Phil Hartman remembered in 'NewsRadio' season premiere | Banderas takes No. 1 spot with Mask of Zor PASADENA, Calif. (AP) — The character played by the

late Phil Hartman will be mourned in this fall's first episode of the TV comedy "NewsRadio."

Hartman, who was shot to death by his wife, Brynn, in a murder-suicide in May, played pompous radio anchorman Bill McNeal in the NBC sitcom.

When the show returns for its fourth season, the other characters will learn that McNeal has died of a heart attack and will hold a memorial service for him, NBC programming head Warren Littlefield said Sunday.

"Knowing this ('NewsRadio') group, it will be entertaining, it will be irreverent, but it will also be filled with a

lot of the emotions they have over the loss of Phil Hartman," Littlefield said.

The second episode will introduce Jon Lovitz as the anchorman replacing McNeal. The series returns Sept. 23. Lovitz, a friend of Hartman, was said to have been reluctant about taking the role, but Hartman's mother gave Lovitz her blessing at a recent memorial service for her son,

"I could see Jon just relax and feel even more comfortable with the decision to go into the show," Littlefield said. Lovitz was a cast member of "Saturday Night Live" with Hartman.

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The Mask of Zorro debuted at No. 1, while the new comedy There's Something About Mary was swamped by action films in a

crowded summer film field that saw two more entrants break the \$100 million ticket sales mark, according to estimates Sunday.

Starring Antonio Banderas, Anthony Hopkins and Catherine Zeta-Jones, Zorro made \$22.7 million to lead the box office, getting a push from the best reviews since The Truman Show.

Something About Mary, starring Ben Stiller, Matt Dillon and Cameron Diaz opened in fourth place with \$13 million.

From the Farrelly brothers, it opened better than their last effort, Kingpin in 1996, but didn't debut as well as their biggest hit, Dumb & Dumber in 1994.

Here are estimated gross earnings for the top movies at North American theaters for Friday through Sunday as compiled by Exhibitor Relations.

Final figures were expected

1. The Mask of Z

2. Lethal Weapon 4,\$212. 3. Armageddon, \$16 mil

4. There's Something 13 million.

5. Dr. Dolittle, \$5.5 m 6. Small Soldiers, \$8.3 m 7. Mulan, \$4.7 million 7. Mulan, \$4.3 million 9. The Truman Show, \$27

10. The X-Files, \$2 mil

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Solo Seinfeld

Comic leaves television series behind, takes on one-mans

SAN ANTONIO (AP) — Jerry Seinfeld is still talking about nothing.

Only now, there's no Kramer, George and Elaine to But that didn't bother audiences who packed four

sold-out weekend shows as Seinfeld launched a U.S. stand-up comedy tour. "His stand-up routine is much funnier than the final

episode of 'Seinfeld,'" Iris Koeller, 27, of Houston, who attended one of two performances Saturday night, said. For those who have followed Seinfeld's career, he was always a stand-up comedian first and a television

star second. Some devoted fans, however, said Seinfeld

may be an even better stage comic now. 'I saw him several years ago in Houston, and he was good then, but he's really got it rolling now," Tony Villarreal, 39, of Austin, said. "He's more confident, maybe because of the success of the TV show.

Seinfeld also seems to be relaxed and really enjoying himself with the pressure of the show behind him. When he opened a performance up to questions, someone

asked him to name his favorite episode of "Seinfeld." "That's like me asking you which breath of air was your favorite," Seinfeld said. "We were just trying to survive and keep it funny from one show to the next." Another person asked if he would consider doing a

"Not really, because I have so little interest in the people who come on," Seinfeld said. "And I don't have the skill to pretend like I give a damn." That indifference has always been part of Seinfeld's

genius. It's made audiences want him more. Sure, he makes great observations about everyday life in a funny way. But who else could anchor a cast of self-absorbed TV characters and make them likable and funny for nine straight years?

At one point, late in a performance, an attractive blond woman in a low-cut dress walked to the front of the stage and attempted to give Seinfeld what appeared what I do. That's my instrument. I've been in also

"Not right now," he said. "I know you'ren people telling you, 'No,' but I've got to finish Appearing on stage in a dark suit, white

tie - a distinct break from his jeans-and-ten look on the show - Seinfeld was greeted He immediately made the audience how

servations about seedless watermelons you planting to grow a seedless watermel doesn't open, the helmet is wearing you for tion") and elderly drivers ("At what age do ple decide they are not even going to look w back out of the driveway?")

He then launched into a bit on Hallow seemed to be a crowd favorite. ("Remember band on the back of a Halloween mask? Thatwa ity item. How long did that last, about 10 seconds.

There were other observations about dry ("No one's cleaning something totally dry. H ever picked a piece of food out of your teethw finger? That's dry cleaning."), buying Ginsald ("I better get that knife in case I want to cut shoes.") and milk expiration dates ("How in know that's the exact day? Do the cowstipt when they're milking?").

There were no references to the television hour-and-a-half routine. But some fans could pic

infeld back in his TV show apartment. When he was talking about milk, I kept p his kitchen and all those boxes of cereal," Rac

No one seemed to mind that the tickets w

apiece. The only complaints were that the show long enough. Seinfeld said he's happy abouth "It feels good, it feels righteous," Seintel porters. "I'm glad people still know me for that-

a while. Now I'm going solo.

NBC merger in the Questioning Rya works, Littlefield says

PASADENA, Calif. (AP) — A merger seems inevitable for NBC, network programming chief War-

to be a card.

ren Littlefield said Sunday. "It seems today that, more than anything, size does matter," Littlefield told the Television Critics Association annual summer meeting. "Some of the possibilities that have been discussed are quite exciting."

Last week, the Los Angeles Times reported that NBC and USA Networks Inc. were in merger discussions that fell apart when a major USA stockholder, Edgar Bronfman Jr., balked at the idea. In the past year, exploratory merger talks have

been held by GE with Sony, Viacom and Liberty Media, the Times said. A 1996 law deregulating the telecommunications and media industries fueled an unprecedented wave of mergers. They include Disney's acquisition of ABC, Westinghouse buying CBS and Infinity Broadcasting,

and Time Warner merging with Turner Broadcasting. 'Bob and Jack have been very consistent in saying we need partners," Littlefield said, referring to NBC chair Robert Wright and John F. Welch Jr., chair of NBC parent company General Electric

"When you deal with a guy like Jack Welch, he looks at the performance and says 'I wonder if you can do better," Littlefield, who noted that NBC will be the only broadcast network showing a profit in

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Spielberg film brings up topic of NEW YORK (AP) — Steven Spielberg took a page Oliver Stone, questioning authority and depicting rors of war in his World War II drama, Saving Priv

a team of soldiers trying to extricate one enlisted action after all his other brothers die in combat. To berg, the seemingly straightforward humanitarian raised broader concerns.

"The moral question at the heart of the story we send eight boys on a mission to save one, si cause that one lost all of his brothers within 48 each other?" Spielberg asks in Sunday's Daily this a ... Washington public relations mission? The critically acclaimed film bothered some

sometimes grisly depictions of combat during an

famed D-Day invasion of German-occupied France ing showing Americans guilty of wartime atrocit "I'm only holding a mirror up to what really to Spielberg said. "There are soldiers today, in their candidly come out and talk about shooting priso something that happened, and I just wanted to sh way it actually happened.

"I don't want to turn Americans away from triotism many of us feel, but in the process of the of combat, these were some of the things men driven to do." Spielberg said a lot of WWII veterans he into told him traditional Hollywood war movies glosse

the horrors of combat, while they praised the reals

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