Flipping the script

In June, the Spanish city of Pamplona-Iruña will host the third edition of Conecta Fiction, a four-day annual event where the creativity, financing and co-production of scripted TV will take centre stage. Andy Fry reports

Invisible Heroes will play a key role at Conecta Fiction

Explaining why Conecta Fiction adds value to what is already a packed schedule of markets and networking events, its director Geraldine Gonard singles out three key points.

“The event is completely Spanish-English bilingual, which is attractive for Latin American companies, and it brings together everyone in the scripted TV business from creatives to commercial players,” she tells TBI.

“It is also the only event that really focuses on the potential for co-production partnerships between Europe and Latin America. There is a lot of creativity in both regions, and Conecta is a great platform to encourage collaboration.”

Underlining the point, YLE Finland/Parox Chile co-production Invisible Heroes is to play a key role in the opening ceremony.

First presented to delegates at the 2017 edition of Conecta, the multi-language political drama is set during Chile’s 1973 military coup and is shot in Finnish, Spanish and English. It tells the heroic story of Tapani Brotherus, a Finnish diplomat who is believed to have saved around 2,500 people from the brutal Pinochet regime.

According to YLE Fiction chief Jarmo Lampela, “pitching the project at Conecta Fiction 2017 really worked well for us. Off the back of the event, we generated interest from around 11 or 12 companies.”

At this year’s event, which runs from 17-20 June, the Eccho Rights-distributed Invisible Heroes will be screened, followed by a panel discussion on the challenges involved in getting a co-production to work “when there are 14,000km between partners,” says Lampela.

He adds “What I really like is that Conecta Fiction is not too big. Everyone there is focused on scripted co-production, so there is time to network.”

His advice to anyone who wants to create a LatAm-European co-production? “You need an idea that organically lends itself to co-production; and you need a partner who loves the idea as much as you do.”

Equally enthusiastic about the event is Dario Turovelzky, SVP of global content for Viacom Americas and Viacom International Studios, who will serve on a panel discussing the business’ expansion into production.

“We have been participating in Conecta since its first edition because it’s the only event specifically linked
to co-production, where experiences, success stories and business opportunities are shared and concrete opportunities are presented," he explains.

On the potential for LatAm-European co-production, he says there is a great opportunity.

“We recently finished recording a co-production between VIS Americas and Paramount Network in Europe, based on the Alfred Hitchcock film To Catch A Thief.

“In addition, we are involved in many projects in Europe, such as Club 57, carried out with Italy’s Rainbow Group, and more premium content that we are in the process of negotiating.”

To make such partnerships work, Turovelsky says the important thing is to get content that can travel organically and have universal connecting threads.

“Co-production is a practice that will continue to evolve and requires flexibility on both sides to think about business models that will continue to transform.”

After the opening ceremony, the event kicks off in earnest on Tuesday 18 June, with a series of pitching sessions - the most high-profile of which focus on TV co-productions, though there are also digital pitches.

Gonard says the focus is on ideas that can travel: “We ask for a bible and a script as a minimum requirement. Some existing financing helps, because that is attractive to other potential partners, but it is not necessary.”

Aside from Lampela’s endorsement, proof that the pitching process has value comes in the shape of two projects that were introduced at Conecta 2017 and 2018 and have subsequently secured partners.

From 2017, she points to Inés Del Alma Mía (Inés Of My Soul) - a series based on the novel by Chilean author Isabel Allende. Presented by Boomerang TV and Chilevisión, the project was boarded by Spanish public broadcaster RTVE. As for last year, RTVE and Globomedia joined forces behind Malaka, a police thriller set in Malaga.

Conecta’s LatAm-Europe positioning is also prominent on day two, when Chile and Italy will be countries of focus.

Representing Chile, Sebastian Freund, president of the Association of Cinema and Television Producers (APCT) and producer at Rizoma, says the priority for the Chilean creative community will be to find funding and generate co-productions, particularly as Chile is currently benefiting from strong government support for the audiovisual sector.

“Chile is developing and producing series with players such as Amazon, Netflix, Fremantle, Movistar and European free-TV channels, proving the quality of its content. These products have raised a lot of interest," he says.

As for Italy, Gonard says it makes sense to focus on the market, which is in the midst of a production boom. A large Italian contingent will include the Ronna Lazio Film Commission, Banijay Studios Italy, Cattleya, EndemolShine Italy, Fox Networks Italy and Mediaset. Also present will be Rai Fiction director Eleonora Andreatta.

“I believe the future of TV series lies with the exchange of experiences, and in a dialogue that permits the discovery and comparison of ideas and projects,” she says. “We need events like Conecta that support the growth and dynamism of the co-production system.”

Explaining why Rai Fiction is so engaged in co-production discussions, Andreatta says the unit has recognised the need to look beyond its own national borders.

“To achieve this, we have invested in projects that reflect the universal value of our historic, artistic and literary heritage, and the attraction of ‘Italianness’,” she says.

“This has enabled us to launch co-productions with partners such as HBO, AMC and Netflix. From the Renaissance, the saga of Medici emerges, and from great literature, we have My Brilliant Friend by Elena Ferrante and The Name Of The Rose by Umberto Eco. These are distinguished by quality and talent at all levels.”

In terms of new developments, Andreatta points to a series about renaissance genius Leonardo da Vinci, created in collaboration with the Alliance — an initiative founded by Rai with France TV and ZDF in order to support European projects with international appeal.

“Furthermore, we have two other projects through the Alliance: Around The World In 80 Days from Jules Verne’s book, and Survivors, a modern story that plays on universal moral dilemmas,” she says.

While it’s tempting to think of Conecta as primarily a bridge between LatAm and Southern Europe, Invisible Heroes is a reminder that Northern European outfits are also engaging with both markets. Reinforcing the point, there will also be a German contingent led by the likes of ZDF and Beta Film.

Robert Franke, VP of ZDF Enterprises, says Conecta has played a valuable role in the company’s expansion into Spain and LatAm.

Echoing Lampela, he says “Some other events have become so big they are difficult to navigate, so we like the fact this one is very focused. MIP Cancun has a LatAm emphasis, but that is more of a sales show whereas, at Conecta, you get to network with the creators.”

Conecta Fiction will host a number of high-profile pitching events

“It is the only event that really focuses on the potential for co-production partnerships between Europe and Latin America. There is a lot of creativity in both regions, and Conecta is a great platform to encourage collaboration.”

Geraldine Gonard, Conecta Fiction