

CBS shared its fall schedule with advertisers during the second part of ViacomCBS’ two-day upfront stand-in virtual event. Monday’s presentation focused more on the company’s Viacom properties and the power of its combined portfolio.

Given that CBS renewed 23 current shows for next season, “Covid or no Covid, there was not going to be a ton of room on the schedule for new shows,” said Kahl. “In a world right now of unknowns, we decided to go with what is known, which is very successful schedule with proven appeal to advertisers.”

The fall schedule includes just two new series. Comedy B Positive, co-created by Chuck Lorre, stars Thomas Middleditch as a man looking for a kidney donor who finds a volunteer in Annaleigh Ashford.

“Anytime you can put a Chuck Lorre show on the air, you have to feel pretty good about that,” said Kahl, noting that B Positive was the only pilot completed this year prior to the shutdown, and “it’s a terrific pilot and an exciting addition to our schedule.”

The other fall newbie is a reboot of the ’80s series The Equalizer (which later was turned into two films starring Denzel Washington). Queen Latifah steps into the lead role as an anonymous guardian angel to the downtrodden.

At midseason, CBS will air Clarice, a Silence of the Lambs sequel series that will follow Clarice Starling, the FBI trainee played by Jodie Foster in the 1991 film—which was

based on the Thomas Harris novel—six months after the events of that story. “Based on everything we’ve seen, this is going to be a faithful reflection and depiction of the books, and pay homage to the movie as well,” Kahl said.

In the event that production is not able to resume this summer as CBS hopes, “we have contingencies” for the fall schedule, according to Kahl, though she declined to go into specifics. But CBS’ merger with Viacom last December enabled the network to air classic Paramount movies like Titanic and Forrest Gump on Sundays this month to fill scheduling holes caused by production shutdowns.

“That’s just the tip of the iceberg of things we can do,” Kahl said. “Rest assured, we’re not going to be showing a test pattern on any night.”

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Pages: 1 2

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