There's more variety in the drama business than there's ever been, but crime series are still the most in-demand genre. By Steve Clarke

They say crime doesn’t pay, but broadcasters, producers and, significantly, international distributors all beg to differ. From Dragnet to True Detective, Kojak to CSI, Hill Street Blues to Broadchurch, the television audience’s love affair with crime drama is long and apparently everlasting.

“Audiences love the escapism that crime provides,” says Irina Ignatiew, the managing director of global scripted distribution at Red Arrow International.

Ruth Clarke, director and executive VP of global content and co-productions at ITV Studios Global Entertainment (ITVS GE), agrees. “Broadcasters around the world are always pleased when the word ‘murder’ is included in a show’s title. It helps people navigate their EPGs.”

“A good crime story provides excitement, suspense and surprise,” she adds. “The emotional roller coaster of a compelling whodunit is second to none.”

In fact, imagining a mainstream network TV schedule minus crime drama is a bit like Christmas minus the gifts under the tree. And now VOD operators like Amazon have started to surf the crime wave. At MIPTV, Red Arrow International launched Amazon’s procedural series Bosch, based on Michael Connelly’s novels about an L.A.-based detective.

CSI: Crime Scene Investigation, the classic crime procedural renewed earlier this year by CBS for its 15th season, is one of the most successful TV shows of all time. For five years, the program – part of what distributors like to call a “cookie-cutter franchise” – won the award at the Monte-Carlo Television Festival for the world’s most-watched show. This year, that honor went to another CBS procedural, NCIS, which focuses on a team that investigates crimes involving the Navy and Marine Corps.

More recently, a newer type of crime show – dark, serialized rather than having self-contained episodes, and often
starring a female detective as the lead investigator—has provided an alternative to the perennial appeal of the police procedural.

However, if audiences’ appetites for TV crime fiction are to remain strong, their creators need to innovate and avoid some of the genre’s obvious clichés. “There’s no innovation without good scripts,” observes Fred Burcksen, ZDF Enterprises’ executive VP and COO. “Innovative storytelling is largely in the hands of talented scriptwriters.”

FremantleMedia is looking to offer up a new take on the genre with Suspects, produced by FremantleMedia UK’s Newman Street for Channel 5 in the U.K. “It’s an improvised, almost reality crime series, but using top actors,” says Sarah Doole, the director of global drama at FremantleMedia. This follows FremantleMedia’s success with Wentworth, a reboot of a classic Australian drama that is set in the violent world of a women’s correctional facility. The show has been renewed by Foxtel for a third season and sold into the U.K. with Channel 5. It has also been remade in Germany and the Netherlands.

SERIALIZED STORIES

Most distributors maintain that serialized crime shows, strong on complex plots and detailed character studies, are continuing to gain ground on the classic procedural piece, and that European series remain in the ascendant. “Commissioning editors are becoming braver in greening sophisticated serialized crime drama, and audiences love them,” says Georgie Brown, the senior VP of acquisitions at Shine International, distributor of Broadchurch and its American version, Gracepoint.

She adds: “One of the recent trends in crime drama is how they have engaged with bigger issues.” In the U.K. Happy Valley, a hit for the BBC (and airing on Netflix in the U.S.), revolves around the destructive power of drugs, Line of Duty (distributed by Content Television), focuses on police corruption, while ITV’s Broadchurch zeroes in on a single community and its inhabitants. The BBC Three show My Murder examines a real London murder through the eyes of the person who was killed.

“Ten years ago it was procedurals; today audiences are more prepared to give up big chunks of their time,” says Noel Hedges, DRG’s senior VP of acquisitions. “It’s like reading a book.”

“One innovation is that the characters now have lives,” adds Greg Phillips, Content Television’s president. “We see their problems at work and at home.”

In theory, single-episode crime stories are easier to schedule because they are produced in volume. They are still in demand, especially from free-to-air networks.

“There is now a balance between procedurals and serialized drama,” observes Phillips. “Some markets will always prefer the procedurals, but innovation is in serialized crime drama.”

Entertainment One eOne has great hopes for The John Cardinal Mysteries, based on Giles Blunt’s stories. The firm is looking for Scandinavian, U.K. and U.S. partners for the project, commissioned by CTV in Canada, at MIPCOM. “The innovation is that the crimes are all set in the Canadian Arctic,” explains Carrie Stein, executive VP of global production at eOne. The company has also had success worldwide with the procedural Rookie Blue, a U.S. and Canadian co-pro, and the more serialized Rogue, recently renewed by DIRECTV.

Meanwhile, in the summer it was announced that a long-running British procedural, ITV’s Law & Order: UK (based on the NBC original), was being “nursed” following eight seasons after its lead actor, Bradley Walsh, said he was quitting the show. The U.K. is regarded as a bellwether market. In a digital age when more TV is watched online and binge viewing via catch-up services and box sets are commonplace, the demand for multi-episode stories looks likely to grow even stronger.

In an uber-competitive world, broadcasters and other content providers demand “event TV” that can be effectively
MAKING A KILLING

So was it the Scandinavians and DR’s seminal series The Killing that sparked the revolution in crime drama? Well, yes and no. “There were four shows that kicked off the change in TV crime drama—The Killing, The Bridge, Those Who Kill and Broadchurch,” suggests eOne’s Stein. “I guess success breeds success. Broadchurch felt different to the other three.”

DRG’s Hedges agrees: “The Killing was gripping serial drama. People were saying ‘Did you watch that on TV last night?’” Hedges adds that having a female lead helps on the international market, as women make up a large portion of crime drama audiences.

The show was sold internationally by ZDF Enterprises, which was the first distributor to make a big bet on Scandi dramas internationally. “ZDF Enterprises was able to bring Scandinavian crime series to German television and successfully distribute them around the world,” says Burcksen. “Many were skeptical about this project, but success proved that we were right. In the meantime, many competitors have joined the fray.”

He adds: “Scandi drama paved the way for outstanding, innovative foreign-language shows, but did not necessarily nurture the broad genre.”

ITVS GE may be relatively late in hitching its wagon to the Scandi crime craze. But at MIPCOM, the distributor has two new Swedish noir serials (both boasting female leads) it will be talking up.

“We’ll be starting conversations around Jordskott and Ängelby,” says Clarke. “There’s a light undertone of supernatural and fantasy within these crime stories.”

Jordskott, a ten-parter, is a mystery crime story that follows the disappearance of a child in the small community of Silverhöjd. The drama is produced by Palladium Fiction in association with SVT. The 12-part Ängelby, about a woman who embarks on a new start in the eponymous town, is produced by Tre Vänner/Svensk Filmindustri in association with SVT and Film i Väst. ITVS GE hopes to sell the Swedish-language shows in as many markets as possible.

The importance of having a strong female character at the heart of a story is evident in eOne’s Glue, commissioned by the U.K.’s Channel 4 for its youth-skewed network, E4. The eight-part thriller is written by Jack Thorne, whose credits include Skins, This Is England and The Fades, and is produced by Eleven Film. The lead detective is a twenty-something rookie policewoman.

GENRE FUSION

Many crime dramas on the market are embracing elements of mystery, science fiction and more. Another apparent innovation is to put gay characters at the core. At MIPCOM, DRG will be selling Eyewitness, a dark Norwegian saga produced by NRK. The drama tracks the fallout for two teenagers who inadvertently encounter a gang murder on their first clandestine meeting.

Mixing crime with period drama is another way to bring new life to the genre. Zodiac Rights is unveiling The Pinkertons at MIPCOM, a 22-part procedural series about the early days of the Pinkerton Detective Agency. Starring Angus Macfadyen, the show is set in Kansas in the mid-19th
century and features what claims to be America’s first female detective, Kate Warne.

“As the U.S. has moved towards more serialized shows, there are the buyers of the procedurals within Europe who are finding it quite difficult to find content,” says Caroline Torrance, Zodiak Rights’ head of international scripted. “The Pinkertons did really appealing to us because it is 22 episodes and it is a procedural. There is a real appetite from European broadcasters for that, even though they can also accommodate the eight- to ten-episode serials.”

A LIGHTER TOUCH

The Pinkertons has a light touch that, in theory, should make it easier for broadcasters to schedule in the early evening than, say, Ripper Street, axed by the BBC after two seasons but resurrected by Amazon.

“The Pinkertons is not in any way a comedy, but it does have a sense of humor,” says Torrance. “The interplay and chemistry between the two main characters will appeal to a lot of audiences.”

TV’s crime rate might be rising, but is this apparent glut of shows unusual? The jury is out on whether or not the market is experiencing a full-fledged boom in TV crime drama.

“Our long-time competence in crime series means they have become a major pillar of our sales operations,” notes ZDF Enterprises’ Barcelsen. “We need no special booms for success in this segment.”

That may be true, but creatively, the willingness of U.S. cable to foster high-end shows seems to have done a favor to more mainstream crime serials.

“In the last three years, the big thing that changed is that scale and quality have united,” suggests Jane Featherstone, the CEO of Kudos, the British independent that struck gold with Broadchurch, which sold to more than 106 territories and was remade for the U.S. as Gracepoint. “As an industry we’ve found a way to tell crime stories across 8 or even 12 episodes, so the impact of crime shows is far greater than it used to be. Also, brilliant writers who once didn’t want to write crime drama but would be happy to write a period piece or an issue-based series are [now] happy to write crime because crime has become fashionable.”

This, combined with the growing number of outlets for crime drama as OTT platforms like Amazon invest money in original content, is helping to change the dynamics of the market for the genre.

Since the arrival of Scandi crime as a market leader, there is a widespread belief that Europe’s cop shows can more than hold their own against their U.S. rivals.

CONTINENTAL CAPERS

“The emergence of strong Euro crime dramas is giving the dominant American shows a run for their money,” says Burcksen. “Euro crime drama is gaining steadily in popularity. And since production quality is constantly improving in Europe, a high-value European production might feel more authentic and closer to Europeans.”

Content Television’s Phillips agrees: “In terms of quality, there is no longer any distinction between U.S. and U.K. drama, although [the Americans] still have the volume.”

“There’s always going to be a place for American crime drama, but nowadays, quality crime shows can come from anywhere,” opines Louise Pedersen, all3media international’s managing director. “Crime drama is particularly strong at the moment. It could be a procedural series or a serial. My only concern is that it’s high quality and comes with a strong story, great acting and looks wonderful.”
To illustrate her point at MIPCOM, she and her team are selling the second season of the Welsh noir drama *Hinterland*, which comes in English- and Welsh-language versions (season one was bought by Netflix in the U.S.), and *The Brokenwood Mysteries*, set in New Zealand wine country and made by South Pacific Pictures. The company’s other new MIPCOM crime drama is *The Missing*, an eight-part thriller in which a father returns to France to look for his son who disappeared years earlier. That show is being co-produced with Starz in the U.S.

*Hinterland’s* debut season was recently sold by all3media international to ARD in Germany—its first major series deal with the broadcaster in several years.

“In Germany, even young people are gathering in bars and watching crime shows together,” says Red Arrow’s Ignatiew. “Europe’s biggest economy still reserves part of Sunday night prime time for police series on ARD, the regional pubcaster. After more than 40 years, the police procedural *Tatort* continues to be a mainstay for ARD. On private network Sat.1, Thursday evenings are crime nights with series like *Criminal Minds* and Tandem’s *Crossing Lines*.

“European broadcasters are still looking for procedural crime shows, but U.S. studios are going more and more into serialized crime and event programs,” says Ignatiew. “We at Red Arrow have tried to fill that gap.”

**CODE RED**

Ignatiew has high hopes for the 12-part 100 Code, produced for Kanal 5 in Sweden and Sky Deutschland. The series stars Dominic Monaghan as NYPD detective Conley, who travels to Sweden to investigate a string of murders. He is paired with Swedish cop Eldund, played by Michael Nyqvist, who starred in the original Swedish-language *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. 100 Code was created by U.S. showrunner Bobby Moresco, winner of an Oscar for *Crash*.

“The show combines all the best parts of Scandi crime drama but has a more American commercial hook,” she explains. “We always try and find the right partners who share the same vision. I have no doubts that both the U.S. and U.K. will buy it.”

Red Arrow is convinced that Scandi crime can continue to impress the international TV community. So, too, is ZDF Enterprises’ Burcksen. “Scandinavian crime drama is defined by unique features and can practically be seen as a subgenre of its own,” he says.

Zodiac’s Torrance claims the demand for Scandi crime is as strong as ever. “There is huge demand for Scandi crime shows,” she says. “But good serial crime drama can come from anywhere now. We’re developing a French series.”

At MIPCOM, ZDF Enterprises will be selling *The Team*, a pan-European cop show written and directed by Scandinavian talent. The co-producers are ZDF, ORF, SRF, DR, SVT and ARTE. Explains Burcksen: “*The Team* portrays a group of European police officers fighting international crime throughout Europe.”

The series attempts to reflect Europe’s cultural diversity, and so appears to bring something new to the genre.

But others are skeptical that Scandi crime can keep innovating. They suggest that producers and distributors put their faith in writers from other parts of Europe and the U.S. to create concepts and stories that are genuinely original.

“Scandi crime is losing a little bit of its luster,” reckons Content’s Phillips. “I’m hearing from the marketplace that they are trying to evolve their drama and make it less dark. People are saying, ‘We can’t keep producing the same thing in the same way.’” Ultimately, if crime drama is to remain highly sought-after by international buyers, screenwriters need to keep reinventing the genre. It’s anybody’s guess where the next big innovation will come from, but one thing is clear: in such a healthy market, TV’s crime wave is no longer dominated by the U.S.