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## All rise for the new Hispanic judges on television

Mainstream TV aims to reach Hispanic viewers by adding more Hispanic judges to their court show lineups.

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As the saying goes in the TV biz, if a concept works, do it again, and again, and again.

The burgeoning U.S. Hispanic population and the success of two Hispanic TV judges in syndicated court shows haven't gone unnoticed by Hollywood programming denizens -- two more Hispanic benchesitters have been signed up for next fall.

Cristina Pérez will jump ship from Telemundo to English language syndication in Twentieth Television's Cristina's Court while María López will take the lead in Judge María López from Sony Pictures Television.

They will join Alex Ferrer and Marilyn Milián to give Hispanic gavel-bangers four of about 10 court shows slated for the 2006-07 season. López, Ferrer and Milián are Cuban Americans and Pérez is Mexican-American.

"It's a reaction to what people want to see," said Luis Estrada, a Texas-based programming consultant. "With the number of second-generation Hispanics growing, you want to see Hispanics speaking English on TV."

A forerunner of reality TV, court shows have evolved into a staple of daytime programming after The People's Court with Judge Joseph Wapner made its debut in 1981. They're particularly popular with women and build loyal followings. TV producers like them because they're relatively cheap to make.

Although the shows have been criticized as low-brow fare, viewers love the entertainment value of real-life dramas and the educational aspect of learning about a justice system whose inner workings often seem arcane to everyday people.

**STRONG PERSONALITIES**

A judge who isn't afraid to inject a lively spurt of strong personality into the proceedings is key to making the show work.

But as court shows have multiplied across the programming grid, producers have sought to put fresh twists on what has become a tried-and-true genre. Some shows, such as *Divorce Court*, focus on a different niche of the law. *Cristina's Court* will take a CSI-like approach to examining evidence.

Ethnically diverse judges are another way to make shows stand out and broaden appeal. Black TV judges have outnumbered their non-Hispanic white counterparts for the past couple years. Now it appears Hispanics have become the judge du jour.

"I'm surprised it's taken five years," said Miami's Milián, the first Hispanic courtroom captain who started presiding over Warner Brothers' *The People's Court* in 2001. "This business is all about marketing to your audience. Not to take away credit from my expertise, but I'm sure the fact that I'm Hispanic is something that's helped *People's Court* to do as well as it's doing."

#### SUPERIOR TALENT

Twentieth Television did not set out to seek a second Hispanic judge, says programming president Paul Buccieri.

"We look for superior talent," Buccieri said. "It just so happens that Cristina is Hispanic. We saw some old episodes and fell in love with her right away. She's a dynamic person. But we do see it as a plus that she's Hispanic given the growing Hispanic influence in the media."

#### MOST POPULAR

Pérez's show also comes on the heels of Twentieth's success with *Judge Alex*. In October, Fox Television Stations renewed *Judge Alex* for 2006-2007 after the show had aired for just a month. *Judge Judy* and *Judge Joe Brown* are the most popular TV court shows, according to Nielsen Media Research. A former Coral Gables cop and Miami-Dade Circuit Court Judge, Ferrer said he wasn't surprised that more Hispanic judges are in the pipeline. "If a show is successful, everybody wants to do the same," he said.

Sony Pictures Television was forthright about its goal of making inroads in the Hispanic market with López, a former Boston judge who resigned in 2003 after criticism for sentencing a child molester to probation instead of prison.

"Judge María López's dynamic personality and strong appeal to female and Hispanic viewers will have a big impact in the thriving court genre," said John Weiser, president of distribution for SPT.

The show has already been snapped up in 90 percent of the country's TV markets, including WFOR-CBS4 in South Florida.

Twentieth's Buccieri was sanguine about possible saturation of Hispanic judges. "In the end, the best talent will resonate and rise to the top," he said.

Estrada lauded the new trend of Hispanic-led justice as having an ancillary effect on audiences, as well. "It shows Hispanics in positive roles on TV," he said.