David Wood explores the new renaissance in live-action drama for tweens.

Netflix and Amazon are not just revolutionizing the world of big-budget, marquee stories for grown-ups; they’re doing it in the children’s space, too. Having brought their high-end game to tween scripted live action, they’ve helped to reinvigorate a sector that has traditionally been limited to the likes of Disney and Nickelodeon and a handful of European pubcasters, among them ZDF and CBBC.

“Five to six years ago, the market was dominated by the U.S. [kids’] networks, mostly doing high-budget sitcoms,” observations David Michel, co-founder and president of Cottonwood Media and the managing director of Federation Kids & Family. “Then there were a few European broadcasters, such as ZDF, which started doing on-location live-action shows like H2O. But the big change came when Amazon started doing live-action shows for kids. The way they were shot was different—with higher production values comparable to premium adult fare and no Disney-style laugh track.”

Michel continues, “Overnight, the SVODs created a new subgenre of premium kids’ drama that looked like nothing else: expensive, shot on location, single-camera live action with a heavy episode order, typified by shows such as Gortimer Gibbon’s Life on Normal Street. Now [others] have taken on that trend.”

The Cottonwood and ZDF Enterprises co-production Find Me in Paris, which is currently in production on a second season, is a good example. “All we knew at the start was that ZDF wanted a high-production-value series shot on location at the Paris Opera Ballet School. The budget is $14 million for 26 episodes—that’s not so expensive for an SVOD drama, but it’s pretty high for a kids’ show.”

The broadcast partners for the project include ZDF in Germany, ABC in Australia, Hulu and NBCUniversal in the U.S., France Télévisions in France and Disney Channel in select European markets.

GROWING PAINS

“The OTTs have opened up what can be produced in the teen and tween space,” notes Mark Bishop, co-CEO and partner at marblemedia and executive producer of the Canadian tween drama Open Heart. “A couple of years ago there were only comedies for the 9-to-12 demo, but now there is an interest in a much wider range: drama, adventure, mystery, supernatural, sci-fi and romance, all with a real eye to serialized and character-driven stories.”

Bob Higgins, the executive VP of kids and family at Boat Rocker Rights, is of a similar perspective. “Everyone is looking at this as the white space—an opportunity market,” says Higgins on the prospects for tween drama. “Over the years you have seen the kids’ market fragment into different audience segments. The latest is this new 11-to-15 space, for viewers who have graduated from sitcoms aimed at 9- to 14-year-olds and are ready for something meatier and more relevant that they can sink their teeth into. Something that isn’t a silly sitcom but more dramatic.”

Higgins continues, “At that age, kids are tremendously awkward, have lots of questions and need a life-line. In drama they can find it with more nuanced, flawed characters—someone who they can identify with.”

The idea that there is a growing market for tween drama with more serious dramatic storytelling is underlined by the success of titles such as The CW’s Riverdale and by the viewing habits of tween girls who are seeking out more challenging content. Higgins says his 13-year-old daughter—much to his chagrin—has binge-watched the millennial drama Pretty Little Liars, whose themes are very advanced for a tween audience.

The question, Higgins says, is whether producers can develop shows with grown-up themes that are addressed
in an age-appropriate and responsible way for the tween audience. The demand for that very much exists, and there's little doubt that the SVODs have hit on an audience that is currently underserved. While CBBC has been screening challenging dramas such as The Dumping Ground, about a British children's home, for years and continues to innovate, the commercial pay-TV networks and terrestrial platforms tend to play it safer.

"Commissioning decisions are advertiser-driven and shows are squarely aimed at a 6-to-11 target demographic because that's what Kellogg's wants," notes Higgins. "The space where they can't go is the space that Netflix and other SVODs cater to—and these audiences are hungry and want to be fed."

Federation's Michel agrees that one of the problems with financing tween drama is that terrestrial networks are programming in kids' blocks and don't want shows that are too adult-themed, whereas the SVODs are trying to go broader and older.

CASTING CALL

The other major challenge in tween drama is finding the appropriate talent—youngsters who will be able to carry the story and be relatable to viewers. Arne Lohmann, the VP of the junior slate at ZDF Enterprises, advises that when it comes to the production of tween drama, the casts should look older than their target audience. "Kids, in general, are more interested in what the slightly older ones are up to, so the protagonists should always be a bit older than the target group. Nevertheless, the stories need to be suitable. A good example is our new tween drama The Athena, based in the creative but fickle world of fashion."

Produced by Foz Allan (Wolfblood, The Dumping Ground, Hetty Feather), The Athena, which will air on Sky Kids in the U.K. next year, will have a look and feel comparable to programming for young adults. "But the scripts are targeted at the tween demographic with stories and situations suitable for their age," declares Lohmann.

"For tween dramas, the main cast has to look 13 to 16 because the audience is very aspirational," agrees Michel. The target audience is "not getting a realistic vision of the future but a fantasized version of what they think their lives will be in five years."

Tween dramas should assume a mostly female audience, Michel adds. "Networks might talk about gender neutrality, but the audience for tween drama is basically 70 percent female."

TWEEN GIRLS ARE ALSO FIRMLY ON THE AGENDA AT MONDO TV. FOLLOWING THE SUCCESS OF HEIDI, BIENVENIDA A CASA, THE GROUP IS PLANNING MORE INVESTMENTS IN THE GENRE THROUGH ITS SISTER COMPANY MONDO TV IBEROAMERICA. "Fortunately, the market offers many opportunities to exploit this genre and our goal is to continue to benefit from them," says Micheline Azoury, the head of TV sales and acquisition at Mondo TV. "The tween drama market we are aiming for is more girls than boys. Girls tend to want to grow up faster and watch what their older sisters are watching."

Kids' viewing habits can be very complicated or very simple, depending on your point of view. For Michel, it's straightforward. "Kids broadly watch animation until they are 6 or 7, then they watch live action on SVOD or linear until 11 or 12, and then it's off to YouTube. On YouTube teens and preteens find something that appeals to them, like I did when I was a teenager and stopped watching TV and started listening to the radio. For 12- to 13-year-olds it's all about freedom—they are interested in danger and taking risks and seek out different, edgier content."

So can the polished, big-budget, SVOD-inspired tween series compete with the lure of low-cost edgy YouTube...
Following the success of Heidi, Bienvenida a Casa, Mondo TV is planning additional live-action dramas for tween girls.

dreadful, there wasn’t much competition [since we had] a good show. So it was easy to sell.”

And just when more investment is needed, Canada and Australia, two key territories for kids’ live action, have been stepping back—the former roiled by consolidation, the latter struggling with changes to the funding ecosystem.

NEW SOURCES

ZDFE’s Lohmann says that fluctuations in the Canadian and Australian markets “had a significant impact on our co-productions. With the lack of funding from these countries, we will have to find other ways of financing to maintain the high standard and quality of the productions.”

If only all tween live action had the gilt-edged good fortune of The Next Step, the Canadian series that has spawned spin-offs such as the CBBC talent series Taking the Next Step, a stage show and a strong line of dance-related merchandising.

The reality is that most tween drama’s commercial potential is limited to channel distribution, so ideas need to travel well. Shows that are too culturally specific or non-English-language and need dubbing tend to be a harder sell. “Themes need to be universal,” says Boat Rocker’s Higgins. “We try to create characters and stories and relatable issues and avoid concepts that are too culturally specific. This can often be—for better or worse—the North American high school experience. It has become a global staple so that even if kids around the world don’t have that experience, they still understand it—they get the references.”

Higgins adds, “Tweens are going through massive changes, both physically and psychologically, so if you can tap into that you are likely to be watched by kids wherever they are in the world.”

The consensus is to focus attention on strong storylines and characters and not to shy away from controversial subjects like violence or cyberbullying.

“It is important to address all those difficult subjects,” ZDFE’s Lohmann says. “The audience needs a realistic view on such topics and it may help them to face the challenges of growing up.”

A good example is ZDFE’s new series Heirs of the Night, a seven-way European co-production. “Only combined investments from those partners enabled us to close the financing,” reveals Lohmann.

“It’s a micro, micro market,” says Federation’s Michel. “You have to convince two buyers to finance it or you are toast—and it’s a market where there aren’t too many commissioners. It’s the global SVODs, Hulu, Disney and Nick and then a few channels such as ZDF, Rai, the BBC and ABC in Australia.”

But having financed Find Me in Paris, selling the series was pretty straightforward, admits Michel. “Everyone was drawn to the luster and quality of the show. We created a new category and pushed it a step further. So once we had passed the financing, which was

marblemedia’s Open Heart was accompanied by a mobile app and second-screen experience.