

TV Sunday

THE Tony Awards are hot. They've been racking up Emmys for the last few years as the best Variety, Musical or Comedy Special and they've got a red-hot star in "The Producers" — the biggest Broadway hit since "The Lion King."

Is this the year Broadway's big night plays as well on Main Street as it will on 42nd Street? Probably not.

"CBS has not complained about the ratings," says executive producer Gary Smith, who is giving an interview while furiously editing footage for the opening number.

"We'd all like it to get bigger ratings simply because we'd like it to reach more people. But there's no question that when you get outside New York and Chicago and Los Angeles and the big cities, there's probably not the same national appeal that the other awards shows have."

"This year I think we're going to do very, very well. 'The Producers' has cer-

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tainly sparked national attention," says Smith. "But compared to the other award shows? No. It will never get the ratings the Oscars, the Grammys and the Emmys get."

Syndicated columnist Liz Smith agrees. "Movies are seen all over the country," she says. "The theater is right here. And this isn't dealing with theater but just the Broadway theater. It doesn't even deal with Off Broadway. You could never have the audience."

Not that she has any problem with CBS pumping up interest with stunts like having soap stars hand out awards.

"You can't blame the network for trying to get a bigger audience," says Liz Smith. "And lately the theater has been employing a lot of people who aren't just serious, legitimate actors. I think it's all fine. It's all entertainment."

And this year promises to be more entertaining than most. Liz Smith is going to the Tonys for the first time in years.

Why? Not for the suspense of finding out which show wins Best Musical, that's for sure.

"There are always big surprises at the Tonys," says Liz Smith. "But this year 'The Producers' will sweep and it just has to be what it is — a one-show phenomenon. This is the first time that I can remember that I feel so much of it is a foregone conclusion. It's a once-in-a-lifetime happening."

Maybe that sense of history in the making will be enough to get viewers to tune in — despite the show having to face down the season premiere of "Sex in the City."

To Thomas O'Neil — who's published books for Variety about the Oscars, the Grammys and the Tonys (but, tellingly, not the Tonys) — it doesn't matter how well the show does against stiff competition.

"The Tonys are the most noble award program because most of the people watching it have not seen any of the shows nominated," says O'Neil. "But they still care about it."

"It's very noble of CBS to keep running it. The Tonys just aren't about ratings. We have to accept that. Clearly, CBS has, or they would have booted them off long ago and given them to TNT."

"That doesn't keep the network from warring back and forth every year — conflicted about trying to package the Tonys as a mainstream entertainment special ('Presenting the award for Best Lighting, the Backstreet Boys!') and simply relaxing and accepting the show for what it is — a theater lovefest."

This year, it seems clear that Gary Smith is producing a show that wants to be as entertaining as possible but doesn't

Will this Nazi pig make you watch the Tonys?

Just shoot me: Brad Oscar as Franz Liebkind in "The Producers"



try to be something it isn't. Most notably, in a year that's the strongest in ages for new plays, he's giving all eight nominated dramas a spotlight, either through a live performance ("One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," "King Hedley II") or a taped performance that gives the flavor of the show.

"We have the playwrights of the four new plays introducing their work," says Gary Smith. "The network isn't saying, 'Oh my goodness; isn't this great?' But it's so relevant to what the theater is about. So for 20 or 30 seconds of an intro, it is worthwhile to have that author represented on the show."

Highlighting the plays — which in recent years have sometimes not been spotlighted at all — is a good sign the Tonys are on the right track, says O'Neil.

"When they try to go populist and have

Rosie O'Donnell host it, I think they're wandering off their turf," he says. "What makes it such a great show is when it's true to itself. When they have someone like Angela Lansbury host it, those are the best Tony shows."

"They're sometimes so pandering to

ratings. One of the great outrages in recent years is when they would not even have snippets of the nominated plays performed."

In a departure from past years, Gary Smith is not trying to fit every musical or play into the same box. If a monologue from "King Hedley II" works brilliantly out of context on the show, it doesn't mean you can do the same for every other drama.

"There's good exposure and then there's exposure," he says. "And if it's not

good exposure, it's not worth doing. "So we really try to find plays that do work. Sometimes it's done live because it will work. With 'The Invention of Love,' a brilliant new play by Tom Stoppard, it wouldn't make sense to show one live scene because it just wouldn't work. So in this case, we'll probably do something on video showing many different aspects and have it narrated."

And as the controversy surrounding "Jane Eyre" illustrates, not every show will receive the same amount of airtime. "Right now it's [getting] two minutes and 20 seconds," says Gary Smith, who later mentions that show as one of his favorites of the year. "These are short versions of many things in this show. Now we get a chance to show everything."

Other highlights to look for include an opener Gary Smith was shooting in Grand Central at 4 a.m. that has the cast of "42nd Street" leaving the theater and hoofing uptown to Radio City Music Hall. And of course, a big production number from "The Producers" — but not the one you might expect.

"It was clear to all of us that 'Springtime for Hitler' would not have been the right thing to show on television," he says. For one thing, "Nathan and Matthew are not in it!" (The focus of that number is in fact Adolf himself.)

So which number did they choose? "You'll see. It's a great surprise. It leads into the whole first act finale with everybody on stage, including the old ladies. It sets the tone very nicely."

Liz Smith, who generally avoids the dreary business of actually attending award shows, won't miss it.

"It'll be a fascinating night and a Tony Awards to remember, so I thought I should go and get an idea of it in person again," she says.