

# TV pilot insanity

By [Gail Pennington](#)

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**Jessica Radloff (Parkway Central, 1997) "Campus Ladies"**

In January, Bill Chott temporarily suspended the improv-comedy classes he teaches at Laughs on the Landing. He was, he told students, heading to Los Angeles for pilot season.

In all corners of America, aspiring stars were doing the same thing: scraping up air fare, kissing their families goodbye and scouting around for a couch to crash on. LA-based actors were likewise putting their regular lives on hold, preparing for a three-month period so crazy that even those who have been through it can hardly believe it.

Each fall, with the new TV season barely under way, the networks already look ahead a year, taking pitches for proposed new series. Writers and producers who get lucky in the pitch lottery then have a couple of months to produce a script.

By the first of January, the scripts are in, and the networks read and review them, deciding which look promising enough to shoot a pilot episode. By the end of January, the major decisions are made — and the craziness begins.

Dozens of pilots, far more than will ever make it to the air, are staffed, cast and shot all at once, creating a scramble for actors, writers and crew. This creates the best opportunity of the year for finding a job but also leads to a lot of heartbreak for actors who read for role after role without landing one.

"It stinks," says actress Teri Polo, who has more than a dozen series to her credit, including Fox's "The Wedding Bells." "It's a very difficult and long process for everyone. ... As an actor, you go on two or three different auditions a day for a different pilot. It's a gamble. It's rolling the dice as to if you get a call back, if you even get seen, if you get to test."

The process is "horrible and dreadful," says Sean Maguire, who plays Kyle on CBS' "The Class." "If there are two or three roles you really want to do, the readings will all be on the same day, with pages of dialogue and probably dialects. Even getting to three places in one day in Los Angeles may be physically impossible."

If the problem for successful actors is too many possibilities, for many others, pilot season is more famine than feast. Some try for years to get a foot in the door, while others find that the system rejects fresh faces in favor of actors who have done show after show, even if most of those shows were failures.

"One year, I got to studio or network tests for seven pilots, and none of them worked out," University City native Leonard Roberts says. "It was really demoralizing. I started to reassess my life at that point. I thought maybe I should go back and open up a barbershop in St. Louis."

Roberts wouldn't call himself a cynic, "but I'm sort of becoming a fatalist. It makes the audition process easier to think what's meant to be will be."

What was meant to be for Roberts was NBC's hit "Heroes" — which he landed during the pilot season after all those failures.

Having so many shows casting all at once is stressful for producers as well.

British director Jon Amiel, who teamed with David E. Kelley on "Wedding Bells," says: "The world of American television was something of a brutal shock to me when I first discovered the insanity of pilot season."

"It's a spectacularly senseless process. Everybody going after the same directors, the same actors at exactly the same time."

Carlton Cuse, executive producer of "Lost," sums up pilot season as "80 projects all scrambling around competing for the same limited pool of actors. Everybody's chasing the same actors, the same writers, and it's all on this clock to get everything done. I don't think that's necessarily the ideal way to nurture something creatively."

Pilot season is "so stupid, it's now stupid to keep calling it stupid," says Ted Harbert, former head of ABC Entertainment who now runs cable networks including E! and Style.

Nevertheless, "the networks want to collect every script and then compare and contrast them" before moving ahead, Harbert says.

In addition, pilots are still viewed as an important tool for selling advertising at the May "upfronts," when the new schedules are announced. And the pilot system, in place for four decades, is deeply embedded in television's "institutional memory," Harbert says. "That's the time when the actors and writers are available."

But pilot season can also be a blender, "where stuff gets blanded out and too many cooks put in their opinions," says Marc Cherry, who wrote the "Desperate Housewives" pilot in his living room, then sold it to a studio without going through the "blender" process.

One solution to pilot-season chaos would be a year-round development process in which producers would pitch shows and writers would turn in scripts whenever they were ready.

That wouldn't work, suggests "Scrubs" creator Bill Lawrence, because writers "are a giant lazy group. They won't turn in something early, because they believe the networks will wait for the very last one. Every writer finishes everything in the last four days."

"Doing term papers until you're 50 — that's comedy writing."

For Chott, and actors like him, pilot season is an efficient if wacky way to stay in touch with opportunities in Hollywood while waiting for that big break.

Last week, Chott reported from Los Angeles that he had tested for a pilot from the Farrelly brothers ("There's Something About Mary") and made it to the final two: him and one other actor.

"I didn't book it, but Bobby Farrelly took the time to come out and tell me that I gave a great read, and the network loved me," Chott reported by e-mail.

Driving home from Los Angeles, he was two hours from St. Louis when his manager called to say he'd been cast in a guest-starring role on FX's "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia." What could Chott do but turn around and drive back — and, while he's there, audition for some more pilots?

### **St. Louis actors share stories about pilot season:**

"I was up for a comedy, and it was down to four of us. One of the four was Ashley Drane, whose husband is David Eckstein. I'm the world's biggest Cardinals fan, and I was starstruck. I went in and said, 'Do you know who that was?' It's a rule in auditions that you don't talk about anyone else, but I went on and on to the producers about her. Needless to say, I didn't get the part."

### **Jessica Radloff (Parkway Central, 1997); "Campus Ladies"**

#### **The seven stages of pilot season**

- 1. Get your foot in the door.** Ben Newmark (Ladue High, 2000) once put on a Wild Oats shirt and delivered bread to land an initial interview.
- 2. Read for the casting director.** Bill Chott (Ritenour, 1987) recommends developing relationships with casting directors so they'll call you when they see suitable roles.
- 3. Read for the producers, who might test you to see how you look on film, or read with other actors.** "Sometimes I'm going after a particular actor, because the network says if I get him, they'll do the show," says Bill Lawrence (creator of "Scrubs").
- 4. Test for the studio that will produce the show if it's a go.**
- 5. Read for the network, whose bosses have the final say on casting.** "If (CBS boss) Les Moonves says this is who you're getting, it's who you're getting," says Ted Harbert, former head of ABC Entertainment.
- 6. Go to pilot.** Participate in the making of a pilot episode for the series.
- 7. Wait to see whether the network picks up the series.** Even if you win the lead, the majority of pilots die quietly.

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