

'Studio 60' flop humbles the mighty Sorkin

Matthew Perry worked, but not much else did

By TIM GOODMAN
SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

Viewers might have seen the last episode of "Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip." Aaron Sorkin's much-anticipated, then much-derided drama for NBC.

The series, about the behind-the-scenes machinations of a television sketch show not unlike "Saturday Night Live," is being pulled a week earlier than expected after its season-worst ratings performance.

It's unlikely to be renewed for a second season. And if "Studio 60" comes back to finish its six remaining episodes, it will have everything to do with the respect accorded Sorkin and nothing to do with a last-ditch effort to save it.

In a freshman crop littered with failures, why is the demise of "Studio 60" so intriguing?

Easy, it's Sorkin.

He's an immensely talented writer who made television better with "Sports Night" and "The West Wing." And he made a pilot, "Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip," that got people's blood pumping.

Anytime a home-run hitter like Sorkin swings the bat, people pay attention.

But television is a business that makes a lot of people whiff.

There was a time when anything



The cast of "Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip," from left, includes D.L. Hughley, Nate Corddry, Sarah Paulson, Timothy Busfield, Bradley Whitford, Matthew Perry, Amanda Peet and Steven Weber. The show by TV veteran Aaron Sorkin is being canceled.

Steven Bochco or David Kelley did brought viewers up on the edge of their seats in anticipation.

Both men are still enormously respected, but until their next great hit — which neither has delivered in some time —

they remain out of the stratosphere.

Now Sorkin joins them. Because no matter how long his die-hard fans — and NBC — hung in there, "Studio 60" didn't get better.

Sorkin didn't need a failure of his own

to know how things work in this world.

In a twist so perfectly dramatic it's almost hard to believe, "Studio 60" is being replaced by "The Black Donnellys," from creator Paul Haggis, who has led a far more mercurial life as a

television writer than Sorkin.

An A-list film writer and director ("Crash," "Million Dollar Baby," "Casino Royale," "Flags of Our Fathers," "Letters From Iwo Jima"), Haggis went from writing episodes for creatively bankrupt series such as "Diff'rent Strokes," "The Facts of Life," among others, to creating one of his own: "Walker, Texas Ranger."

Sorkin, of course, has also represented himself well on the big screen — "A Few Good Men," "Malice" and "The American President" — before his heretofore glorious run in television.

So don't pity Sorkin for the failure of "Studio 60," but have no doubt that it is, indeed, a creative misstep.

For a lot of his loyal fans, the question is why? Here, in descending order of importance, are a multitude of answers to that lone query:

- The premise wasn't so much flawed as doomed. It turns out that most Americans didn't care at all about the career woes and personal crises of pampered Hollywood writers.

- It was a drama about a comedy show but the skits weren't funny. In fact, much of the show was decidedly unfunny.

- The cast was a bad fit. Aside from Matthew Perry (who was a wonderful surprise) and Timothy Busfield (who was underused), not much else worked.

This could mean but two things:

- Sorkin was tone deaf to the problems. Or, more likely:

- This was a bad fit for his talents. He aimed for something and missed. No home run. No hit. It happens.

AT THE MOVIES

'BREACH'

This carefully observed thriller is based on the exploits of real-life spy Robert Hanssen, who is brought to life in a brilliant performance by Chris Cooper. Hanssen, a mass of contradictions, was staunchly Catholic at the same time that he traded in Internet porn. He also spent 22 years selling secrets to the Soviets.

An ambitious young FBI operative (Ryan Phillippe) is asked by his hard-boiled supervisor (Laura Linney) to spy on Hanssen.

Rated: PG-13. Violence, sexual content and language

'BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA'

No fair telling precisely why, but this adaptation of a much-admired Katherine Paterson novel tips toward older children. The story does two things: It celebrates the imagination and brings youngsters into contact with serious issues.

Josh Hutcherson plays a slightly troubled boy who's befriended by an intrepid newcomer (AnnaSophia Robb) to his school. Together, the two characters discover an imaginary world, deal with the school bully and face other serious problems.

Rated: PG. Thematic elements including bullying, some peril and mild language

'HANNIBAL RISING'

This useless prequel tells us Hannibal the Cannibal was born in the crucible of World War II.

Implicated in the adult Hannibal's murderous behavior: the Nazis, starving Lithuanian marauders who ate his younger sister and a general atmosphere of global violence.

A somber tone doesn't help; neither does a lackluster Gaspard Ulliel, who plays Hannibal. Same goes for the occasional bursts of gore. Who needs any of it?

Rated: R. Strong violence, language, sexual references

'LITTLE CHILDREN'

Kate Winslet does Oscar-worthy work as a frustrated housewife in this adaptation of a novel by Tom Perrotta. The foray into suburban malaise features fine acting from Winslet and Jackie Earle Haley, who plays a child molester.

Winslet's Sarah has an affair with a stay-at-home husband played by Patrick Wilson; that gets the movie off and running through incidents treated in overly literary fashion.

Rated: R. Strong sexuality and nudity, language and some disturbing content

'MUSIC AND LYRICS'

Hugh Grant plays a washed-up rocker from the '80s who meets a natural-born lyricist (Drew Barrymore) in a movie that mostly fulfills its promise as a bouncy, entertaining light romantic comedy that's peppered with good one-liners.

Rated: PG-13. Some sexual content

'NORBIT'

If a photo of Eddie Murphy as the world's fattest woman makes you laugh, you've pretty much gotten what there is to get from "Norbit," a comedy in which Murphy plays three roles.

This alarmingly crass comedy has the feel of something composed from recycled Murphy bits. Murphy portrays Norbit, a dweeb orphan who grows up to marry Rasputia (also Murphy), a truculent woman who becomes the movie's running sight gag.

Murphy also plays Mr. Wong, who runs the orphanage where Norbit grew up.

Rated: PG-13. Crude and sexual humor, some nudity and language

• Director

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE C1)

And when 2001's "A Beautiful Mind" won best picture, despite criticism that it sugarcoted the life of mathematician John Nash, it still won best director "because Hollywood was that determined to catch up with Ron Howard," O'Neil said.

Robert Wilonsky, film critic for the Village Voice chain of weekly newspapers, said directors win the Oscar "for being great ring-masters of spectacles in a lot of cases."

"Someone like Clint Eastwood or Jim Cameron or Peter Jackson ("The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King") especially is someone who keeps tight control over what could be a chaotic and disastrous set," said Wilonsky, host of the movie show "Higher Definition" on HDNet.

"Occasionally that's all a director does. A director doesn't determine how a film looks, that's the cinematographer. The director didn't write the thing. The director makes sure stuff doesn't fall apart. They're award for making sure the process doesn't break down, which is fine."

The directors who've won over the past decade have all been well-known and established, except for Mendes, whose "American Beauty" (1999) was his first feature.

TAKE IT HOME ON DVD

'BABEL'

Nominated for best-picture at Sunday's Academy Awards, Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu's sweeping drama follows the lives of families around the globe that are affected by a tragic shooting in the African desert, the film spanning three continents and unfolding in five languages.

The cast list is headed by the top-billed Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchett and Gael Garcia Bernal, who all deliver strongly, but the standout performances come from Adriana Barraza as a Mexican nanny in crisis and Rinko Kikuchi as a deaf Japanese teen coping with her mother's suicide.

For such an expansive film, it's disappointing the DVD arrives without any extras: no interviews, commentary or other background. It's certainly

if there's any common thread to the last 10 years of winners, O'Neil said, "they're all heroic figures as directors: James Cameron, even Anthony Minghella with "The English Patient," and Spielberg. They are such huge stars off-camera that they still have huge presence over the film."

But looking back even further at Oscar history, the kinds of films that win for best director seem to go in cycles. Smaller movies in the late '70s (Michael Cimino's "The Deer Hunter," Robert Benton's "Kramer vs. Kramer," Timothy Hutton's "Ordinary People") gave way to blockbusters in the early '80s (Warren Beatty's "Reds," Richard Attenborough's "Gandhi," Milos Forman's "Amadeus").

Lately, we've been in a small-movie phase.

Most of those films also were named best picture (1981's "Chariots of Fire" won while Beatty took the directing prize). In the last eight years, though, the best-picture and best-director winners have differed half the time — and that could happen again this year.

While "The Departed" is likely to win best director, it seems any of the five films nominated could take home the top prize. Scorsese's film is competing against "Babel," "Letters From Iwo Jima," "Little Miss Sunshine" and "The Queen."

"It is ludicrous to suggest that the best picture of year isn't the best directed. There shouldn't

even be a best director award; the director should share the best picture award with the producers," O'Neil said.

"There is no logic to this illogical split. Part of it is wanting to share the wealth. Last year you had two best pictures: They gave 'Crash' best picture and Ang Lee best director."

So who's going to win this year?

O'Neil thinks Eastwood, who's won two directing Oscars (for "Million Dollar Baby" and "Unforgiven") could play spoiler. Eastwood's "Letters From Iwo Jima," which looks at the Battle of Iwo Jima from the Japanese perspective, is a companion piece to his "Flags of Our Fathers."

"The year (Steven) Soderbergh won for 'Traffic,' beating Ridley Scott for (best picture) 'Gladiator,' one of the chief reasons Soderbergh won was because he had two big movies, 'Traffic' and 'Erin Brockovich,'" O'Neil said. "What does Clint have this year? Two big movies."

But Wilonsky would like to see a director win whose film isn't even in the best-picture race: Paul Greengrass for "United 93."

"There's no piece of film this year more tense, more heart-breaking, more wrenching than 'United 93,'" he said. "I had no interest in seeing that, and the fact that Paul Greengrass makes me want to see it a million times, I just think it's an astounding achievement."

a candidate for a special-edition DVD down the line, especially if it wins best picture.

'THE PRESTIGE'

Hugh Jackman and Christian Bale play a deadly game of sleight-of-hand as rival magicians caught up in a blood feud in the early 1900s. Scarlett Johansson, Michael Caine, David Bowie and Andy Serkis (Gollum of "The Lord of the Rings" films) round out the main cast.

Filmmaker Christopher Nolan, who directed Bale and Caine in "Batman Begins," combines historical drama, mystery and fantasy for this ambitious saga of a friendship that sours.

The DVD and high-definition Blu-ray disc include segments on the film's visual gimmicks.

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