The real deal

Kids' live action has a reputation for being more challenging than animation, both to finance and to export. But the success of shows including Find Me In Paris, The Next Step and Waffle The Wonder Dog has proved that the right live-action project can do great business, writes Andy Fry.

The general consensus in kids' TV is that animation is more exportable than live action, primarily because it is easier to localise. When you also take into account the fact that animation tends to have longer shelf-life — live-action casts get older — and that it lends itself to licensing and merchandising, it is easy to see why this is where the lion's share of kids' investment goes.

Yet children's live action is in pretty good shape right now. Aside from being a scheduling stalwart for Disney, Nickelodeon and Europe's well-resourced public broadcasters, kids' comedy and drama have both become staples on Netflix and Amazon in recent years.

Cottonwood Media CEO David Michel says the appeal of his company's hit show, Find
Me In Paris, has surprised even him. The English-language time-travelling fantasy adventure is set against the backdrop of the Paris Opera House. “We are starting on our third series, which is great when you consider that each season has 26 episodes,” Michel says. “And the show has sold well in most parts of the world.” Aside from launch partners France TV and ZDF/ZDF Enterprises, Find Me In Paris’ buyers have included Disney France/Italy, Nickelodeon UK, NBCUniversal US and ABC Australia.

Part of the tween show’s success, Michel says, is down to its premium production values and “amazing writing”. But he also believes Find Me In Paris has filled an untapped gap in the market: “The pay-TV channels tend to focus on comedy and the SVOD platform shows are often not available for channels to buy. Pubcasters like CBBC in the UK make great shows, but they tend to be the kind of socially realistic shows that don’t travel so well. So all of that left a void in the market when Find Me In Paris arrived.” This is not to say it was an easy show to pull off: “There aren’t many players in the kids’ market that can make an expensive show like this happen. So we were fortunate to have ZDF Enterprises involved, because they have experience working with Australian producer Jonathan Shiff on this kind of show.”

The big question for Cottonwood is how it keeps up the momentum. Michel says season three of Find Me In Paris is a key juncture for the show — the point at which it will become clear if it has to come to a natural end or if new characters can take it forward. “In addition, we are developing an English-language book-based property,” he adds. “And we have partnered with Canada-based producer Sarah Haasz [The Next Step] on developing shows for North America.” So is Find Me In Paris a one-off or is it part of a broader trend in favour of kids’ live action? Michael Goldsmith, vice-president of original production at DHX Media, is upbeat suggesting that “there’s never been a better time to make TV shows in this genre. There are more buyers and there just seems to be a bigger appetite for different kinds of kids’ live action right now.” In particular, Goldsmith identifies an opportunity in serialised drama for tweens, echoing Michel’s point: “We don’t get into half-hour comedy because Nickelodeon and Disney are so good at that. But we have had success with music- and dance-based serialised dramas like The Next Step and Backstage, which tell stories from the kids’ point of view. The lesson we’ve learned from the SVOD platforms is not to be afraid to leave episodes open-ended, because cliff-hangers keep kids coming back.”

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Alongside music and dance, Goldsmith says sport, sci-fi and fantasy are all fertile areas of exploration. “We need shows to work outside North America and these subjects can translate well across borders,” he adds. “For example, we’ve enjoyed success with Creeped Out, a spooky anthology series that we co-produce with CBBC. That has just been renewed for a second season, while the first season was licensed to Netflix.”

In addition, DHX also seeks to draw inspiration from adult series “that might be reimagined for the tween audience,” Goldsmith says. “Bajillions is our look at entrepreneur kids and has the feel of a kid-appropriate Silicon Valley. A lot of what you see in the adult bingeing space can provide creative clues.”

If there is a trend, Goldsmith says, it is earlier engagement with buyers: “We have our passion projects. But it’s difficult when you take a great project or script out to the market and no one’s interested. So getting a sense of what buyers want early on and developing towards that makes a lot of sense.”

While the economics of creating kids’ live action for the global market can seem daunting, Brain Power Studio founder and executive producer Beth Stevenson points out that the same is true of animation. “You can spend four years investing in an animation series, only to find the market isn’t interested when you’re ready,” she says. “Live action has the advantage of quicker turnaround.”

Stevenson, who has spent much of her career creating kids’ live action, says a clear plus point for tween drama is that it can encourage co-viewing. “If you get the story and characters right, then you’ll hit a cross-generational family audience,” she adds.

Stevenson acknowledges that it can be tough setting up kids’ live action as a co-production, “because it’s more difficult to organise a work split than it is with animation”. Brain Power, however, has conquered the economics of children’s live action by positioning itself as a self-sufficient studio/distribution operation that turns out a high volume of TV movies and series each year. An example of the latter is The Ponisitters Club, which has been licensed to Discovery Kids Latin America and Netflix. “There is healthy demand for family/tween singles and that helps us support our ambitions in series,” Stevenson says.

Echoing trends in adult drama, Stevenson does not rule out the possibility that some of the company’s singles might form the basis of ongoing TV series: “We are talking to buyers about a few ideas. The great thing about producing TV movies is that they can act as back-door pilots for returnable franchises.”

While a lot of the export activity in kids’ live action is English-language — ABC Australia’s Nowhere Boys is another well-travelled series — there are signs that the genre, like adult scripted, is opening up to the prospect of non-English series. Nicola Andrews, senior sales and commercial director, kids, at Keshet International (KI), says her company’s Hebrew-language children’s dramas, including Spell Keepers and The Hood, have been selling well in their original form. “I was a bit sceptical
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at first,” she says. “But given that so much of the world already watches content with subtitles or dubbed, it hasn’t proved to be that difficult a proposition.”

Andrews says one factor in KI’s favour is that “Israeli kids’ shows tend to be a bit edgier than most of the content you see for tweens and young teens. They deal with subjects like kid-napping or the death of a loved one, for example. And I think a lot of buyers are crying out for kids’ drama that tackles tough issues."

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Alongside the tape sales, KI has also seen one of its children’s shows, The Greenhouse, adapted into English for Netflix. Andrews says she is keen to pursue this route, but adds “formats are time-consuming and labour-intensive. Sometimes it’s better just to pursue the distribution approach with these shows.”

While KI is enjoying success at the edge, older end of the spectrum, there is also evidence that scripted shows can work for pre-schoolers — an audience traditionally regarded as too young to follow plots and character development over multiple episodes. UK producer Darrall Macqueen proved the point with Topsy And Tim, which ran for 72 episodes, and has enjoyed similar success with Waffle The Wonder Dog.

“If the storytelling is good and it reflects their lives back at them, kids of five to seven will buy into live action with an ongoing narrative arc,” says company co-founder Billy Macqueen. “We’ve focused on delivering primetime quality TV shot at a knee-high perspective.”

One of the key findings with both shows, Macqueen adds, is that they have high levels of repeatability — Topsy And Tim is still one of the most popular shows on BBC iPlayer five or six years after launch. They have also, he adds, sold well internationally, defying expectations about live action: “Waffle is in Germany, France, Sweden, Denmark and Israel, among others. Topsy And Tim, meanwhile, airs on NBC’s Universal Kids in the US.”

Part of the explanation for Waffle’s success, Macqueen says, is the quality of the dubbing: “Obviously, subtitles are not necessarily a good approach for children of this age. But I’ve looked at the German version of the show and the dubbing is extraordinary — so much tighter than it would have been years ago.”

Sebastian Deberini, head of fiction, acquisitions and co-pro at ZDF/ARD kids’ channel KiKA, says: “Live action has always been an integral part of our portfolio. This is especially true for productions made in Germany, as they reflect the life of German kids.” He cites Castle Einstein which, at 922 episodes, is thought to be the longest running weekly soap for children in the world; and detective series The Peppercorns, airing since 1999.

That said, Deberini is also in the market for the right acquisitions and co-pros: “Find Me In Paris, H2O, Dance Academy, Worst Witch, Hank Zipzer and Odd Squad all work well, as they are able to cover the magical aspect children look for when watching live action,” he says. Live action does not just feed the KiKA audience’s desire for fantasy and adventure, however. “With live action, we can tackle topics and conflicts that concern older kids in Germany,” Deberini adds. “These topics are usually too complicated, sensitive and locally specific to be dealt with by animation series.

On the question of live action for pre-school, Deberini reports mixed results: “The sweet spot is six to nine-plus. But with local productions like Felix On Holiday and All New For Lina, as well as acquisitions like Casper & Emma or My Summer With Dad, we offer pre-school children a glimpse into the lives of children their age.”

As mentioned earlier, Nick and Disney are still key live-action creators. Nina Hahn, senior vice-president of international production and development at Nickelodeon, says the channel takes a totally genre-neutral approach. “We don’t say ‘today we’re looking for a live-action idea,’” she says. “That said, live action has always been, and continues to be, integral to our offering.”

Hahn is heading to MIPTV with a slate that includes Cousins For Life, The Bureau Of Magical Things and TV movie Bixler High Private Eye, along with existing hits Hunter Street, Henry Danger, I Am Frankie and The Thundermans.

Notwithstanding Hahn’s emphasis on genre neutrality, she says: “One of live action’s greatest strengths is that you can get it to market faster than animation and work with it in real time, making it more reflective of current trends and developments. We’ve also witnessed how live action can serve as a fantastic creative trigger to grow a franchise. Take Jojo Siwa, who burst into the Nickelodeon family in 2016 as a YouTube sensation. Since then, her work has extended into a global consumer-products programme and number-one live-action property.”

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On the subject of digital, Hahn says: “We’ve upped our investment in new digital originals, including live-action short-form series Shhhh, which follows the adventures of five classmates as they fight boredom at the back of the classroom.”

Regarding pre-school live action, she reports an increase in the US pre-school space: “However, our sweet spot is finding formats that have the potential to appeal to a global audience, from Hunter Street and I Am Frankie to the revival of the Nickelodeon US classic Blue’s Clues & You.”

In terms of sourcing content, Hahn has its own in-house production capability, but Hahn stresses that “opportunities can come from anywhere, so it’s critical to broaden where we source, create and seek inspiration.” She adds that, whether it’s Hunter Street, which originated in The Netherlands as De Ludwigs, or I Am Frankie, which started life as Yo Soy Franky in Latin America, “if a creator has a story to tell that will resonate with kids across the globe, then our brand can be their home”.

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