

Life Support

The Writers Guild of America's strike is causing the industry to flatline. By Faisal Al-Juburi



More than twenty million viewers each week in the United States alone have become accustomed to hearing Dr. Meredith Grey give her opening and closing monologues on the hit television series *Grey's Anatomy* – which is now in its fourth season. There is a comfort factor associated with the monologues, hearing her rationale for being human. And, inbetween her bookend speeches, emotionally wrought scenes abound, with perfectly crafted dramatic moments in which she pleads with her paramour Dr. Derek Shepherd to “pick me. Choose me. Love me.” But, for the foreseeable future, such enrapturing scenes on the screen are few and far between for the characters and audiences alike. The television and film industry, like some of the patients tended to by Drs. Grey and Shepherd, is in need of life support. For those who are unaware, on 5 November 2007 the Writers Guild of America began a strike against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, after contract negotiations fell through. The main points of contention were and still include payment for pieces written for

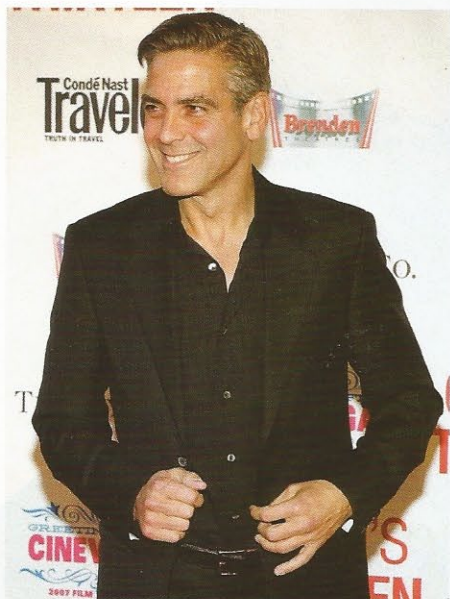
distribution through digital technology; profits from the sale of DVDs; and authority – or lack thereof – over writers employed for reality television programming.

When the strike began, professionals in the industry gasped, remembering the debilitating strike of 1988 that lasted just short of 22 weeks and came at a cost of \$500 million to the industry. Those people who were ignorant to the widespread ramifications that such a union dispute would eventually have paid no real attention, since the effects could not immediately be felt. Now, however, the masses are singing a less indifferent tune. It seems as though the whole of the United States has begun to take notice as economic impacts are felt, and as beloved and comforting characters fade into distant memory.

Recent estimates reported on *NBC Nightly News* – one of the United States' most respected television news programs – indicate that, in total, the current strike, which, it should be noted, has the support and blessing of the actors, has cost the industry approximately \$1 billion. And, even with economics aside, a palpable loss to the television-viewing public is felt every night. The

on-again, off-again relationships on *Grey's Anatomy* are on hold indefinitely, with no more new episodes in line to be aired this season. Family matters explored in *Brothers & Sisters* are left to be re-examined through reruns of earlier episodes. Crimes are left unsolved on *CSI*, *Law & Order*, and their respective spin-offs. And, we are left hanging, proverbially speaking, wondering just how far into the depths of debauchery and desperation the famed *Desperate Housewives* will plunge.

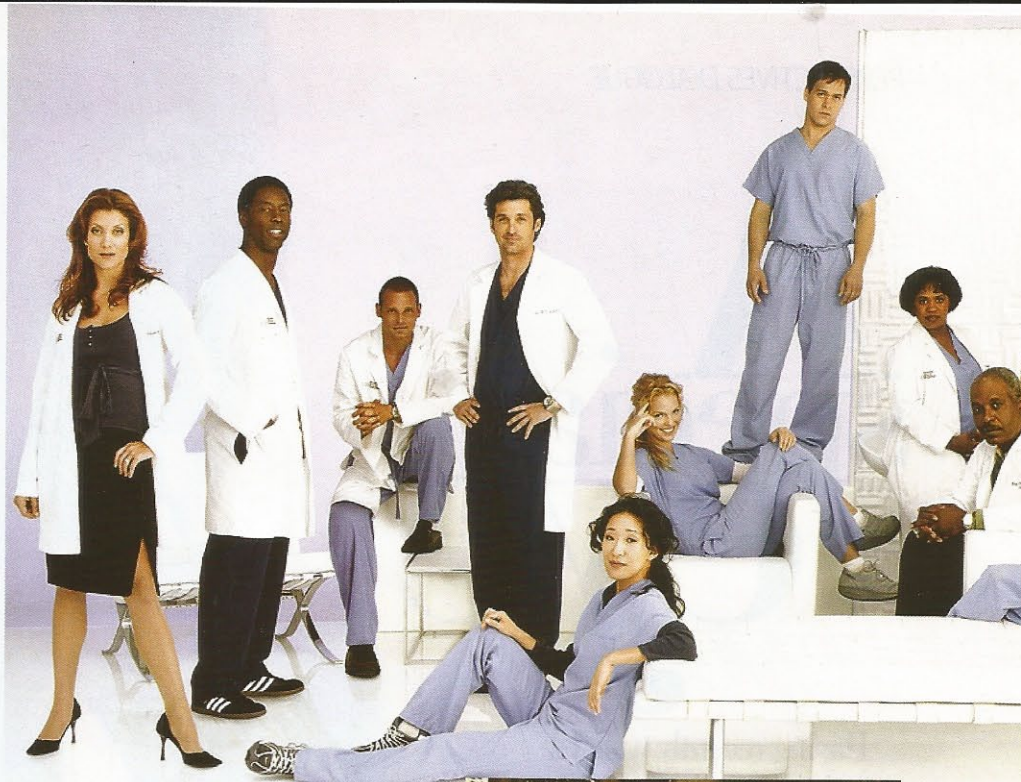
And that, in effect, is why television studios are, from all current accounts, eager to amass a stronger line-up of reality shows, which, as the strike in progress has clearly illustrated, do not employ members of the Writers Guild of America. With the ever-popular trend of reality television – though perhaps no longer considered a trend since it does indeed seem to have firmly cemented itself in the programming landscape – comes a sense of security for studios and viewers alike, for it serves as a lifeline of sorts for continued entertainment. Producers do not have to anticipate a potential halt to production, and audiences can rest easy, knowing that, week in and week out, they will



be kept up to date on those who have entered into the emotional fabric of their lives by way of the television screen. It is generally thought that reality programming, including the cultural phenomenon *American Idol*, will gather even greater viewership as the strike continues, though it should be noted as an aside that preliminary numbers for the season premiere of *Idol* do not support that presumption at this time.

As the strike continues, television most definitely becomes less exciting, even with the prospect of more unscripted shows filling soon-to-be-empty time slots. As discussed above, markedly less anticipation accompanies primetime. And, while there are indeed enough motion pictures already completed to help the film world weather this dire period for a bit longer, Hollywood as a whole has become a little less glamorous. A bit of the luster and sparkle has been tarnished, a large part of the excitement stripped away.

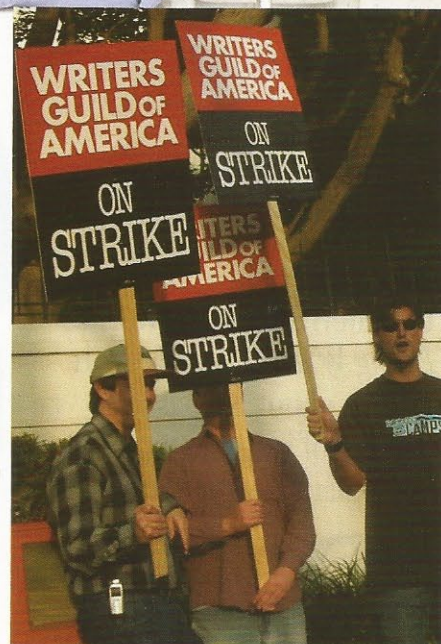
The annual Golden Globes ceremony – during which television and film personalities regularly sashay down the red carpet and enjoy a champagne dinner while being rewarded for their efforts on and behind the camera – was halted due to promised picket lines just days before it was scheduled to take place in January, with a press announcement of the winners serving as a pale substitute in terms of both quality and ratings. And, even more horrifying to film professionals and enthusiasts, the same threat looms over the Academy Awards. Yes, and the Oscars too are in danger this year. Currently scheduled for February 24, 2008, the annual Oscar ceremony and telecast together comprise an international institution. It was revealed



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in mid-January that plans are still in place for the ceremony to continue in some fashion, even if a traditional telecast proves impossible due to the strike and associated picket lines. That being said, the ceremony serves as a celebration of an art form that is accessible to and, perhaps more importantly, deeply touches the masses. So, to have their involvement eliminated from the proceedings ultimately translates into a “shun” toward those who, as cliché as it may sound, make a career in the entertainment industry possible: the fans.

It would be foolhardy for someone who is not deeply entrenched in the industry to claim that there is indeed a clear solution to the difficulties and obstacles at hand, especially in a piece



such as this written by someone who is perhaps little more than a disgruntled fan himself. After all, we are discussing show *business*. Ultimately, all parties have their own interests to protect, and, consequently, their own personal motivations and justifications. That being said, the consequences of the strike are widespread, and negative, potentially long-term effects are on the horizon. In recent weeks, it has become increasingly clear that, to remedy the situation, a doctor of sorts is in order – or an intermediary, at the very least. And, while it is not exactly evident who that someone with the healing touch will eventually prove to be, many are paging one of television’s favorite former doctors – and one of the industry’s most respected professionals, George Clooney. ■