

Multichannel **NEWS**

Cable TV Upfronts 2009: Ion Ready to Air A Dozen Telepics

Original Films Could Serve As Backdoor Pilots To Series Production

By Michael Malone--March 25, 2009

New York — Cable TV Upfronts 2009: Complete Coverage From *Multichannel News*

Looking to leverage its considerable real estate, Ion Television will produce 12 original films annually, with the first—a Christmas movie—debuting set for holiday 2009. Ion will debut an original film each month after that, according to executives.

"There's plenty of room out there to do movies," new executive vice president of programming Leslie Chesloff said from Ion's midtown Manhattan headquarters on March 25. "We're stepping our toe into original production."

Chesloff said the films, which Ion will develop from script to finished product, could lead to what she called "backdoor pilots" for the network. Ion will work with advertisers, she added, on "integrated marketing opportunities" in the telefilms, which will cover a wide range of genres.

Ion also offered peeks at three Canadian series making their U.S. debut: the suburban thriller series *Durham County*, which bears the tagline, "This is no Wisteria Lane"; the Homeland Security drama *The Border*; and the Coast Guard-themed action series *The Guard*. *Durham* will debut in the fall of 2009, and the others after that.

Once the home of aging reruns like *Mama's Family* and *Who's the Boss?*, Ion has been ramping up both its original production and its acquired series through programs like *Boston Legal* and *NCIS*. Last spring, Ion partnered with RHI Entertainment to air four original westerns on Saturday nights. Come fall, it will air Jennifer Love Hewitt-starrer *Ghost Whisperer* at 8 p.m. and *Criminal Minds* at 9 p.m.; *Durham County* will follow in the 10 p.m. slot.

Acquired films like *Goodfellas* and *Batman Forever* help round out the schedule.

The gritty dramas further shift Ion from its family-friendly past as Pax TV, and more into general entertainment. "We're as far away from what we used to be as can be," said Chesloff, previously a senior senior vice president at Lifetime.

Ion execs also announced they're taking back two hours of paid programming each weekday. They were pleased to share Ion's viewership growth over the past year, including a 16% boost in primetime households from last season to the current one.

Ion's 60 stations reach 94 million homes nationwide. Brass did not say there were plans for local programming at the station level, but didn't rule out the possibility either. "You never say never," said Chesloff.