

HBO has been the class act of pay TV for as long as anyone can remember. Now Showtime is making a serious run at knocking them off their perch. How? By appealing to a group of proven trendsetters — gays.

# David or Goliath?



The no-holds-barred "Queer as Folk" (left) is challenger Showtime's first serious punch at HBO, which became reigning champ with original series such as "Sex and the City" (below).



By MICHAEL GILTZ

**A**FTER years of playing Pepsi to HBO's Coke, Showtime seems poised — finally — to go toe-to-toe with its longtime rival.

Its most impressive slate of original programming in memory — including movies like Diane Keaton in "Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You" and Nathan Lane in "Neil Simon's Laughter on the 23rd Floor" — are due this season.

But, in truth, the future of Showtime is riding not on its original movies or even the theatrical blockbusters the premium channels were originally meant to showcase.

No, its best hope for closing the gap with HBO is the one-two punch of highly touted new series "Queer as Folk" (premiering next month) and "The Chris Isaak Show" (due early next year).

"Queer as Folk" is a no-holds-barred American version of the controversial British miniseries about gay and lesbian friends.

Set in Pittsburgh, this 22-episode drama doesn't shy away from the explicitness. The sexually voracious main character, Brian, has sex with a very young-looking 17-year-old early on.

"Chris Isaak" is a promising, "Larry Sanders"-like blending of reality and fiction about the life of a damn good-looking rock star.

When Showtime made its new season pitch to the media, those are the two shows it saved for the

finale.

"Queer as Folk" may be a real breakthrough for Showtime," says Linda Moss, programming reporter for the industry paper Multichannel News.

"Obviously they're trying to make it a big breakthrough. I saw a presentation on 'The Chris Isaak Show' and it looked really funny. The reaction from the critics was really good."

The only problem with Showtime's new-found ambition? HBO has never been stronger.

"HBO has 'The Sopranos' and 'Sex and the City,' says Moss. "So it is unfortunate that Showtime is coming of age when HBO is at its zenith."

Mark Zakarin, the executive vice president for original programming at Showtime, agrees the new series are crucial to the future of the network.

"You can do great movies and miniseries, but the thing that makes you want to come back week-after-week is original series," says Zakarin.

That emphasis on original series is a sea-change for premium channels.

Box office hits still matter. But nowadays, nobody will subscribe to Showtime or HBO just to see a

blockbuster that's probably already been on video and DVD and pay-per-view and will soon be on basic cable or the networks.

"The importance of original series has really accelerated in the last two or three years," says Zakarin.

And the importance of "Queer as Folk" can't be overestimated.

"We think 'Queer as Folk' could be the most important series on TV for gay and lesbian viewers," says Zakarin, who predictably also mentions the many programs appealing to blacks and other niche viewers.

"Minorities buy premium channels at a much higher rate than viewers as a whole," points out Moss.

Presumably that includes gays too.

Tightly targeting a niche group is becoming an effective way for young and emerging networks to create a loyal audience.

HBO targeted blacks early on ("The Tuskegee Airmen," "Miss Evers' Boys") — and the WB made an instant name for itself by focusing on teenagers.

Whatever the fate of "Queer as Folk" and "The Chris Isaak Show," they will certainly accomplish one goal: getting a lot of press.

Showtime has been getting

short shrift for years from the media — due in part to bad timing and in part to producing original movies that maybe were a little too good.

In 1984, Showtime was the home for the groundbreaking sitcom "Brothers," perhaps the first critically acclaimed comedy on cable and, appropriately, featuring the first openly gay character in its storyline about a retired New York Jets place kicker who tried to get a handle on his kid brother's coming out.

Two years later, Showtime nurtured "It's the Garry Shandling Show," the delightfully self-referential series that laid the groundwork for his work on "Larry Sanders" — on HBO. Both ran when cable's audience was much smaller and before non-network shows were eligible for Emmys.

In movies, Showtime got little credit for being the backer of the Oscar-winning "Gods and Monsters." The movie turned out so well, its producers were able to get a theatrical run before going direct to Showtime. Showtime paid for the movie, but never got the credit — certainly not the way HBO raked in praise for "Introducing Dorothy Dandridge."

The reality is we offer these

shopping windows [to producers] and we pray no one picks them up theatrically," says Zakarin. "If it gets picked up theatrically, by the time it gets back to Showtime it doesn't have any attribution for us. We get a fraction of the publicity and attention we would have gotten."

In this race, HBO has had a healthy headstart.

It began first (in 1972, with Showtime launching four years later), it produced the first made-for-cable movie and it's always had significantly more subscribers (36 million homes versus about 23 million for Showtime).

Showtime obviously wants to garner a "Sopranos"-like whirlwind of attention and step out of the shadow of HBO, even if it never acknowledges that shadow exists.

"HBO does great work," says Zakarin. "We think we do great work, too."

"Do we think we deserve more credit? Of course we do," he says.

"But probably everyone in the programming business thinks they deserve more credit."