

FRIDAY PRIMETIME/LATE NIGHT														SEPTEMBER 27, 2013																																																								
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# Television Takes A Fantastic Voyage

## From 'S.H.I.E.L.D.' To 'Dracula,' Networks Turn To Fantasy To Pump Fall Ratings

BY NEAL JUSTIN  
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LOS ANGELES — Thor hammered his little brother Loki. Batman put a muzzle on Bane. Spider-Man disarmed Dr. Octopus.

Big deal. If "Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D." can meet superhero expectations and rescue ABC, currently in fourth place among viewers age 18-49, it will make those other feats seem as mundane as changing a light bulb. Clark Gregg, whose character Agent Phil Coulson apparently recovered from his death in "The Avengers" to star in the upcoming series, tried to downplay the hype — just an hour after network executives practically threatened reporters with a personal home visit from the Hulk if they leaked video from the first episode.

"How long has ABC been around? Like 75 years, right? They'll outlive us no matter what we do," Gregg said. "I hear things like, 'Oh, there's such pressure on the show,' but it's just not something I feel."

Gregg must have somehow missed the fact that "S.H.I.E.L.D." was the hottest ticket at this summer's Comic-Con. Disney-owned ABC, hoping to capitalize on its corporate parent's ownership of Marvel Comics, has launched a marketing campaign that rivals a Tom Cruise production.

Other broadcasts are also betting big on the fantasy genre. This fall, prime-time network TV will showcase more than 11 hours of programming with a fantasy element, from Alice going back down the rabbit hole to the resurrection of Dracula. There's serious talk of origin series for the Flash and Black Canary. And let's not forget that Disney also spent \$4 billion last year for Lucasfilms, which means ABC executives are almost certainly having lunch meetings about a Boba Fett series.

Networks are taking a cue from their big-screen brethren. "The Avengers" was the biggest movie of 2012, with a global box-office take of \$1.5 billion, while "Iron Man 3" is likely to take the title this year.

But while fantasy and sci-fi long have held court in movieland, those same genres have struggled on TV.

"It's so strange," said J.H. Wyman, who served as an executive producer for the ratings-challenged "Fringe" and returns to Fox this fall with "Almost Human," a cop-buddy series in which one of the partners is a robot. "Everyone flocks to the cinema to see a great film like 'Conception,' but sci-fi on television is sort of iffy. But I do think this is the right time."

Driving Wyman's optimism is the fact that special effects have gotten considerably cheaper, thanks to new technology.

"When I saw the "Almost Human" pilot, I was kind of blown away," said Wyman's producing partner Naren Shankar, who has also worked on "Grimm," a surprise hit for NBC.



BOB D'AMICO/COURTESY OF ABC/MCT  
Chloe Bennett, Elizabeth Henstridge, Iain De Caestecker, Clark Gregg, Ming-na Wen and Brett Dalton star in "Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D."

"Two years ago you couldn't make a show like this, certainly not on a weekly basis." The budget for the first episode of "S.H.I.E.L.D.," a visual stunner with globe-trotting settings and flying cars, is about as top secret as the contents of a Roswell warehouse, but Gregg insists that it's not nearly as expensive as it looks.

"I thought after the pilot, the next episode would be restricted to us all being stuck in an elevator because they'd already spent all of the money," he said. "But the second episode, if anything, is bigger and even more exciting."

That's music to the ears of comic-book geeks, who may finally have inherited the Earth. It's no coincidence that the most watched sitcom now is "The Big Bang Theory."

"When I was 16, I had to hide the fact that I collected comic books. People thought I was

mentally arrested," said "Spawny" creator Todd McFarlane. "They'd say, 'Why would you read those fantastic, sort of outlandish stories?' And I would say, 'Well, what are you doing this weekend?' And they'd go, 'We're going to go see either "Star Wars," Indiana Jones or James Bond,' all of which had 6-foot, talking Chewbaccas."

But now the gatekeepers have changed. Even President Barack Obama isn't embarrassed to admit he read Spider-Man as a kid.

"We won in the long run," said Len Wein, a comic book writer who helped create Wolverine. "All of us who got picked on in high school are now on top of the heap."

You don't have to own a copy of "Daredevil" No. 181 to appreciate this growing genre. Using well-known fictional characters to tell contemporary stories is a great way to pull in an audience. At least that's the theory

behind Fox's "Sleepy Hollow," in which Ichabod Crane awakens from a 250-year nap to find he still has to deal with the Headless Horseman.

"I think there's something really fun about taking the imagery we're already familiar with and then revising it in a way that's new and fresh," said Mark Goffman, one of the drama's executive producers. "That's where the trend is heading."

When will that bubble burst? Julie Plec has heard this all before. When she helped launch "The Vampire Diaries," people told her she was too late to the game. The series is about to begin its fifth season.

"We got the exact same questions because of 'Twilight' and 'True Blood' and 'Buffy,'" said Plec, who is also launching "The Originals," a "Diaries" spinoff. "Yes, we were afraid we were going to be the thing that killed the genre forever. But not only did that not happen, it thrived. It reinvigorated the genre and opened doors to a lot of other things. So, same answer. Yep, this could be the thing that finally has you people saying, 'No more vampires, darn you.' Or it could just continue to No character style: breathe powerful life into a genre that been around for a hundred years."

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