Kids’ TV gets real

In terms of global appeal, kids’ live-action may not have enjoyed the explosive success of adult scripted series in recent years. But, writes Andy Fry, all that is changing.

Nina Hahn: “One of the great strengths of live-action is that you can get it to market faster than animation, making it more reflective of trends.”

Hahn says Nickelodeon’s success with live-action is built on a range of development and production models. While the company is probably best known for Los Angeles-produced comedy series such as iCarly and The Thundermans, it has also enjoyed success with shows that have emerged out of an international model. I Am Frankie, for example, started as a Spanish-language series in...
Latin America (Yo Soy Frankie) and was then adapted into English. “That means we have two versions we can roll out internationally,” Hahn says. “Hunter Street went through a similar process and is now available in its original Dutch version, as well as in English.”

For a show to capture kids’ imaginations across borders, strong production values, great writing and solid research are essential. Hahn gives an example of why research matters: “A few years ago we were getting feedback that kids found their parents embarrassing, so we emphasised a ‘no parents allowed’ philosophy in our shows. But this sentiment has shifted and, now, kids see family as being their ‘tribe’. ‘Parents as friends’ is something we’ve consciously been able to feed into shows.”

Nick also makes a point of staying across trends in digital media. Social-media star JoJo Siwa, for example, has appeared for Nick as a show host, in a TV movie and as a star of her own reality series. “We now have a deal with her and are looking at all the options,” Hahn adds.

While Nick and Disney are major players in the kids’ live-action genre, they are not the only gigs in town, says Josh Scherba, executive vice-president of content and distribution at DHX Media: “We have our own channels in Canada and there are other players like the BBC, ZDF and ABC Australia in the kids’ arena. With Amazon and Netflix also active in this area, it’s possible to develop an international co-production or look for a big pre-sale to support a show.”

A current example, Scherba says, is Creeped Out, a spooky anthology series co-produced by CBBC and DHX-owned Family Channel in Canada. DHX has the distribution rights for the show, which Scherba calls “a kind of Black Mirror for kids”. He adds: “We’re aiming to place it with a big global platform to create a buzz around the launch.”

Scherba believes Creeped Out’s anthology format is a good way of getting around the usual restrictions of co-production: “We’re not having to shoehorn elements into the show. Because each episode is an individual story, it’s easier for us to produce in a way that utilises the skillsets available to us in both Canada and the UK.”

DHX’s extensive live-action catalogue includes Degrassi, Make It Pop, Hank Zipzer and a new show called Bajillionaires “about a group of young kids trying to invent something”, Scherba says. “It’s like Silicon Valley for kids. It’s all about their resilience as they attempt to discover the next big thing that will make them rich.”

There is also a supernatural pilot called Dark Haven High, reflecting the current trend for children’s live-action with some kind of fantasy dimension. In part, this is because Nick and Disney have sewn up the market for multi-camera sitcoms. But it is also the case that fantasy series tend to travel well, says Steven Andrew, UK creative director at Zodiac Kids Studio. “Witches, wizards, aliens, ghosts and the like are a neutral landscape. They help get around the little differences that can be a stumbling block.”

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Degrassi Next Generation, from the DHX live-action catalogue

Nickelodeon’s Hunter Street, now available in its original Dutch version, and in English

while its sequel, Mako Mermaids, has been picked up by Netflix for the global market. Recently, ZDFE has had particular success selling kids’ live-action to channels in Asia, including the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand, as well as the pan-regional network HBO Asia. Other fantasy-driven successes include The Worst Witch, a BBC, ZDF and Netflix co-production based on the books by Jill Murphy. ZDFE is also back in the
INTERNATIONAL MARKET WITH JONATHAN M'SHIFT'S LATEST CHILDREN'S PROJECT: THE BUREAU OF MAGICAL THINGS. FILMED IN AUSTRALIA, THE SHOW FOLLOWS THE ADVENTURES OF A TEENAGE GIRL WHO ACQUIRES MAGICAL POWERS WHEN CAUGHT IN A CLASH BETWEEN AN ELF AND A FAIRY.

Hahn points out that Nick is also active in the fantasy/magic space. In May, the company unveiled plans for a new 20-part show called Knight Squad, which is set at a magical school for young knights.

Zodiac's Andrew says another genre that travels well is music/performing arts-based shows. His company has made the Lodge for Disney, while DHX's contributions to the genre include Backstage, licensed to Disney and Netflix.

"Well-made performance shows have an aspirational feel that audiences like," Andrew says. "But they are also very visual with lots of action. That's something they share with fantasy series and is another reason they travel well. It's important not to be too 'verbal' if you want a show to travel. And you probably need the bold, unambiguous characterization that has always helped telereads to stay out.

Another model that seems to work at international level is the co-pro in which the story's lead character visits another country. UK producer Lime Pictures, for example, has enjoyed success with Free Rein, which aired on Netflix. The storyline turns on a 15-year-old American girl who visits a horse stable in the UK.

Zodiac's slate, meanwhile, includes Joe All Alone—about a 13-year-old boy whose unhappy life starts getting better after his mother and her objectionable boyfriend leave him behind while they holiday in Spain—from Joanna Nadin's book; and CBBS' Secret Life Of Boys, in which an Australian girl comes to say with her four British cousins. An added point of interest about Secret Life Of Boys, Andrew says, is that it offers interactive elements that deepen engagement via character insights, story secrets and additional jokes.

While the majority of live-action shows for kids are aimed at the eight-to-12 tween market, a few companies are having success with live-action for younger kids. Darrall McQueen co-founder Billy Macqueen says his company's hit series Topsy And Tim is one of a handful of shows that has given broadcasters the confidence to experiment with preschool live-action.

"Topsy And Tim originated in the UK but has since done well in France and the US, where it airs on Universal Kids," Macqueen says. "I think it's ability to travel is partly down to the quality of the production and partly down to its emphasis on a universal theme, namely first experiences. Broadcasters also like the fact it has a high level of interest, which you can also see through the show's views on BBC iPlayer."

Darrall McQueen is now working on a new show for the same age group called Waffle The Wonder Dog, which Mcqueen believes can emulate Topsy And Tim's international success: "Waffle is for the BBC, with DHX Media distributing. It has a talking dog, which we think will appeal to kids internationally. The fact that the initial order is 10 x 11 minutes is also appealing to broadcasters."

One age group that does not see a lot of live-action are six- to nine-year-olds. This, however, is the segment that Brain Power Studios founder and president Beth Stevenson is exploring with The Ponyminders Club.

Having produced or exec produced 35 children's series, Stevenson knows her market well and believes the show's emphasis is on empathy, inclusion and compassion will cross borders. "The thing that's missing from the market is classic family series like The Waltons and Little House On The Prairie — heart-warming shows where the kids have key roles," she says. "We wanted to address that with The Ponyminders Club. The problem with a lot of today's light-hearted comedy is that it doesn't really allow you to address the issues facing kids in a satisfactory way."

The first broadcaster to jump on board is the Pony Club, which is being produced in Canada, was Discovery Latin America: "I think animal care is an area that appeals to audiences around the world," Stevenson adds. "The show is based around some kids working on a horse-rescue ranch. They get to ride the horses as well as take care of them. That gives them a sense of responsibility and empowerment, which kids will relate to."

To date, many of the kids' live-action series that travel have originated in markets such as the US, the UK, Canada and Australia. At the younger end of the spectrum, Sinking Ship's
Dino Dana (Canada) and ABC ME’s Little Lunch (Australia) are examples of how the live-action genre is being stretched, the former using CGI and the latter a mockumentary set in a primary-school playground. Another illustration of Australia’s expertise in live-action is Nowhere Boys, a Matchbox Pictures’ production for ABC3 that has so far run for three series and inspired an 80-minute feature film. Canada’s Odd Squad (Sinking Ship) and the UK’s Horrible Histories (Lion Television) are also well-travelled kids’ live-action series.

Mainland Europe’s primary contribution, as illustrated by ZDFE, is its distributor or co-pro partner. Another example of this is Studio 100 Media, which came to MIPCOM last October with two kids’ live-action series from Australia: Drop Dead Weird and Random And Whacky.

Drop Dead Weird is a good example of how co-pro and cross-cultural experiences can dovetail neatly, especially if there is a fantasy twist. In this show, an Australian family moves to Ireland to run a B&B in a remote seaside village. However, things are complicated by the fact that the parents are zombies.

One company changing the sector’s dynamics is France’s Cottonwood Media, whose hit series Find Me In Paris cleverly deploys both performance and fantasy. Produced in partnership with ZDF, the show centres on a young dancer — and princess — who travels forward in time from 1905 to the modern day. The first season of the show was pre-sold to Hulu in the US, France Televisions, Disney France and Italy, ABC Australia and VRT Belgium. Find Me In Paris has now been recommissioned. Cottonwood president and founder David Michel echoes Zodiak Kids’ Andrew when he says: “A lot of kids’ drama doesn’t travel because it’s too culturally specific.” He adds: “I think the combination of high production values and a twist on a classic story helped our show travel. We set out to make a kids’ show but with prime-time sophistication, so we put a lot of emphasis on the scripts.” In Michel’s opinion, one of the challenges with the children’s business is that “people tend to pigeonhole what they think kids’ content should be. They are second guessing what the market wants instead of taking creative risks, and that’s where they go wrong.”

Italian broadcaster De Agostini is entering the kids’ live-action space with New School, a show for seven- to 12-year-olds.
Launched in December 2017, the 26 x 26 mins first season follows a group of children who join a new school, where they stumble across an out-of-service room that only kids can enter. The series has already been renewed by De Agostini for a second season. Europe’s growing impact on children’s live-action can be seen in the latest crop of shows aimed at the older end of the market — teens traversing into adulthood. German kids’ channel KIKA, for example, commissioned Five2Twelve as a way of appealing to an older audience. This show centres on five teenage boys who have all been in trouble with the police. Also noteworthy is NRK Norway’s hit youth series Skam (Shame), which focuses on kids at a high school attempting to deal with issues such as eating disorders, sexual assault, homosexuality, mental health and cyberbullying. The challenge with shows like these is that they can be too culturally specific to travel. One solution is to format the show. A break out hit in its own region, Skam was picked up for reversioning in France, Germany, Spain, Italy and the Netherlands in late 2017. Entrepreneur Simon Fuller also picked up the English-language rights to the show and has since licensed it to Facebook Watch, which will make a US version.
‘Create relatable characters and explore universal themes’

What’s on Disney’s live-action slate?
Disney Channel produces and co-produces live-action series for kids aged six-to-11 in a variety of formats and locations, including the UK, Spain, France, Germany and Italy. Our goal is to complement the US content pipeline with different formats, genres, talent and voices. We work with partners including Zodiak Kids, Lime Pictures and 3Zero2 to create dramatic programming, often serialised, for this age group. We also create a variety of formats, episode lengths and orders, to be better able to reflect how kids are consuming content these days. We’ve created digital short-form, 10-minute episodes and 22-minute episodes, and we’ve also worked with our Latin America team on one-hour episodes of telenovelas to cater for all tastes and engagement.

Any notable changes in approach?
We’re looking to focus our next wave of content on a slightly younger audience — the six-to-nine age range, as opposed to the nine-to-11. We’re looking to create more episodic and repeatable content that can work more easily across multiple age demographics and that can also have a longer shelf life on multiple platforms. The big investments for us in terms of series are for linear and on-demand TV. Creating episodic, repeatable content works best for those platforms.

What’s the key to success with kids content abroad?
Kids can show more flexibility than adults in accepting dubbed voices in live-action. Different settings and wardrobe can be a challenge, but this can be overcome by creating relatable characters and exploring universal themes. Music is a great way to captivate audiences. Both Soy Luna and The Lodge have musical elements that lend themselves to short-form content and can be consumed across multiple platforms and markets. The telenovela format was first popularised by Violetta and now by Soy Luna — it’s a format that I think surprised many people by being able to work across virtually the whole EMEA region, including markets like Germany and the Nordics. Aspiration and appealing casts are also very helpful — an example being Thomas Doherty from The Lodge, who has gone on to appear in Descendants 2.

What are the models? Co-production? Scripted formats?
We draw from a range of models, including wholly owned Original Productions. We have our telenovelas, which are done as co-productions with our Latin American team. We also re-version international formats — for example, The Lodge is based on North Star, which was originally produced in Israel. We also get pitches from production companies, such as German local production Binny And The Ghost and French local production Mother And Daughter. And we also embark on co-productions where we have partners who take on the distribution rights. An example of this would be Italian local production Alex & Co, where 3Zero2 has the distribution rights.

Are you developing new forms of live-action to cater to the mobile-first generation?
Yes, absolutely. Our pilot series Royal Ranch is a great example of this. We produced three-minute shorts, which were windowed to DisneyLife first and then to our non-linear platforms, as a way to test the concept and idea with audiences. We are also showcasing YouTube talent in our live-action content, because we recognise that these influencers are important to our audiences. An example is season two of The Lodge, where we cast Lina Larissa Strahl from Germany, who has a huge social-media presence there. Another example is short-form series Just Like Me, which is produced in France. Our Italian team re-versioned the concept locally using two popular Italian YouTube talents and it has performed incredibly well.

How is live-action holding up against animation?
We recognise that live-action is under some pressure from animation on the linear channels. But the variety of new formats, and the rise of YouTube and local talent online, is driving on-line usage of live-action content in ways it has never done before.