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'La Reina Del Sur' pursues Primetime Emmy consideration

The Telemundo show and its star, Kate del Castillo, work to break new ground for Spanish-language programming.

By Yvonne Villarreal, Los Angeles Times

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"La Reina del Sur" is one of the most watched TV shows this season that you've probably never seen. And it wants an Emmy.

Networks and studios are already deeply into their song-and-dance routines, trying to lure Academy of Television Arts and Sciences members with flashy campaigns before Emmy nominations are announced in July. Fox has purchased "For your consideration" mall posters for "Glee"; buses, at this moment, are charging through West Hollywood, Burbank, Culver City and Beverly Hills displaying Showtime's efforts. USA is handing out dog treats at local farmers markets. And at movie theaters? "For your consideration" ads are being projected onto the screen.

Quietly seeking recognition through all the hype is Telemundo's Spanish-language series "La Reina del Sur" (Queen of the South) and its female lead, Mexican actress Kate del Castillo, lobbying for drama series and lead drama actress, respectively.

It's the network's first foray into the Primetime Emmy race. To date, no Spanish-language show has won a Primetime Emmy in any of the major categories, according to the academy. Such shows are usually submitted for recognition by the International Emmys instead.

The series, based on a novel by Arturo Pérez-Reverte about a Mexican girl who involuntarily becomes a major drug trafficker, aired five nights a week at 10 p.m. and often helped Telemundo, which is owned by Comcast's NBCUniversal, beat English broadcast networks this season.

Although the show hasn't had trouble competing with its English-language counterparts for ratings — the May 30 finale of "La Reina del Sur" was the highest-rated program in the network's 19-year ratings history, averaging nearly 4.2 million total viewers and more than 2.8 million adults ages 18-49, according to Nielsen Media Research — beating them out for a shot at a golden statue is likely to be a formidable task.

"It's going to be tough, definitely," said Del Castillo at her Los Angeles home, an acknowledgement that doesn't suggest a defeatist attitude so much as a realistic one.

"I don't know what Telemundo is to voters," she said. "They've probably never flipped to that channel. The

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challenge is to make them not think of cheesy *telenovelas*."

Chon Noriega, director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, emphasized the validation a nomination would bring to the Spanish-language community.

"It would be a big step in recognizing Spanish programming in the context of American television and American culture," Noriega said. "An enormous step. But, let's be honest, we still have a society that operates as if there aren't multiple languages that are part of day-to-day culture."

Joshua Mintz, the network's senior executive president of entertainment, is hoping the show's impressive performance in the ratings will get academy voters to look beyond language barriers to at least consider it as a worthy contender.

"I can imagine that when they get the ratings every day and they see the numbers that this show and other Hispanic TV are delivering, they see the power, the reality," he said. "Whether they accept that fact is different. But the numbers are there, there's no denying that."

With Hollywood's crowd mentality, however, the uniqueness of the submission may work against it, said TV historian Tim Brooks, considering that studios and premium channels are creating noise by spending anywhere from \$50,000 to upward of \$500,000 per campaign for billboards, ads in the Hollywood trades and on DVD mailings to members of the roughly 14,000-member academy.

"A show can't just stand on its own," Brooks said. "Voters value familiarity, so it's how much effort you put behind a product to generate enough noise amid the clutter. I suspect that it will take a few years of doing this for a Spanish-language show to be recognized."

Telemundo spokesman Alfredo Richard would not disclose how much the network is spending, only saying it was "less than half" of their competition's Emmy budget.

This sum has been used to make dubbed episodes of the series available on the TV academy's website; the network has also sent a modest mailing of dubbed episodes to academy members, and has launched "for your consideration" English-language trade advertising.

They hope all this will introduce unfamiliar voters to "La Reina del Sur." When the series originally aired, viewers had the option to watch with English captions.

"It was a huge success," Mintz said. "Our product had good production values — and that wasn't easy with such a small budget. And the acting by Kate was excellent. She worked that character in a way that no one else could. In a way that rivals anything on TV."

Del Castillo is probably better known to American audiences as a Mexican crime boss Pilar Zuzua in Showtime's "Weeds." The longtime *telenovela* actress made her crossover debut on U.S. television in the 2002 PBS series "American Family" with Edward James Olmos.

And, yes, she'd like it if one day "Emmy Award winner" was included in future paragraphs describing her work — "it'd be fantastico!" — but she's at ease with the idea of that not happening in the immediate future.

"If we don't get it, that's OK," Del Castillo said. "But now there's a precedent that there was a Spanish-speaking show that was submitted. And that's pretty amazing on its own."

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