

Live coverage

Live-action children's shows have always tended to be one of the less adventurous genres on kids' TV. While animation can travel, live-action tends to stay at home. Nuances of culture and language differences mean it can't cross borders as easily, while much of the commissioning lends itself to very local productions. That's a problem when the genre is growing in popularity, and compounded if there are fewer shows available, says Nigel Pickard, CEO of Zodiak Middle East, Asia, Australia and UK, Kids & Family.

Pickard says that although blockbuster brands such as Disney's *Hannah Montana* and Nickelodeon's *iCarly* have been rolled out globally, most kids' live-action programming struggles abroad. "It tends to be slightly more parochial," says Pickard. "That's because it's usually commissioned by a single broadcaster for its local audience, so it's harder for it to travel."

Factual shows, he adds, are almost impossible to sell into multiple territories, while entertainment and comedy also find it tough, although there are exceptions, such as Zodiak's *Dani's Castle*, which has found homes in territories as diverse as Poland, Portugal and Kuwait.

Jeremy Salsby, MD of UK indie Saltbeef TV, who produces studio show *Friday Download* for CBBC, agrees that comedy is hard to get right for multiple destinations. It needs to appeal without using local references, he says, which often means physical comedy. This requires meticulous rehearsal, which "impacts on the schedule and budget."

The problem is further complicated by the differing preferences of girls and boys, and the ages at which they want to watch live-action, says Melanie Stokes, MD of Kindle Entertainment, which produced *Leonardo* for CBBC and Al Jazeera Children's Channel.

"When kids get to about eight, girls tend to tire of animation and crave live-action, which is closer to their own experiences and reflects

Live-action is increasingly popular with children, but cultural nuances and production costs are limiting multi-territory sales. Richard Middleton reports.

their own worlds," she says. "With kids up to the age of five, it doesn't matter if you're in Africa, Tokyo or Toronto, they have pretty much the same interests and concerns."

All of that, in addition to the relative ease of dubbing animation, poses a problem for live-action producers and broadcasters that want affordable, high-quality shows. The dominance of the US in live-action is also a key factor. Pickard says that for him, a "truly international show" has to have a US broadcaster onboard.

"We have to look at the effect of the US market on

"When kids get to about eight, girls tend to tire of animation and crave live-action, which is closer to their own experiences."

Melanie Stokes, Kindle Entertainment



international coproductions and focus on how we market and position those shows. That's pretty key," says Pickard.

But Stokes adds that the dominance of US culture can cause problems for non-American producers. "The tricky thing is that if you want to make something that will sell internationally, the US is still the culture we aspire to," she says.

And that means producers in the US have an innate advantage that must be combatted by either identifying local elements that attract interest around the globe or by creating an alternative world that transcends territories. "Live-action can't be just about social realism; it needs to be more about creating a world that kids anywhere can participate in," Stokes says.

Perhaps that explains the success of Anglo-German drama *Wolfblood*, which was praised by almost everyone interviewed for this feature. Aimed at eight- to 12-year-olds, the copro between CBBC and Germany's ZDF and ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE) is based in a fantasy setting. It has already been picked up by Disney, which plans to roll it out in the US, Latin America, Europe and the Middle East.

Another show that has combined similar ingredients, albeit accompanied by huge brand appeal, is *Power Rangers*. As the brand nears its two-decade anniversary, *Power Rangers: Super Megaforce* is set to launch in the US in ▶



2014. Fernando Szew, CEO of its international distributor MarVista Entertainment, agrees that its appeal lies in a recipe of “slapstick comedy, action and empowerment of children,” adding: “Two out of five of the Rangers are girls as well. So there’s great interaction between the male and female characters in their adventures.”

The appeal of global live-action brands has also seen Nickelodeon launch teen spin-off show *Sam & Cat*, featuring characters from *iCarly* and *Victorious*. “We’ve seen these two quite potent breeding grounds in *iCarly* and *Victorious* lending themselves really well to *Sam & Cat*,” says Caroline Beaton, Nickelodeon’s senior VP of international programme sales. The show found immediate success following its launch in the US, which Beaton says was partly because the “groundwork” had been laid in previous shows.

Yet without that big-brand appeal, new shows such as *Wolfblood* have proved it is possible to enjoy cross-territory success. Part of that is based on its coproduction roots and the ability to assemble a larger budget to drive up production quality.

Jenny Buckland, CEO of the Australian Children’s Television Foundation, says that element of funding has been vital for Australian producers, with local broadcasters there paying around just 20% of the production costs.

Fellow antipodean Jonathan M Shiff, whose company Jonathan M Shiff Productions makes live-action series such as *H2O: Just Add Water* and *Mako Mermaids*, which aired on Network Ten and Netflix in July, has been in partnership with ZDFE for over 13 years. The partnership, along with funding from other sources, proved a successful model, he claims. “When you combine the might of broadcast presales, deficit finance from the rest of world, the producer offset in Australia and Screen Australia and state investment, as well as investment from us, you can see how the pie is put together,” he says.

But Shiff says his firm’s relationship with ZDFE is not just about funding, as it engages with the ZDF channel as well as its sales arm. “It’s built on a robust creative discourse, and it can get pretty robust. It’s also built on a lot of chemistry, goodwill and trust.”

Arne Lohmann, VP of ZDFE Junior, who exec produced live-action show *Sam Fox* with Sydney-based SLR Productions, adds: “Long-term partnerships are important to us. We’re seeking partners we can work together with not only on one show.”



Top left: BBC comedy *Friday Download*. Left: *Mako Mermaids*. Right: *Zodiak’s Dani’s Castle*

This global approach to production has also been used with success by Disney’s Latin America and Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) arms, which teamed up for hit kids telenovela *Violetta*. Made in Argentina by Buenos Aires-based Pol-Ka Productions, it also included European cast members and writing.

“*Violetta* was a great experience of putting together the strengths of the company’s

gritty of coproduction is, however. *Zodiak’s* Pickard describes it as feeling like “you’re the United Nations,” and Salsby says kids’ comedy shows can be particularly affected.

“You might have a production partner from Australia or Germany or France, so you need things that are not too British, that can be translated. So your default tends to be physical comedy, which is universal. But it’s hard to get right.”

But incorporating new revenue streams into the financial pot has become increasingly important during the economic downturn. “You have to find additional ways to fund your shows,” says Stokes, who is keen to work with European partners. She readily admits it is “a bigger part of the job now,” but agrees that while previously a distribution advance “would have been minimal, you’re now asking more from them. And they want more in return.”

Back in Australia, Shiff is also looking to Europe, particularly Ireland, to produce his next show. Having exhausted Screen Australia funding after producing two seasons of *Mako Mermaids* – and with the strong Australian dollar cutting into his margins – he says: “Europe is waking up to the fact they have their own high-end fantasy adventures they can do. That’s an exciting development, and it’s a change.”

“Maybe it’s time we started to engage with the traditional coproduction model. It’s been a bit idle in live-action.” And if that model can continue its revival, the potential of new coproductions could be just the jolt that broadcasters and audiences are looking for.



Jonathan M Shiff



Nigel Pickard

coproduction teams with our colleagues in Latin America,” says Cristiana Nobili, Disney EMEA’s head of live-action production. The show has aired across Disney’s networks, and, unusually, has even been dubbed for a UK audience. “It’s a bold move, because it does look different and is dubbed so it will take time with an audience who has never watched anything dubbed in their lives,” adds Orion Ross, VP of original series at Disney Channels EMEA. But he believes audiences adapt quickly – a common theme when the issue of dubbing arises.

While dubbing might not be a problem, the nitty-