Drama leads the way for kids

Children’s TV is mirroring what is happening in the adult space, with SVoD services joining international co-pros to make high-quality scripted series. Ann-Marie Corvin reports

For many people working in the kids’ space, Find Me In Paris – a €12m (£10.5m) English-language co-production about a time-travelling ballerina – signals a new era for live-action programming.

In a market awash with animation, transatlantic sitcoms and domestic originals, this international mega-production, packed with big set pieces, mirrors current trends in high-end adult drama.

The 26 x 30-minute series is a copro between ZDF/ZDF Enterprises/Federation Kids & Family and Cottonwood Media. It is also one of digital streaming platform Hulu’s first forays into original teen content.

According to ZDF Enterprises president and chief executive Fred Burcksen, SVoD services are turning their attention to children’s and young-adult content.

“The streamers have created a higher demand for original premium content, but it also means that the scripts need to be special – better than just good – and it shows need to look cinematic,” he adds.

Find Me In Paris came out of ZDF’s desire for a location-based ballet show. ABC/ZDF co-pro Dance Academy had performed well, and the German broadcaster was keen to avoid sitcom, which doesn’t work as well for its domestic audience.

Big-budget successes

While there’s no fixed formula for finding the next big hit, Burcksen says ZDF Enterprises has learned from recent big-budget co-pro successes, including The Worst Witch (CBBC/Netflix) and H2O: Just Add Water (ABC).

“Coming-of-age shows are global. A first kiss, taking that first step towards your dream career – these experiences tend to touch every kid between 10-14,” he says. “If you can combine this with a magical/fantasy factor, it’s a mix that works well wherever you go.”

Secret Life Of Boys producer Zodiac Kids UK is also looking at the fantasy genre to create a drama that has “big set pieces, the legs to run to three or four series and production values that are fundable but also ambitious enough to attract a wide and broad audience”, says creative director Steven Andrew.

He welcomes the content explosion driven by Netflix and Amazon, which has “given the kids’ drama community a new lease of life for narrative storytelling”.

Keeping things universal is key, according to Lime Pictures joint managing director Kate Little, whose 10 x 30-minute equestrian drama Free Rein premiered on Netflix last summer.

“Horses and soccer are subjects that work well everywhere, but within that mix, we wanted to create a show for people who are also growing up in the city,” she says. “It’s as much a rites of passage and a tale about friendship, empowerment and adventure as it is about horses.”

While Lime has a track record of delivering internationally focused teen dramas for the likes of Disney
**PRE-SCHOOL JOINS THE PARTY**

The growing hunger for live action has had a trickle down effect on preschool, according to Billy MacQueen, co-founder of Topsy And Tim producer Barratt MacQueen. He believes the genre is effective in straddling both the younger and older end of the three to seven age group, as well as pulling in other family members for co-viewing.

The company’s latest offering started broadcasting on CBeebies last month: *Waffle The Wonder Dog* is a 30-episode live-action comedy with a serialised arc that focuses on a puppy who comes wagging his way into the lives of a newly blended family.

MacQueen says Barratt has already received international interest, while *Topsy And Tim* is performing well in France and was recently picked up by Kids Universal in the US. “Now that serialised live action for kids is a proven thing and now that we have enough of it, our content is really starting to find its legs internationally,” he says.

While big-budget live-action productions have not yet influenced traditional kids’ player Nickelodeon, new series such as Nick LatAm’s *Kally’s MashUp* (see Hot Picks, page 55) hint at more international ambitions.

The recent trend has been to create something more bespoke for local markets. Nickelodeon has had success filming global and local versions of the same show using the same script, crew and some of the same actors – a model that Nina Hahn, senior vice-president, production and development, refers to as going “glocal.”

Every Witch Way was produced this way for the Latin and US markets, while in Europe, the Anglo/Dutch live-action teen drama *De Ludwigs* (known internationally as *Hunter Street*) combines Amsterdam settings with Nickelodeon’s brand of comedy, action and adventure.

Now in its second season, *Hunter Street* was so well received in its home territory that it has spawned a number of specials. Hahn says that Nick is now in “the late development stages” with a London-based show, as well as one set in Israel.

As opportunities in the live-action kids’ market grow, production firms are realigning their businesses to cater for this market. At UK-based Komixx Entertainment, the emphasis used to be on animation and pre-school, but it’s now honing in on the teen live-action space, says group chief creative officer Andrew Cole-Bulgin.

Current productions include a feature-length adaptation of young adult novel *The Kissing Booth* for Netflix and, through a joint venture with publishing group Random House, an adaptation of Simon Mayo’s *Itch* thriller series for ABC.

Cole-Bulgin says the main challenge has been finding authentic teen voices that speak to the generation it is targeting. Fan fiction and self-publishing platforms have become rich places to mine.

Komixx discovered *The Kissing Booth* author Beth Reekles – then just 18 years old – through online publishing platform Wattpad, which allows readers to interact with an author’s story.

Komixx is now developing a TV version of Ali Nowak’s Wattpad novel *My Life With The Walter Boys*, which has had 167 million reads.

The beauty of the platform is that it doesn’t own the authors, leaving production companies to deal with them directly through their agents.

“These authors are setting trends as they write,” says Cole-Bulgin. “We look for stories that have good arcs and then start a conversation with the author online. We ask where they see things going and then we watch the way that audiences are interacting with their stories.”

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(Fenmore) and Nickelodeon (*House Of Anubis*), Little observes that there’s a greater willingness to invest in distinctive drama.

“Five years ago, you went to the markets and it was all about animation with a wafer-thin bit of live action,” she says. “Now it feels like the golden age of international TV drama is finally starting to rub off onto children.”

Little is enthused by Disney’s plans to create a streaming service next year. “They do a lot of multi-camera in the live-action space, so it will be interesting to see whether they use the service to push the boundaries and experiment with different types of content,” she says.

For CBBC, the model of delivering high-end drama to its home territory via international co-pros is well-established thanks to collaborations with partners such as DHX, ZDF and Netflix on its elder-squeaking series *Creeped Out*, *The Worst Witch* and *Wolfblood*.

Typically, the kids broadcaster now has “at least one or two” of these co-pros on the go at any one time, according to CBBC head of production Helen Bullough. These are not, however, without their challenges.

Factors such as location, the diversity of cast, the use of language, colloquialisms and even shooting style all need to be considered.

“The earlier you can identify those local nuances, the better – the scripting process is the cheapest place to make these changes,” she says.

Bullough, who served as an executive producer on DHX/CBBC kids’ horror anthology *Creeped Out*, adds that for high-end co-productions to be successful internationally, they need to play to their combined strengths, so that no one feels alienated.

“Sometimes, this can work to both parties’ advantage,” she adds. “We shot the castle for *Cackle Academy* in Germany. To UK kids, it’s your classic witch’s castle, but German kids are familiar with that style of castle – there’s probably one just down the road from them, and they like the familiarity.”

Even when all these factors are considered, something still might not work in one territory. English/German werewolf drama *Wolfblood* embraces the fantasy/coming-of-age tropes that Burcksen mentions, but while this award-winning ZDF/CFBC co-pro performed well in the UK, ZDFE pulled out as co-producer after series two.