To say that drama is a must-have TV genre is an understatement. Scripted shows are driving prime-time schedules around the world like never before. Hit dramas such as HBO's Game of Thrones, Netflix's House of Cards and AMC's The Walking Dead bring a buzz unmatched by any other type of show.

Even for channels that aren't typically identified by their dramas, high-quality shows can help enhance their reputations. "Drama is important for viewers and for the reputation of a broadcaster," explains Steve November, the director of drama at ITV, a channel whose fortunes were transformed by the success of English-country-house saga Downton Abbey. "Everyone is looking for signature shows that are channel defining."

Across the Atlantic, Sharon Tal Yguado, the executive VP of scripted entertainment at FOX International Channels (FIC) and head of FOX International Studios, agrees that in the digital era, the right kind of drama is a powerful tool for entertainment platforms.

"It is getting harder and harder to have appointment-to-view TV when people watch on catch-up or like to binge-watch on box sets," notes Tal Yguado, whose group co-financed The Walking Dead and The Bridge. "For shows like The Walking Dead and Game of Thrones, you can still find strong appointment viewing," she continues. "People feel the urgency to watch them when they air."

"Drama is something that brands a channel better than anything else," insists Piers Wenger, the head of drama at Britain's Channel 4, which recently achieved its highest-rated new drama in 20 years with Humans, a sci-fi show co-produced with U.S. cable channel AMC. "Drama gives the audience a depth of experience and creates an emotional attachment to a channel that no other genre can," elaborates Wenger.

Of course, TV drama is expensive to make. Premium sports rights aside, it is the most expensive of any TV genre.

**BIG SPENDERS**

Encouragingly, commissioners in the U.S., the U.K. and mainland Europe seem to have the money to keep levels of investment high—or are prepared to form partnerships if they don't.

Precise figures are difficult to nail down. "Our budgets are definitely up," says Josefine Tengbland at Sweden's biggest commercial station, TV4. "We didn't have a lot of drama before. It is becoming increasingly important for us."

Tengbland was appointed to the newly created post of head of drama at the Scandinavian broadcaster a year ago. One of her first commissions was the noir crime thriller Modus, an eight-part series adapted by Emmy Award-winning Danish writers Mai Brostrøm and Peter Thorshoe from the novel Fear Not, penned by Norwegian crime author Anne Holt. The budget is $8.6 million. "We've put in around half the money," explains
Tengblad. Modus is produced by Miso Film, in collaboration with TV4 and Germany’s Nadcon, with FremantleMedia International handling distribution.

BUILDING A BUDGET
In Britain, ITV’s November indicates that the channel’s drama spend is getting bigger. “It is very difficult for me to be specific about budgets,” he says. “Next year there will be more drama in the schedules, which roughly equates to a slightly higher investment.”

The BBC is a big player in drama. The department’s new controller of drama commissioning, Polly Hill, is estimated to have inherited a budget of around £200 million (£308 million) a year. This may be affected by cuts as the British government forces another round of economics on the world’s best-known public-service broadcaster.

“We continue to look for a broad range of drama and creatively will be writer-led,” says Hill, sidestepping a question regarding budgets.

Likewise, Sky’s head of drama, Anne Mensah, declines to provide financial details. But with Sky U.K. having bought Sky Deutschland and Sky Italia, there are economies of scale to be gained from the new pan-European structure.

“Sky is making more drama than it’s ever made,” she says. “It’s not about the money; we are trying to make great shows. We are not making shows for slots. I don’t have to fill spaces in the schedule just for the sake of it. We back great, original drama because that’s what our customers want and expect from us.”

Channel 4’s Wenger says the broadcaster’s drama budget is heading north. “Drama budgets were up in 2015 against 2014, and next year will be the highest ever.”

FIC’s Tal Yguado says her budgets are static. “We try to be cost-efficient while keeping the quality high.”

At Swedish public-service broadcaster SVT, Christian Wikander, head of drama, says that his budget remains fixed at around $35 million a year.

What are these commissioners investing in? Tal Yguado wants “character-driven shows” that provide “universal appeal.” She emphasizes, “I want thrilling plots, but they’ve got to be character-driven.”

She reckons the shine is starting to wear thin on supernatural and period dramas. “I am looking beyond horror, supernatural and sci-fi, which are showing signs of increasing fatigue. I’d say the same is true for period, but the vogue for period might last a little longer. There have been a lot of supernatural shows. The genre’s become exhausted.”

What, then, is the next big thing? “What is missing from TV? I don’t want to tell you too much about my development slate, but I’m working on some really wacky ideas,” she says.

If that all sounds intriguing, for now Tal Yguado is betting big on Outcast, created by Robert Kirkman of The Walking Dead fame. She claims it turns “the exorcism genre on its head.”

MINDING THE MIX
ITV’s November acknowledges that horror is hot. “We want to have a variety of drama genres on ITV,” he says. “We don’t want to have too much of any one thing. No one is more excited by a crime drama than us, but we are moving beyond crime into horror—not horror-horror, but very dark, psychological thrillers.” One example is Mammoth Screen’s three-part police drama Black Work.

This all sounds very different from the genteel, upstairs-downstairs world of Downton Abbey. The sixth and final season of the program broadcasts in the U.K. this fall. “We don’t necessarily replace Downton with another period drama,” says November. “We might do something very different.”

Even so, ITV is lining up several new costume pieces. These include an eight-part show focusing on Britain’s Queen Victoria, made by Mammoth Screen, which scored a U.K. hit with the revival of Poldark on BBC One. Also upcoming is

Channel 4 has renewed Paul Abbott’s No Offence, a comedic cop drama, for a second season.
Jericho, created by *Sherlock* and *Doctor Who* writer Steve Thompson. The eight-episode program is set in a late 19th-century industrial shantytown in Northern England.

Over at Channel 4, drama that wrings stories from contemporary themes are in demand. An exception was *Indian Summers*, set in the early 1930s as the British clung to power in the Indian sub-continent, which was ordered for a second run.

"For us it is not so much about genre as it is about topicality and telling stories with strong, contemporary themes," explains Wenger. "Humans didn't come about because we desperately wanted to make a sci-fi show. It was because the writers had an interesting take on artificial intelligence. They wanted to make a piece that wasn't a Marvel-type supernatural or sci-fi piece, but one that was grounded in ordinary life. That is how we start. We look for big preoccupations of our audience."

HYPING UP HYBRIDS

At Sky, it appears that no genre is off limits. "I'll look at pretty much everything," reveals Mensah. "What we do tends toward contemporary, but then we do something like *Penny Dreadful* or a hybrid crime-occult series set in the 19th century. We tend to follow passions rather than trends."

Sky Atlantic's recent heavily marketed *Fortitude* began as a crime but morphed into horror. One of Mensah's latest shows, *The Last Panthers*, co-produced with CANAL+, is a crime show recounting the story of a gang of jewel thieves. The BBC's Hill says she needs modern tales. "We are always looking for a show that can offer our audience something new and original in any genre. However, we are always looking for more contemporary drama," she says.

In Sweden, crime evidently pays. TV4’s Tengblad is keen to broaden her palette. "We do a lot of crime, but we try to push the genre all the time," she says.

An example is *Torpederna*, a comedy-drama broadcast last November. The central character is an ex-convict who tries to go straight and live the suburban life but fails. Costume drama is on Tengblad's radar too.

"Last year we did a period crime, Agatha Christie-style drama set in the 1950s that was based on Maria Lang’s stories," Tengblad adds. "It was our first period drama in a long time and was a big hit in Sweden."

NEW PERSPECTIVES

The new series *Modus* “is not a traditional thriller,” Tengblad continues. "We meet the killer at the start. It is not a whodunit; it is a why-he-did-it. We are not doing any romantic or supernatural shows at the moment, but it is only a matter of time before we do something in those genres."

At SVT, Wiklander is seeking ten-part, one-hour shows for two peak-time slots on SVT: the Sunday-evening crime slot and a Monday-evening slot reserved for feel-good drama.

"Beyond that, we do three- to four-part miniseries," he explains. "For these, it could be any genre, including crime or classical serials."

Recent commissions have included the second season of the dysfunctional family drama *Thicker Than Water*, produced by Nice Drama with co-production partners YLE and FilmPool Nord, and the International Emmy-nominated *30 Degrees in February*. There's also *Delhi's Most Beautiful Hands*, based on the novel by Mikael Bergstrand, and *The Most Forbidden*.

Producing drama is a time-consuming process. As viewers' expectations continue to rise, production timeline are becoming longer still.
“We used to do a show in a year; now it’s moving toward two years,” says Wikander. “The costs are so high we need to have enough time to ensure our shows are of the highest quality. There are always problems. These dramas cost around SEK 8 million to SEK 10 million ($920,000 to $1.2 million) an hour. Five years ago it was SEK 7 million to SEK 9 million ($850,000 to $1 million) an hour.”

“Time frames are very variable,” adds ITV’s November. “The minimum is 12 months from pitch to screen.”

The Last Panthers took around three years to make; it debuts on Sky Atlantic in the U.K., Ireland and Germany and in ‘Canal+ in France this fall.

“It takes as long as it takes,” says Sky’s Mersah. “I wouldn’t move fast for the sake of it.”

“The cycle can take two to three and occasionally five years,” says FIC’s Tal Yguado.

Explains BBC’s Hill, “The commissioning time frame differs on each show, depending on how long the development process takes, how long the shoot is and when the channel needs it. We can commission anywhere from 12 to 18 months ahead.”

IT TAKES TWO

A show involving multiple co-producers may take several years to get off the ground. Increasingly, however, co-production is central to a commissioner’s strategy.

“We have to start with the writer and the creative idea and ambition, as that is what we commission. So co-pros don’t influence the decision to make a drama,” Hill observes. “However, they can be vital in bringing to screen those ideas that require substantially more investment than our license fee.”

ITV’s November knows that partnerships are often essential in today’s bottom-line obsessed culture. “Co-production used to be a dirty word. It is the way of the world now that we are very interested in co-production. That’s how you get bigger talent—writers, directors, actors—and bigger stories.”

In the more hard-nosed U.S. market, broadcasters are keen to collaborate with British and other European partners.

“It is always helpful to increase volume at a great price,” observes Tal Yguado. “There is great content coming from the U.K. and other markets.”

At SVT, more than 80 percent of the drama Wikander greenlights is co-produced. “It’s hard to raise co-production funds outside Scandinavia, but we work with partners in the U.K., France, Germany and the U.S.,” he explains. “We need international co-production money to be able to make our core budget go further.”

His commercial rival in Sweden is in the same boat. “I have to do co-productions,” says TV4’s Tengblad. “We can’t put up that kind of money.”

With a global network of FOX-branded channels to provide content for, Tal Yguado knows her approach is different from that of her British peers.

“At FIC’s studios, the objective is to make two to three tentpole shows a year that are aimed at both the U.S. and international markets,” she stresses. Tal Yguado highlights the benefits of scale. “My experience on the international channels side taught me a lot about the global appeal of shows. I have a good sense of what works well and where. Regardless, we work closely with our local channels and sales arm, who keep us updated about specific trends and needs.”

Both ITV and the BBC have in-house distribution businesses, but November and Hill insist their priority is to commission with local audiences in mind, rather than the requirements of ITV Studios Global Entertainment or BBC Worldwide.

“I always look for the best show, regardless of where it comes from,” November says. “My priority is the U.K. broadcast audience. That’s where my editorial values lie. That’s how we get Downton Abbey, Broadchurch and Scott & Bailey— all produced outside of the ITV Studios network.”

Adds Hill, “We don’t commission shows on the basis of an international appeal, but on the quality and originality of the drama. We are looking for the most original British drama to offer our British audience, and we see that great drama has international appeal and finds an international audience.”

Indeed, from Poldark and Wolf Hall to Bron to Les Revenants, it’s clear that many dramas commissioned for local audiences across Europe are resonating with viewers around the world.