STORYTELLERS

Elizabeth Guider hears from commissioners, producers, agents and distributors about the high-stakes business of managing talent.

They have inked eye-popping deals worth nine figures over a handful of years for what could be called their "artistic alchemy." And no, we’re not talking about basketball superstar LeBron James or Mission: Impossible’s impressively youthful Tom Cruise, but rather a trio of TV showrunners—Shonda Rhimes, Ryan Murphy and Kenya Barris—who have signed huge contracts with Netflix, and über-producer Greg Berlanti, who did the same with Warner Bros.

These four are inarguable megastars in the writer/produser galaxy, but their paychecks are also pushing up the costs of securing lesser-known talents in the showrunner firmament. In the process, they are elevating the status of the showrunner role in the small-screen pecking order and encouraging a flood of newcomers (and indie film biz refugees) to get in on the action.

In short, it’s never been a more lucrative or invigorating time to be a showrunner in television. Not only do prolific writers and producers of series command head-spinning salaries—they are also championed by studio and network chiefs for their creative chops and loved by their peers and fans.

Not surprisingly, there’s been a trickle-down effect. “It’s unquestionably a very hot market right now, and not just for the very top tier,” says Eric Schrier, the president of original programming at FX Networks and FX Productions.

“Any experienced showrunner with a resume in episodic television and a willingness to rejoin the fray can, in the current climate, find an opportunity,” adds producer Jeff Melvoin, himself a longtime showrunner whose credits range from Picket Fences to Designated Survivor. Melvoin also oversees a Writers Guild of America (WGA) West training program for showrunners that has in the last decade turned out hundreds of graduates, many now fronting series of their own.

That said, newcomers to the business, especially those starting out on disparate digital outlets, may work at the same frenetic pace as their established brethren but for far less remuneration and with far fewer resources. (“Ever thus in all artistic endeavors, as one world-weary source puts it.)

A GOLDEN AGE

Pointing to the growing number of channels, streamers and online upstarts dipping their toes into the scripted waters, FX’s Schrier adds that those new content providers in the series business are driving costs ever higher. “It’s a great time to be talent in general,” Schrier maintains.

Directors, too, have acquired more prestige and authority in the TV space (and arguably a bump in fees), Schrier and Melvoin suggest. That’s not to say that the job of showrunner or director is cushy in its demands on time, energy or mental focus. Given the fierce competition to break through the clutter, showrunners are always under the gun to raise the bar creatively, to turn out episodes that look like mini-movies, and often to act as the public face of a show. They must do all that, plus keep up with the daily grind of managing—and melding—the expectations of corporate bosses and financial backers, the sensibilities of fellow writers and the intrusions of a nosy press without dropping their guard, losing their cool or offending anyone.

Consider that the number of scripted series being churned out around the world each year has never been higher, easily surpassing 500 in 2018 in the U.S. alone and showing no sign of letting up.

A survey of significant commissioning players—especially those who oversee drama projects—suggests that all are scrambling to contract with, and in many cases “house,” the most sought-after established talent and to find new voices and skill sets that can be enhanced and molded for the development of series.

Right now, the onus is on these studios execs to search out fresh voices and fresh ways of telling stories in order to attract and hold new audiences. The range of plots and styles that channel commissioners are embracing has never been broader, the financial outlay for talent never more eye-opening, and the need to recoup from multiple windows and territories never greater.

FINANCIAL ATHLETICS

Even when all goes well, success on a global basis is never a given.

“The economics of the TV business are changing and the value of the traditional back-end is changing; for example, off-net and DVD revenues are in decline while streaming and international are more important,” suggests Allan Haldeman, co-head of TV literary and a partner at UTA. “We need to be able to evaluate for our clients what the smart arrangements might be for their long-term careers, and not just settle for short-term financial gains.”

The concept of “smart arrangements” has taken on some very sophisticated and ambitious connotations in the last few years as global players open their minds, and their wallets, to
underwriting complicated deals for content creation, especially of the high-end variety.

Endemol Shine Group, for example, recently promoted well-known producer Lars Blomgren to head of scripted for Europe, the Middle East and Asia. He co-founded Swedish outfit Filmfinance (now an Endemol Shine subsidiary) and oversaw the hit *Iron/Broen (The Bridge)* and its handful of adaptations. His new remit is to scour the non-English-speaking world for projects that can be fashioned into series that travel the globe, in their original or formatted versions.

"I'm trying to maximize the potential of creative talent and concepts that can travel, from wherever they are sourced," he says. He hastens to add, however, that "local nuance" is paramount in getting these projects right.

**CREATIVE COLLABORATION**

"The business side eventually takes care of itself" when putting together multi-territory deals, Blomgren believes. "Figuring out the mindset of the entities in charge and syncing that with the mindset of the producers in charge is often where the challenges lie" in any big project. In Europe, he specifies, that often means the lead producer has to function as "the negotiator among disparate partners," whereas in the U.S. there's usually a single broadcaster that drives the direction of the project.

One of Blomgren's long-gestating efforts is a new version of the classic Ingmar Bergman miniseries *Scenes from a Marriage*, whose new auspices, he notes, are emblematic of how the business of content creation has evolved. The planned English-language limited series will also harness the talents of Israeli producer Hagai Levi (whose credits include *In Treatment* and *The Affair*), American producer and HBO alumnus Michael Ellenberg and playwright Amy Herzog as well as the knowledge and resources of Endemol Shine.

"We debated whether we wanted to anglicize the project in Britain or the States, but we opted for the latter because we feel that more people worldwide can relate to the American mindset and way of telling stories," Blomgren explains.

As for sourcing talent for all these ambitious projects being announced lately, Jane Millichip, the managing director of Sky Vision, notes, "It's true that projects are proliferating ever faster, but I'd argue that there is a lot of new talent coming into the producer ranks as well." Her own company, which is a unit of European pay giant Sky, is, she points out, "particularly focused on bringing along new voices through mentorship programs."

Moreover, the company is partnering with a plethora of established producers, writers and actors who bring their own passion projects.

Sonar collaborated with David E. Kelley to adapt Stephen King's *Mr. Mercedes* for AT&T Audience Network.
and unique gifts to the table—folks ranging from Benedict Cumberbatch to Lennie James to Jane Tranter.

Millchips explains there's no single right way to do things, citing numerous projects in which Sky has collaborated with talent in different forms. Sky has a financial stake in Jane Tranter and Julie Gardner's Bad Wolf; it aligned with Benedict Cumberbatch’s SunnyMarch on the series Patrick Melrose and with Lennie James on Save Me; and it funded a pilot from the winner of a new-voices writing competition set up by multi-hyphenate Issa Rae.

**THE SKY'S THE LIMIT**

Millchips makes particular note of the number of actors in Britain who are stretching themselves as directors, writers and/or executive producers.

"Increasingly across Sky, we are working with a variety of on-screen talent," Millchips emphasizes. "These are not vanity shingles but rather genuine businesses."

In the U.S., the challenges are hardly less daunting as the race to sign up top talent is ever fiercer and the dollar outlays to do so ever more eyebrow-raising.

"We adopt a number of different strategies in forging strong relationships with talent," stresses Dante Di Loreto, the president of scripted entertainment at Fremantle North America. These approaches include overall deals, first-look arrangements and script commitments. As "an artist-centered entity," he remarks, "we take a curated approach to projects, connecting creators with experienced showrunners and/or producers who can concretize the original concept."

And yes, Di Loreto believes that the talent pool Stateside is currently "stretched very thin."

One way that scarcity is being mitigated, he notes, is by making series with fewer episodes.

Six-, eight- and twelve-episode minis allow talent to tackle multiple projects (even at different companies), prioritizing, staggering and juggling them as needed.

Among numerous alliances, Fremantle has a first-look deal with acclaimed author Neil Gaiman, an executive producer of the upcoming fantasy series Gormenghast; an overall pact with Neil Cross, the creator of the BBC's Luther; and relationships with novelists Elena Ferrante, Paulo Coelho and Brandon Sanderson to adapt one or more of their books.

"We strive to be the place creatives want to call home, where a wide range of voices get heard, where the material to put on screen is exciting," Di Loreto continues.

At FX Networks, Schrier suggests that securing ongoing deals with showrunner talent is the best way to tailor and sustain an environment where those folks can do their best work.

"We're not a widget factory," he stresses. "Being in larger, longer relationships with writers, producers and directors is the best way for us to turn out great television."

**TALENT ALLIANCES**

A Hollywood agent who declined to be named estimated that two-thirds of showrunners around town are currently locked into multiyear pacts at one studio or another.

Like all the major studios and many cable outfits, FX has sealed such arrangements with more than a dozen creatives, among them Joel Fields and Joe Weisberg, the duo behind Emmy-nominated The Americans, and Donald Glover, the creator and star of Atlanta.

From another perspective, heightened competition means indie producer-distributors have to provide all the value-added elements in their repertoire to entice and nurture top-tier talent.

Take indie player Sonar Entertainment, which is behind Mr. Mercedes (for AT&T Audience Network), The Son (for AMC) and The Hunt (for Amazon). "Given the saturation of the market and so many people clamoring to work in television, you can never allow yourself to get comfortable," suggests Jenna Santoianni, the company's executive VP of television series. She points to the creative environment that Sonar provides as a key factor allowing it to attract high-end talent.

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Lee Daniels, whose drama *Star* about aspiring singers, is now in its third season, recently signed a new overall deal to stay at 20th Century Fox Television.

like David E. Kelley, Pierce Brosnan and Jordan Peele to its projects.

Aside from the company’s history of acquiring high-end literary rights, Santolanni says it’s often “the small, simple things” that make a difference with creatives behind the lens.

“We pride ourselves on providing quick responses to problems and thoughtful, specific notes to the producers; we often interface with the network or platform, so the showrunner doesn’t have to, and our own staff boasts a lot of production experience that can be brought to bear.”

“Yes, there is a polarity at work,” says Carmi Zlotnik, the president of programming at Starz. “We are operating in a highly competitive landscape and yet there is no monopoly on creativity.”

One of his company’s approaches is to search out unheralded talent from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. To wit, Starz has invested time and resources in nurturing budding showrunners like Courtney Kemp on *Power*, Emma Frost on *The Spanish Princess*, Tanya Saracho on *Vida* and Stephanie Danler on *Sweetbitter*.

“Mentoring is key to what we do at Starz,” Zlotnik explains, adding that the aim is to give these newer talents “the building blocks” they need to excel. “We prefer to make stars rather than to buy them,” he quips, pointing to Kemp as someone who came to the company already with something fresh to say but then quickly picked up the process of running the writers’ room and the management skills to build a team and lead by example. “She’s the full package, in the John Wells tradition,” Zlotnik emphasizes. *Power* has been renewed for a sixth season, and Kemp enjoys an overall deal in the Lionsgate fold.

New permutations of talent deals are taking place against a media backdrop that is being

HBO’s *Insecure* was inspired by Issa Rae’s own YouTube series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl.*

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rolled, especially Stateside, by unprecedented change, disruptive streamers, distracting mergers and corporate angst over fragmenting audiences and executive behavior.

“The business is being discommodated on a daily basis—FAANGs are eating away at traditional media’s lunch, studios are being forced to either gobble or be gobbled up, and everybody’s words and deeds can come under scrutiny at any time,” is how one producer describes the current dislocations in Hollywood.

WINDS OF CHANGE

Several sources suggest that the most immediate (and perhaps easiest to implement) action companies are taking to address the behavioral issues that have surfaced over the last year is to make their hiring practices more rigorous. Still, in the wake of Leslie Moonves’s shocking exit from CBS Corporation, there are renewed calls for more forceful gender-equity commitments and stronger enforcement of anti-harassment rules.

“Paying lip service is not enough,” is how one longtime media player puts the need for more effective monitoring of the corporate workplace. At the same time, he observes, the “creative workspace” is a little different: writers’ rooms need to be relaxed enough for discussion to be freewheeling yet must not be allowed to devolve into an offensive or demeaning environment. “It’s one more tricky task that mostly falls to the showrunner: to set a tone so that everyone is on their game but no one gets their nose out of joint,” the veteran player suggests.

While the impact and repercussions of Hollywood’s #MeToo and #TimesUp movements have been more muted across the Atlantic, there is, especially in Britain, widespread soul-searching about the need to diversify staff and offer wage parity and equal opportunities to all.

At Sky, for example, new courses in “unconscious bias” have been set up, and the company has pledged that by 2020, women will fill 50 percent of its senior ranks. The BBC recently took a lot of criticism regarding its gender pay gap at all levels of the corporation and is moving to remedy the disparity. Beyond these changes and challenges, some are concerned that too much content will eventually overload the system—to the point that some players may go to the wall, having spent too much on originals that don’t pan out or pay off. However, the overall expansion of scripted IP seems to be continuing, and the world’s appetite for new stories grows ever more voracious.

“I don’t see the demand for good showrunners decreasing,” says producer Melvoin, “even though the job can be perilous and bewildering.”

Sometimes, he and other producers note, there are too many cooks in the kitchen to contend with, the executives in charge don’t appreciate the dynamics of the writers’ room, the tone of the script veers off-key or the mood in the room shifts dramatically.

Melvoin tells graduates at the WGA training program to focus on “delivering quality scripts on time” and “mastering the principles of management.” No matter what else they will confront in their showrunner careers, he advises, getting those two things right will stand them in good stead.