LANGUAGE LESSONS

The market for international scripted series has opened up dramatically, but can non-English lingua fonde break into the mainstream?

Story by STEWART CLARKE

When the U.K.'s Channel 4 aired French series "Les Revenants" in primetime in 2013 it was a watershed moment; a non-English language series playing in the primetime schedule of one of the U.K.'s big free-TV broadcasters. A horde of Scandi invaders also made their way onto international TV screens, as Sarah Lund's knitwear in DR's "The Killing" became watercooler chat for the drama cognoscenti.

English-language markets that had shunned "foreign" production had opened to "international" drama. Starz has now bought a Norwegian drama and HBO will run an Italian-language series. The success of the latter's "My Brilliant Friend" will establish if global fare can edge further into the mainstream, or will remain the preserve of the streamers and specialists.

"Over the last decade the international drama market has evolved from one dominated by sales of English, particularly U.S., finished, 13x1-hour series, to one where any show, in any language and any time length has the potential to be a hot commodity worldwide," says Moritz Polter, executive producer international TV series at Bavaria Fiction. A key producer on Germany's domestic scene, it is one of a growing number of companies targeting international markets.

The surge in the volume of international drama is partly due to an increase in local production. For broadcasters, local stories now resonate more strongly than U.S. fare. "4 Blocks" was the first original for Turner's TNT Serie cable net in Germany while Sky Deutschland and Sky Italia have also ramped up, as has Spanish paycaster Movistar. They are pumping out expensive series that work at home, and increasingly find an audience abroad.

"That creativity was always there in international drama, maybe it was just slightly ignored in the past," says Jason Simms, a former Fox executive who is now director of drama and comedy at Sky's production and distribution unit Sky Vision. It recently gave buyers an early peek at Sky Deutschland's buzzy pre-apocalyptic series "Eight Days" at a London showcase. "The niche services prove the demand is there. In an overall market that is fragmenting, the that fact you can build loyalty among a solid group of people, even if it isn't big free-TV levels of viewership, is something worth going after."

Walter Presents bears the name of Walter Iuzzolino. A leading authority on international drama, he curates and presents programming on the service, which runs as a linear block and on-demand service in the U.K. He freely admits Walter is a boutique proposition and international drama a specialist area, but one worth mining. "It is gaining commercial traction, but with a global niche audience," he says. "That audience is dedicated and loves the content."

Beta Film shops German series "Babylon Berlin" and has a pedigree of selling international drama. Managing director Moritz von Kruecken says the German company is selling to an increasing number of markets, although rarely to mainstream English-language networks. "We haven't had the luck to bring a German or Italian production to U.S. network primetime and there's probably a long way still to go," he said at a Berlin Drama Days session moderated by Variety in February.

At the same event, FremantleMedia's head of drama, Sarah Doole, noted the barriers to mainstream U.S. go beyond language: "I don't think any British producer..."
has sold a show to an NBC or ABC in its original form," she said.

It is a different story on premium cable. Starz has acquired Norwegian mystery drama "Monster," and, with its extensive operations outside of the U.S., HBO is leading the charge.

At Mipcom in October, CEO Richard Plepler disclosed that it would run HBO Europe originals on its U.S. streaming service. "Richard came to see the value for viewers of being able to offer the work from HBO Europe and Asia to an American audience," says Anthony Root, HBO Europe's programming chief. "Are these going to have 'Game of Thrones' level viewership? No, but the point is, there is an increasing number of people who enjoy watching shows that do not come from their own culture."

HBO Europe makes originals from 10 countries in 10 languages. That drive now includes the Nordics, where filmmaker Lucas Moodysson is making comedy-drama "Gosta," which he says will "be a mix of comedy and Dostoevsky." HBO España also has its first original, "Patricia," an original adaptation of Fernando Aramburo's eponymous novel.

"My Brilliant Friend," however, is the potential gamechanger. Produced by FremantleMedia's Wildside for HBO and Rai, it is an adaptation of the Elena Ferrante bestselling novels. It will go out on the Italian pubcaster and in the premium cable's main schedule in the U.S. in its original 1950s Neapolitan dialect.

Pubcaster Rai is playing a key role in bringing Italian-flavored drama to the world with English-language productions "In the Name of the Rose" and "Medici." "I think TV series can build the identity of our country even better than film and add an international dimension," says Rai drama chief Elenaonic Andreetta. "Rai wishes to play a fundamental role in the development of the international presence of the Italian industry."

Adapting "My Brilliant Friend" with HBO is a milestone in terms of Rai's overseas ambitions. "At the public broadcaster, we could not ignore this extraordinary all-Italian success," Andreetta says. "When producers Wildside and Fandango proposed making a series from Elena Ferrante's novels, we had no hesitation."

If premium pay is a growing international outlet, the streamers continue to change the game. Amazon and Netflix became big buyers of global drama as they launched around the world and sought to localize, but the buying boom may be coming to an end. As Netflix pushes into non-English originals with the likes of "Narcos" and "Dark," and Amazon does the same with "You Are Wanted" and "Deutsch les Landes," they are buying fewer finished series, sellers report. The SVOD players heated the market up, but the prices and that heightened level of demand have fallen away, several sources say.

"This is a niche that doesn't justify 'Homeland' prices," says one influential buyer who asked not to be named. "Producers and distributors had developed a sense of the worth of their shows that was misleading. There was a bubble, but there has been a recalibration of the economics."

"Dark," meanwhile, is a bona fide international hit for Netflix, with 50% of viewing of the German-language mystery drama coming from outside Germany. A second season has been commissioned. Netflix offers series such as Sky Germany's Tom Tykwer period drama "Babylon Berlin" with subtitles and dubbed, although some observers have questioned the quality of the dub. "It would be a dream if dubbed European content was successful in the U.S.; it would change the game totally," says one European distributor, although most agree that dream is unlikely to be realized.

What is common to international dramas breaking through is often edgy and dark material — story-of-the-week procedures don't cut it. "The audience is looking for strong, serialized stories and the rapid growth of SVOD and binge-viewing has helped in terms of this kind of story-telling," says Francois Guyonnet, head of TV at StudioCanal, which heads to MIPTV with new Canal Plus original, crime thriller "Nox."

The Nordic crusaders who pioneered a wave of dark serialized programming now have competition for global eyeballs. "The Killing" set a brooding template for Nordic noir that was followed by the likes of "Bron," "Mammon" and "Modus." The light is now beginning to creep in. "I think we are moving to a new brand, Nordic Light," says NRK drama boss Ivar Kohn. NRK has "Homegrown," about a female soccer coach. "Nordic Light has the same DNA and qualities (as noir) but it is not dark crime. It's broader and we are getting a better response from our audience."

Germany, Italy, Spain and Scandinavia sit at the top table of international drama, but others are looking to join them. Brazilian media giant Globo is known for its soapy telenovelas, but it has moved into series with show such as "Bailers" with some overseas success, notably the recent sale of "Merceless" to RTL Crime in Germany.

Israel is already established as a formats hotspot and Keshet's "Prisoners of →
‘My Brilliant Friend’ Brings Italian Voices to Premium Cable on HBO

HBO's take on Elena Ferrante's 'Neapolitan Novels' will bring subtitled drama to premium cable audiences

Story by ROB OWEN

HBO is betting fervent interest will be stronger than an historical aberration to fully subtitled programming when it comes to "My Brilliant Friend," an upcoming HBO, Rai Fiction and TimVasion series produced by Lorenzo Mieli and Mario Gionani for Wildside and by Domenico Procacci for Pan-dango in co-production with Umeda Production.

Based on the first of four "Neapolitan Novels" by pseudonymous Italian author Elena Ferrante, the HBO series will break ground for subtitles in mainstream U.S. programming. German-language "Deutschland 83" and Italian "Gomorrha" both aired domestically on Sundance TV, but "My Brilliant Friend" on HBO marks the mainstream outlet for a fully subtitled series to date.

Lorenzo De Maio, agent at Endeavor Content, says while in the past subtitled programs in the U.S. resulted in a niche audience, that's changing due to global platforms.

"Think about "3%' on Netflix, which is a brilliant show [in Portuguese], or "Bafton Berlin" in German," De Maio says. "I was tracking "My Brilliant Friend" for a long time and think American audiences are ready. You go to Netflix or Amazon and you can find dozens of German-language series on there. The streamers have brought more of this local content to a wider audience, a bigger audience."

Francesca Orsi, HBO co-head of drama, acknowledges the new experience of foreign-language programming on the primary HBO channel.

"The entire series will be in Italian, in the Neapolitan dialect, and it's a very authentic portrayal of this world," she says. "Had we done it in English, we don't think it would have been as honest. It wouldn't have been as truthful an exploration of this culture. Speaking Italian in the Neapolitan dialect is very specific and a whole other endeavor and emotional experience."

"My Brilliant Friend" producer Mieli says his company never considered making the series in English.

"HBO, from the beginning, not only accepted but encouraged something authentic and unique," Mieli says, noting that the language spoken is important to the story's plot as well.

"Seventy percent of the show is spoken in a language — and I'm from Rome — don't understand. Part of the story is the growing up of girls and of one and one makes up someone who wants to write books and must learn Italian. Italian is a totally different language from Neapolitan."

Contractually, HBO has a deal in place to do four seasons based on the four books in Ferrante's series, but just the first season has been ordered so far.

Orsi says for its first foray into foreign-language production, HBO goes in with an advantage in wooing viewers who may not normally gravitate toward subtitled entertainment.

"Worldwide, women of all ages have read these books, women in their 60s and in college. They're just beloved," she says. "So, we, to some extent, know we will get those eyeballs. The question for us is how do we expand it and ensure we can attract an audience beyond just those who have read the books. If we hone in and find the heart of the story and translate it to a visual medium, we can find an audience that will appreciate it."

Part of that effort includes an American writer-executive producer, Jennifer Schuur, working with the show's Italian writers.

"We did all agree an American writer was critical to help the process in Italy and having that point of view that an American TV writer brings, that sensibility, could help translate just from a storytelling perspective," Orsi says. "It's one experience to take it in as a book and published property and another to translate it to a visual medium."

Orsi calls HBO's series "pretty faithful to the book" but acknowledges choices — new scenes, breaking point of view to provide perspective — made to adapt "My Brilliant Friend" for TV without an over-reliance on exposition.

"So much of it is the inner psychology of the characters in the experience of the book, through the author's voice," she says. "How do you capture that in a visual medium? That's what we had to crack and I think we have with a lot of close-ups on the eyes of the girls, how they're taking in things emotionally and how they're processing emotionally."

In Their Own Words

HBO's adaptation of Elena Ferrante's novels will be done in Italian.