

News

HBO to try James Earl Ray

Mock TV trial will examine guilt or innocence in King assassination

• Press tour briefs on page 99.

By Paula Parisi

HBO is courting controversy with its Showcase special "Guilt or Innocence: The Trial of James Earl Ray," which will explore the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. by "examining the case in a courtroom setting for the first time."

Also in the chute is the telefilm "The Roswell Incident," about the 1947 crash landing of an unidentified aircraft in the New Mexico desert. The Citadel Pictures project is set to begin production in March, with Jeremy Paul Kagan

("Descending Angel") at the helm.

Announcing the project at the cable portion of the Television Critics Assn. press tour, HBO chairman Michael Fuchs sent pre-production sparks flying when details of HBO's "exclusive participation" arrangement with Ray raised questions about paying convicted criminals for their stories.

Fuchs said he'd "be willing to pay (convicted drug dealer) Pablo Escobar... for his life story. There are plenty of convicted felons that people have done stories on. Whether they've been paid or

not I have no idea."

Asked about the issue of violence and recent legislative initiatives to curb its depiction on TV and in films, Fuchs said, "We had a president not too long ago that... every time he made a military decision... watched 'Rambo.' (Violence) is a problem that pervades

See HBO on page 101

DAILY VARIETY

TU

HBO to begin production on James Earl Ray spec

BY RICHARD KLEIN

HBO will begin production next week on "Guilt or Innocence: The Trial of James Earl Ray," a three-hour special to debut on April 4, the 25th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

The program follows a Fox Broadcasting Co. special exploring the same topic, "Who Killed Martin Luther King," scheduled to air Friday.

"This is really an authentic trial," said HBO chairman-CEO Michael Fuchs, likening the production to the pay service's special "Waldheim: A Commission of Inquiry."

The pay cabler said it has obtained exclusive access to Ray, who will "participate extensively" in the program, via satellite hook-up that will enable Ray to testify and be cross-examined.

Also included will be testimony

from witnesses who've never spoken publicly before.

Nashville taping

"Guilt or Innocence: The Trial of James Earl Ray" will be taped at Shelby County Courthouse in Memphis and Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville.

Show will be hosted by Charlayne Hunter-Gault of the "MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour" and produced by Jack Saltman, who also produced "Waldheim."

Ray is serving a 99-year sentence for King's murder, for which he originally pleaded guilty on the advice of counsel, but three days later tried unsuccessfully to change his plea and get a jury trial.

Fuchs said he didn't know if any money had changed hands between Ray — a convicted felon — and HBO for the rights to make the spec, but he acknowledged that it's something HBO has done on occasion. "Our job is to communicate and get the most entertainment and the best story," Fuchs said.

Multiplexing growth

In other areas, Fuchs said HBO has shown growth in every cable

system where they have gone to multiplexing, but that they're as yet unable to get multiplexing in every system.

He added that HBO might report some subscriber growth or be flat because "we lost about 300,000 customers to hurricanes" last year in Guam, Hawaii, Louisiana and Florida.

"We actually did pretty well this year, all things considered," Fuchs said.

The service also announced that HBO Pictures has started preproduction on "The Roswell Incident," about the 1947 crash landing of an unidentified aircraft in the New Mexico desert.

Leave it to 'Beavis'

MTV: Music Television said it is premiering a new animated series, "Beavis & Butthead," on March 8. The show, about two unemployed suburban misfits, is the first spin-off from MTV's animated variety series "Liquid Television."

MTV also announced a March 3 premiere of "Straight From the Hood," a look at the youth of South Central and other parts of L.A. following last April's uprising. It's the first of a series of MTV programs promoting its "Free Your Mind" tolerance campaign.

The company is also launching "You Wrote It, You Watch It," series featuring short comedy film re-enactments of viewer mail, starting on Feb. 13, and will add a new half-hour stand-up comedy series, called "Comikaze," beginning March 22.

Lifetime announced a new show, "Ms. Smith Goes to Washington," an hourlong special hosted by Linda Ellerbee profiling women newly elected to the Senate and Congress and their first 100 days in office.

It's the first long-form entry for "Lifetime's Mission 100," a new programming and public service campaign "examining what women want to change in their lives and society." It's also a follow-up to last year's "Women and Politics: A Lifetime Challenge," the public service and programming campaign.