

Masterpiece to be umbrella for 3 strands

Suspecting that *Masterpiece Theatre* is showing its age after 36 seasons—an eon in TV years—the program’s producers at Boston’s WGBH will “polish” the brand and expand into new media platforms in order to bring more structure and predictability to the schedule and reach the next generation of Sunday night drama fans.

The same courtly theme music by French composer Jean-Joseph Mouret will open the program, but it will lose the little tabletop journey of its video opening and half of the series name. The producers will drop “Theatre” and add headings for three distinct seasonal strands: *Masterpiece Contemporary* in the fall, *Masterpiece Classics* in winter/spring and *Masterpiece Mystery!* (working title) in the summer slot *Mystery!* now fills.

WGBH will seek proposals for a new opening sequence, Eaton said, and will hire a new host/“brand ambassador” to succeed Russell Baker, assign an online “Drama Queen” blogger and offer video streams and audio podcasts for as many *Masterpiece* programs as possible.

To pay the bills, WGBH will sell sponsorships for separate strands as more affordable—and more narrowly targeted—*Masterpiece* “mini-seasons,” said Rebecca Eaton, e.p.

“It’s just a good idea to look at brands every now and then and polish them up,” Eaton said. “The very worst thing you can do is just let it sit there.”

“Even *60 Minutes* redid their clock at one point,” she added.

Eaton announced the changes earlier this month at PBS Showcase in Dallas. The re-branding effort, based largely on focus group data from a younger cohort that producers covet, will be funded with a grant from the CPB Opportunity Fund, created in 2005 to fuel primetime investments identified by the corporation’s research.

The re-polished *Masterpiece* will debut January 2008, with a blue-blood run of *Masterpiece Classics*. Adaptations of all six Jane Austen novels should ease any fans’ fears that the series’ is ditching its bread and butter (scones and jam?) along with its opening sequence.

“That program could not be more iconic,” Eaton said. “We’re not going to alarm our

core audience with a change of programming—we’re changing the presentation of it more than anything.”

That audience is predominantly women aged 50 and over, “or as someone put it, ‘horny older women,’” Eaton said. To reach the viewers deemed next most likely to embrace *Masterpiece*—educated, drama-loving women, ages 35-54—the producers quizzed groups of such women in Columbus, Ohio; Richmond, Va.; Phoenix and Boston.

What emerged was a sense that *Masterpiece* was a “valuable but dusty jewel that’s hard to find,” Eaton told public TV programmers in Dallas. The research suggested that people valued the programs, but the mix of dramas was not consistent enough. Anecdotal evidence suggested that the elite drawing-room look of the opening sequence “scared people off,” she said.

The new scheduling arrangement will clarify where fans can find the more modern films, such as *Reckless*, *White Teeth* or *Prime Suspect*, in the fall, while devotees of British costume dramas can tune in on winter and spring Sundays for proof that the British Empire carries on.

By separating and labeling *Masterpiece*’s divergent offerings, producers hope viewers will no longer experience the “whiplash phenomenon” of going from “a week of Charles Dickens into Helen Mirren the next week,” Eaton said.

The new segmented schedule could also allay the phenomenon of not having a signature sponsor. WGBH has been unable to find a replacement for longtime benefactor ExxonMobil when it turned off the tap in 2004. Underwriting prospects increasingly look for shorter, more narrowly focused media buys.

Producers will also try to secure digital rights for streaming, podcasting and video-on-demand.

The new host will have online duties as well as on-air. The new face of *Masterpiece*—there’s no official timeline yet in place for finding one—will go beyond the “host-educator” role filled by Alistair Cooke and Russell Baker, serving as a more accessible spokesperson for the show, Eaton said.

—Jeremy Egner