Drama: Shortform

Netflix, Hayu, Hulu and Verizon's go90 will be high on the list of potential suitors, it is hoped, but it is not just younger viewers who are the proposed target of shorter-drama producers. As mobile viewing grows, TV content can be readily consumed pretty much anywhere.

But whether VoD streaming platforms can enhance the sales proposition for such shortform shows remains to be seen. If content such as *Overshadowed* is going to travel the globe, it needs to resonate on a universal level and not just regionally.

French prodco and distribution house Calt is active in areas including shortform series, drama, documentary, comedy and even live shows. One of the firm’s most successful projects to date is *Comedy Café*, a single-camera fly-on-the-wall account of three actors in an office as they discuss everyday subjects over four-minute episodes.

The show has been a huge hit at various times over the past 15 years, having been bought by 24 countries. Calt is now considering it in a different context, with mobile-first and on-demand viewers in mind.

“Back then [when *Comedy Café* was created] there was less technology so it was made for TV, but now catch-up and things like YouTube work really well,” says Dimitri Gélineau, head of international at Calt. “You can watch the four minutes anywhere you want and it’s super-cost-effective, which is why so many broadcasters and producers around the world wanted to have their own adaptations. It’s cheap to produce with just one camera.”

Production isn’t always that easy though and if shortform formats are to thrive it will depend on companies being willing to invest in something still relatively untried.

Despite *Overshadowed*’s arrival on BBC3 this autumn, Palfrey doesn’t expect anyone to be making money from this kind of programming anytime soon. She says it was more about pulling together and being resourceful on set to make the project happen. “You have to find a lot of creative solutions,” she reflects.

Because *Deadlock* was invested in at a local level, Every Cloud found it could achieve its usual high production values, but only with everyone pulling in the same direction. “It was professionally done. It wasn’t like a guerrilla short film shoot but it was fresh and a different approach because we had all the youthful energy and experience attached,” says Cox.

Shortform is also proving to be a great way to develop new talent, by tapping into their social media followings. Cox and Egger found two of their *Deadlock* stars on YouTube and BBC3 has also announced a pledge to get behind newcomers.

“Initially we weren’t looking at shortform but when we started it was unbelievable refreshing to have 10 minutes to tell a story and work out how to do it.”

Sian Palfrey, Rollem

Eva O’Connor (left) wrote the play on which BBC3’s *Overshadowed* (right) is based

highlighting another benefit of this emerging format.

Producing such new, experimental shortform shows is also encouraging companies to review the way they make content, as Rollem found with *Overshadowed*.

“We’ve started thinking about telling stories differently,” says Palfrey. “We weren’t thinking like that before and we are now speaking to a host of new writers about possible shortform projects. We’re always thinking there might be a better way to tell a story.”

Alternative ways to bring stories to life is also something being considered by DreamWorks boss Jeffrey Katzenberg, who is reportedly keen to move into mobile content creation. The plans stem from the emergence of new platforms and their use among young people. Kavanaugh’s BBC3 reaches 10% of 18- to 34-year-olds in the UK and this audience is clearly high on the agenda of international TV execs.

*Pop Idol* creator Simon Fuller has also invested in shortform, having acquired the rights to make a US version of Nordic drama series *Skam* (Shame). The programme, whose episodes vary between 15 and 59 minutes, follows the lives of a group of friends at high school in Oslo.

While producers are throwing their hats into the shortform drama ring, brands have been working on their own content. AT&T’s long-running *It Can Wait* campaign to prevent distracted driving is one such case, including hard-hitting safety films that would be too long for traditional TV slots.

Warning about the dangers of texting while at the wheel, *Close to Home* and *Unseen* run to about four minutes and form part of a wider digital and interactive push by the telco.

Add have a huge influence on the structure of linear TV schedules, of course. “How often do you see a show finish at a quarter past the hour?” asks Kavanaugh. But maybe there will be a place in the future where both ads and shows could work together to blur the line between commercial break and programming, to the viewers’ benefit.

Gélineau recalls *Comedy Café* being bought by ad agency network GroupM for a coffee brand’s campaign in Asia, for instance.

For now, however, the shifting TV landscape means some of the most innovative content being made might not even make it to the TV screen at all.

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**Beta, ZDFE plan drama JV**

Munich-based producer Beta Film is in talks with Germany’s ZDF Enterprises to form a joint venture to develop, finance and produce high-end fictional series for the domestic and international markets.

The plans intensify a longstanding relationship between Beta and ZDF, which have partnered on a number of event movies and miniatures over the years, including recently aired six-parter *The Same Sky* and miniatures *Maximin*.

Details of the JV were not available at press time.

The move comes as production of high-end TV series in Germany is on the rise and also becoming increasingly competitive. All of Germany’s major players — ARD, ZDF, RTL, ProSiebenSat.1, Sky, Netflix and Amazon — are developing and producing ambitious series and miniatures.

Jan Motjes Beta also partnered with Sky, ARD Degeto and X File on the €40m (US$48m) historical crime drama *Babylon Berlin*, which marked its first collaboration between Sky and ARD. It premiered on Sky in October.

Movie talent has also embraced high-end TV series with Tom Tykwer (*A Hologram for a King*), showrunning *Babylon Berlin* and Oliver Hirschbiegel helming *The Same Sky*.