

Roc' begins second season on the air — live

Series' outspoken star seeks greater challenge

by Suzanne Gill

Broadcast networks can be difficult to characterize. Last year, CBS was No. 3, now it's No. 1. Once proud as a peacock, General Electric-owned NBC looks like a dim bulb since losing a Perot-sized fortune on the Summer Olympics, while scrappy ABC is now the most profitable of the bunch.

And then there's Fox. For the most part an unabashed purveyor of sleaze, the fourth network occasionally distinguishes itself with programming that's good by any standard, and the impulse to wholesale condemnation is frustrated.

Yet it doesn't make much sense to find *Roc* alongside *Vinnie and Holly*, a comedy entertainment chief Peter Chernin has publicly admitted he was ashamed to air.

Roc, with a Yale-trained cast plucked from a Tony-winning Broadway play, has more than enough on-camera talent to tell the story of a Baltimore sanitation worker, his working wife, shiftless brother and retired dad.

After just half a season, star Charles Dutton sounded restless. "I wish we were doing *King Lear* every week," he said in January. The adrenalin began flowing again the following month when *Roc* aired live during the first week of the February sweeps. That theatrical turn evidently pleased both network and viewers, and Fox is credited with the idea of an entire season of live performances beginning Sunday, Aug. 16.

"When I thought about it," Dutton says now, "it thrilled me and juiced me up because it was an opportunity to make television history (that)

hasn't been done since 1955."

That's how long it's been since a prime-time drama or comedy series aired live each week. Most Fox viewers, who are commercial television's youngest, weren't even born then, and the rest probably didn't have a TV set. For the next 22 weeks, *Roc* will be performed live at 5:30 in Los Angeles so that it can air at 8:30 in living rooms on the East Coast.

"I think what will happen," Dutton predicts, "is that after two or three weeks, it'll smooth out. It'll be what we do—what this cast does. And it will be the same as if we were working on a stage play."

In fact, a live broadcast has one complication a stage show lacks: the necessity to perform each show in exactly 30 minutes, with time out

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