

'GAME OF THRONES' ANNOUNCES WINTER IS COMING - IN SUMMER



In this image released by HBO, Kit Harington appears in a scene from "Game of Thrones." HBO said Thursday that the series will return for its seventh season on Sunday, July 16. — AP

Game of Thrones returns for its season seven premiere on July 16, HBO announced Thursday in an elaborate marketing stunt which elated and bemused fans of the hit fantasy show. In a gimmick described by the New York Times as "memorably misguided," the US cable network revealed all in a Facebook Live video showing a block of ice which viewers had to melt by commenting "Fire" to reveal the date.

The process was supposed to take a touch under 15 minutes—already a long time to be concentrating on a block of slowly melting ice—but the video malfunctioned several times, drawing out the process to more than an hour. The debacle sparked snarky posts on Twitter, where #GoTS7 remained one of the top trending hashtags worldwide for hours after the announcement.

"Whoever is in charge of the @GameofThrones S7 premiere date reveal is getting a visit from Septa Unella," tweeted one frustrated fan, invoking the brutal nun of the show's fifth and sixth seasons. "Next year, @HBO, a press release will do," said fan account @BeautyBrienne. "Game of Thrones" tells the story of noble families vying for control of the Iron Throne, all the while keeping one eye on the "White Walkers" leading hordes of the undead toward an invasion from the North.

Since its debut in 2010, the fantasy epic—which has 38 Emmys, more than any other narrative show in history—has been the target of criticism for senseless violence and, more controversially, its pervasive use of rape as a dramatic device. The adult themes have not deterred viewers of the show, which has grown its audience in the US to more than 25 million, and is breaking records across the world.

Season six of "Game of Thrones" was the first to move beyond George RR Martin's "A Song of Ice and Fire" novels. Showrunners David Benioff and DB Weiss last year announced a shortened run of episodes for the final two seasons after HBO had already confirmed season seven would return in summer, a departure from the usual April premieres. The show has been teasing winter's arrival since its pilot episode, and with the season six finale entitled "The Winds of Winter," the camera crew has been forced to wait for colder weather. Benioff told fans at San Diego Comic-Con in July last year shooting would not finish until February and that "there's no way to get the show out there until summer." — AFP



This image released by NBC shows Mandy Moore, left, and Milo Ventimiglia in a scene from "This Is Us." The season finale for the popular time-twisting family drama will air Tuesday at 9 pm EST on NBC. — AP

'This is Us' season finale focus is ill-fated Jack, Rebecca

"This is Us" creator Dan Fogelman helpfully explains his time-twisting family drama's ambitious theme: A vision of shared humanity, without end. "There's no dying. There's no you, or me, or them. It's just us," character Kevin says in a fifth-episode scene singled out by Fogelman as key.

"It has always been part of our conceit that people die but stay a very active part of the lives of both the people who knew and loved them" and the generations that follow, the writer-producer said. But do not, even for a moment, expect his courtesy to extend to revelations about Tuesday's season finale (9 pm EST) of the hit NBC drama already renewed through 2019.

Or - spoiler alert for laggard viewers! - that he'll confess when we'll find out how Milo Ventimiglia's Jack dies, or how long it takes Mandy Moore's widowed Rebecca to end up with Miguel (Jon Huertas), Jack's friend and colleague, or any of the other unknowns driving fans to distraction. But Fogelman will say the season-ender is a showcase for Ventimiglia and Moore. While they're part of a gifted ensemble cast, their characters' unexpected journey and the actors' chemistry made them standouts.

"It's a very intense hour of television and I'm incredibly proud of Mandy and Milo's performance in it," Fogelman said. "I'm excited to see people react - hate it, love it, and hopefully come back to try to find out some things." Following Jack and Rebecca, their three children and others connected to them isn't a linear experience. "This is Us" hopscoches between decades past and present as we meet people at different stages in their lives. There are scenes whose place on the timeline is uncertain, and the characters' connections emerge gradually.

'Lost' meets 'thirtysomething'

Think of it as "thirtysomething" meets "Lost," everyday pathos sliced into a jigsaw puzzle. In season one, Jack and Rebecca Pearson make a snap decision to adopt an abandoned African-American baby after losing one of their triplets at birth, and the family's multiethnic nature is part but only part - of the layered and emotionally intimate series. Because of its zigzag nature, we get glimpses of events yet to be explained.

Moore, for one, recommends taking the stories as they come, especially the circumstances of Jack's death. "I encourage people to almost forget that Jack is not here present day," she said. "I would hate for people to be sitting on pins and needles and saying, 'Is this the episode?' 'Is that the episode?'"

But that intrigue likely is part of the drama's success. "This is Us" has broken into the top 10 shows among total viewers, unusual for a freshman series, and is a big winner with advertiser-coveted young adult viewers ages 18 to 49 and with

women. Its numbers are only getting better. Last Tuesday, it drew its biggest audience yet, 11.2 million, and attracted 20 percent more young adults than its prior telecast. Among young adult women, "This Is Us" is the No. 1 broadcast program for the season.

Ask Fogelman what's behind the show's appeal and he gamely offers up several possibilities. The time-shifting approach adds an element of mystery to the family and "twists up their narrative in a way that maybe makes people pay attention to a family drama in a way they don't always." The casting, including the actors who play the three grown Pearson children, Sterling K Brown, Chrissy Metz and Justin Hartley as, respectively Randall, Kate and Kevin. Count in Susan Kelechi Watson as Randall's wife, Beth; Chris Sullivan as Kate's boyfriend, Toby, and Ron Cephas Jones as Randall's birth father, William.

The characters all are "well-meaning and good but incredibly flawed," providing a mirror in which viewers may see versions of themselves and their own relationships. But maybe he's overthinking it, Fogelman says: "It honestly may work because people enjoy looking at Mandy and Milo and there's not too much more to it than that." (For the record, he also lauded them as "actors' actors. They just happen to have the faces of stars.")

Told of Fogelman's suggestion that she and Ventimiglia might be irresistible eye candy and the show's draw, Moore laughingly brushes it off. "Dan, of course, totally deflecting his genius writing and brilliant concept," she said of Fogelman, a University of Pennsylvania graduate (in English) who took a year's side trip to Oxford University. His film credits include "Bolt" and "Crazy Stupid Love."

Critics largely agree with Moore's assessment, showering "This Is Us" with the kind of praise that these days goes to programs on cable and streaming platforms, not network TV. Emmy Awards should follow. Fogelman and the cast appreciate it all, but viewer devotion can have its downside. "I've been lucky enough to work on some very successful things, movies, but never quite had something like this before," Fogelman said. "You think, 'Oh wow, we did it!' but it comes with a whole load of new stressors and problems," including audience reaction to the foretold shattering of Jack and Rebecca's life together. He tries to avoid reading online comments but insists they wouldn't sway the show's course if he did. "We're going to stick with what our original plan is," he said, and have faith it won't alienate viewers. "But if we do, so be it. But I don't think we will." — AP