

Royal Family

In the land that gave us Scrooge, who would have thought Christmas is the biggest TV watching day of the year . . .

By MICHAEL GILTZ

IN the U.S., Christmas Day is a bust for TV viewers: endless repeats, the occasional high-minded (and dull) religious programming and airings of old movies. (Manorists can appreciate every ounce of pleasure from 1983's "A Christmas Story.") TNT is repeating the movie over and over again all day long.

Here, families are supposed to talk on Christmas Day and/or at least go out to a movie.

Not so in the UK: December 25 is one of the biggest days for television in the year. "A traditional British Christmas day now include watching a fair amount of television," says Matt Baker, head of press for Channel 4. "The Queen will get 12.15 million people watching her at 1 o'clock when she gives her annual speech reviewing

Sun 28 PAGES OF FESTIVE TV
FREE INSIDE TODAY
 12-day guide to Xmas & New Year on telly
CHRISTMAS SMACKERS!



The BBC tries to carve up the competition with two editions of its biggest big soap, "Eastenders." Above: Readers of the London Sun get all this — and a Page Three gift for Christmas.

Time

the year!" During the rest of the day, the BBC and its commercial rivals — Channel 4 and ITV — roll out stunt programming, specials and new episodes of favorite series. BBC's broadcast premiere of "Titanic" is just the most obvious example that in Great Britain, Christmas Day means serious business for the networks.

"The BBC has always offered something special and home-grown for Christmas," says BBC spokesperson Vanda Lumley. "It's the time of year extended families come together, have a huge Christmas lunch and then sit down and watch television."

"It really is the most competitive day of the year," agrees Baker. "The BBC has traditionally saved a lot of resources for the holiday period — probably because it sees itself as the broadcaster that brings the family together."

Those resources just got bigger. The BBC — publicly funded by a tax on every television — just had its budget bumped up by about 150 million pounds over the next two years. That means more money for more programming — just in time to fight off the competition.

"In the past, the commercial channels competed very hard," explains Baker of Channel 4. "We and ITV would show a lot of repeats and dead-end movies. But that's changed. Last year, ITV won for the first time in donkey years thanks in part to Who Wants to Be a Millionaire."

Sunday in the U.S., Christmas Day is up for grabs. A day that used to be synonymous with the miniseries "Titanic" is now pierced by "Is that your final answer?" Advertisers pay through the nose to sponsor the Olympics. Imagine what they'd pay to be indelibly linked with Christmas and the competition are warring.

This year, ITV shows an hour-long edition of its top soap "Coronation Street," two episodes of its second most popular soap "Emmerdale," a new version of "Aladdin" and two editions of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire."

The BBC counters with two editions of its big soap "Eastenders," bookending "Titanic." Also, late night sees a



Between 12-15 million Brits watch the Queen — sometimes with corgis at her feet but not her husband — give her annual speech reviewing the year. Below: Last year, commercial channel ITV won the holiday ratings in part thanks to "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire."

A day that used to be synonymous with the BBC is now pierced by, 'Is that your final answer?'

Sir John Hicks was the first British winner of which Nobel Prize?

A: Peace

B: Chemistry

C: Economics

D: Physics

comedy hour by popular performer Victoria Wood and a special edition of its most popular sitcom, "The Royal Family." In the afternoon, there's even a sequel to "Walking with Dinosaurs," one of the highest rated documentaries in BBC history.

Both the BBC and ITV are clearly going for big audiences with their best and most popular shows. Channel 4 — a younger, cheekier rival to those more mainstream broadcasters — is doing it differently. Their prize show for attention? A new production of the opera "La Boheme." "Mad, eh?" laughs Baker.

Of course, despite their best efforts, the big networks can't convince everyone that Christmas Day is best spent glued to the telly. Even Baker admits it wasn't part of his family tradition.

"No, never," he laughs. "It was kind of frowned on. My parents were very middle class so it was always, 'Get outside and go for a