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How Aldous Huxley's novel was reworked for Peacock **6**

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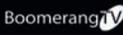
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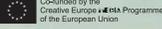
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Packing it up

Scripted seasons have been getting shorter over recent years and Covid-19's impact on production looks to only be accelerating this trend, with some producers cutting episode counts to ensure delivery. Stephen Arnell explores what the longer-term implications might be

Earlier this summer it was revealed that the second season of BBC and HBO drama *His Dark Materials* was still on track to air in 2020, despite the travails of Covid-19.

The effects of the pandemic on production, however, meant the show would only consist of seven, rather than the initially planned eight, instalments.

The abandoned episode was a standalone focusing on James McAvoy's character of Lord Asriel, which appears to mean the overall narrative of the second season is largely unaffected.

Jane Tranter, executive producer at the show's producer, Bad Wolf, assured potential viewers that "essentially, our adaptation of *The Subtle Knife* has been completed."

For the scripted business, which is still reeling from the effect of lockdowns on filming, it is however an example of how some producers are adapting to the challenges to get their shows onto screen in a hugely unpredictable world.

The potential for quick-turnaround scripted content, such as the UK's *Staged* (above), has been recognised internationally

Costs, cuts & commissions

"We're not cutting back episodes on dramas unnecessarily," says Gabriel Silver, senior commissioning editor for Sky Drama, but the approach is changing. "One thing that Covid-19 has made us do is think about making editorial adjustments to better protect against a postponement or abandonment of filming again due to another spike.

"So, although the ambition going into production is for a 10-part series, could you get out at episode seven or eight or nine if you had to? That means you can still deliver a satisfying show for the audience, but also help to safeguard against possible disruption to filming.

"A reduced episode count also provides a makeweight against the added cost of protecting cast and crew (and the wider public) against Covid."

Over in India, producer Sunder Aaron of Locomotive Films says the structure of scripted shows in his part of the world has not changed dramatically

as a result of the pandemic. “Over the past few months in India, there hasn’t been any Covid-related curtailing of series/projects that I have noticed. For my projects, we are still discussing 10 episodes that are going into development.

“In India, when it comes to streaming, the issue isn’t so much a Covid-related impact, but really about making sure that the creators and producers are capable of telling a story in a compelling fashion that can have a proper run. Many Indian series have fewer than 10 episodes, but that pre-dated Covid and really was the result of the producers not yet being ready to tell longer stories.

“Indian TV is mostly populated with long-running series that air on a daily basis (similar to telenovelas). Of course, production ceased because of the pandemic, and is only now getting back on track. However, I doubt very much whether the conventions of Indian television serials will be changed going forward.”

Elsewhere, the pandemic and the reaction to the death of George Floyd in the US has in some ways stimulated scripted production and provided content-hungry broadcasters with a slew of quick turnaround series transmitted over recent months.

In the US, Freeform debuted the romantic comedy series *Love In The Time Of Corona*, while *Isolation Stories* and *Unsaid Stories* for ITV, along with the BBC’s *Talking Heads* and *Staged*, highlighted the potential in the UK, with the latter selling internationally. But with the exception of *Talking Heads*, it’s difficult to see these shows having much of an afterlife, if and when the pandemic hopefully ends. People may well not want to be reminded of the dreary months of lockdown.

Consumption & quality

It remains to be seen how the pandemic will continue to impact the drama pipeline over the coming year, but for viewers around the world, any reduction of episodes isn’t necessarily unwelcome. Network shows have regularly been accused of stretching their stories thin, while embracing some SVOD serial dramas can prove to be a daunting prospect when you know that a 10 or 15-episode series can often contain a fair amount of filler to work through.

These usually include flashbacks when the early formative years of characters are explored; others where relatively minor cast members are brought into focus and ‘bottle’ episodes, where the action is confined to one set, with a small number of regular players.

However, it’s worth noting that the trend for shorter seasons did not start with Covid-19. Dave Clarke, head of scripted & non-scripted acquisitions at

“Although the ambition is for a 10-part series, could you get out at episode seven?”

Gabriel Silver,
Sky Drama



NENT Studios UK, says that while there may be some short-term impact on specific shows directly affected by lockdowns mid-shoot,” the downward trend was already well underway.

“This has been down in part to budgetary pressure – why don’t we make more, shorter shows – as well as the impact of SVOD commissioning on the development process,” he says.

“Distributors have traditionally shied away from four-parters, for example. Most broadcasters around the world, and especially in the US where the biggest rewards tend to be earned, have always found six to be too few, so dropping to four can be tough.”

Slimming process

However, in a bid to make commissioning budgets go further, shorter runs – including four-parters – are becoming increasingly popular. “The simple maths of it allows you to launch more projects, try more things, potentially take more risks, and have a more regular and varied dialogue with your viewers,” Clarke says.

“Obviously, the same is true of any reduction in series length, regardless of your starting point. There are downsides of course, such as not keeping viewers in your channel eco-system as long as you would otherwise, but perhaps the pros outweigh the cons.”

And shorter seasons can of course work – Clarke points to NENT Studios UK’s four-parter *The Cry*. “The editorial was so tight and so engaging that buyers around the world saw past the format and concentrated on the quality of the storytelling, with most picking it up even before the stellar viewing figures on BBC One.”

But the growth of SVODs has also meant that material no longer has to be stretched to breaking point, as has been the case with some linear networks that have a necessity to fill inflexible schedules. “If streaming has done anything,” adds Clarke, “it has been responsible for removing a few of the formatting shackles that come with a linear schedule. If the best version of an SVOD series is seven eps – so be it.”

That naturally has commercial implications, including the loss of economies of scale which can be achieved on longer runs. In terms of network schedules, gaps will have to be filled, but for the non-linear SVOD, it seems likely to escape relatively unscathed if episode losses are not too drastic.

Shorter seasons will continue to have an effect on freelance creatives, producers and writers however, many of whom are already facing a perilous time. An uptick in the number of shows may, however, mean they are freed up for new projects if global economies bounce back. **TBI**



Building an American Utopia

Amazon Prime's *Utopia* might be a remake of the eponymous UK drama, but as producer Sharon Levy tells Mark Layton, it's quite a different type of show

While some scripted TV execs might have been tempted to hog the glory for getting John Cusack onboard his first drama series role, Sharon Levy is giving credit where credit is due.

The Hollywood actor made his small screen bow on conspiracy thriller *Utopia*, which launched on Amazon Prime Video in the US in September, having been reworked from the UK original.

His casting on the show was all down to creator and showrunner Gillian Flynn, says Levy, president of unscripted and scripted programming at Endemol Shine North America (ESNA), who is attached as a producer on the series.

"This is the first time he has ever done a television series, so it's a massive coup, but I think it's all about the strength of the character and the strength of Gillian's vision, and her determination to get whatever she wanted."

Utopia – a co-production by ESNA, UK-based Kudos (producers of the UK original) and Amazon Studios, is a darkly comic nine-part series with some marquee names both in front of and behind the camera. *Gone Girl* and *Sharp Objects* author Flynn is running the show, while Cusack numbers among a cast that also includes *The Office*'s Rainn Wilson and Sasha Lane, the breakout star of 2016 feature *American Honey*.

Levy says that Flynn's determination was just as evident when it came to bringing Lane, who plays the character Jessica Hyde, onboard. "Every time she talked about Jessica Hyde, there was always an image of Sasha, even way back. She was Jessica Hyde, Gillian insisted. She's a very determined showrunner."

Shared DNA

The series, as Levy puts it, follows a group of "unlikely heroes who believe that the secrets to the world's unfeeling" are hidden inside the pages of a comic book. And when the somewhat geeky gang find themselves caught up in a deadly conspiracy, it seems they might be right after all.

Utopia is a remake of Kudos' UK series of the same name that aired on Channel 4 in 2013, though Levy says this adaptation will be far from an identical experience for existing fans.

"There are of course characters and elements from the original, but Gillian really had a vision to make it her own and you will see that it does depart. It's a different tone. Gillian's work is always laced with a lot of dark humour and I do think they share that in the DNA, but she made it very much her own."

The remake has been in development since as far back as 2015, with Flynn and David Fincher, who directed the theatrical version of her novel *Gone Girl*, originally attached to deliver a series for HBO. When that fell through, the project went into limbo, until Endemol took *Utopia* back to market.

"When I got to Endemol three years ago, I was so lucky that on my desk were these fantastic scripts by Gillian. And it was 'Oh, what is this gift I have walked into?'" enthuses Levy.

"It was a moment in time where, there were a lot of places, a lot of new content distributors that were either just getting on the scene or hadn't really been that established and we said this is such a fresh show, this is such a unique idea with such amazing talent, let's take it back out.

"When we pitched it to Amazon they immediately understood it, they immediately got it and thus began our relationship. I think we're very lucky. Waiting is always terrible, but sometimes patience does pay off."

"This is the first time that John Cusack has ever done a television series, so it's a massive coup"

Sharon Levy



Comic book credentials

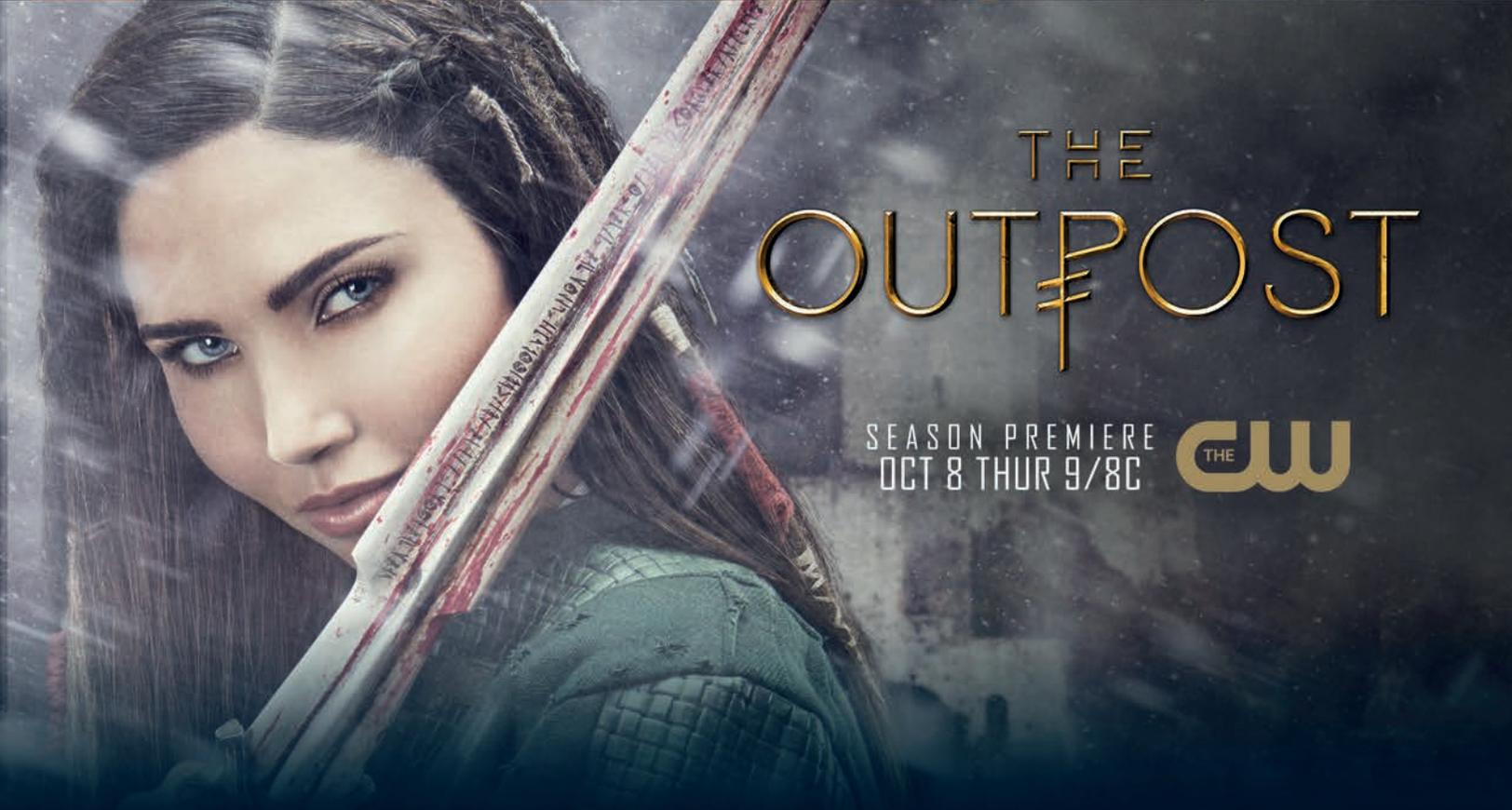
Levy adds that working on *Utopia* was a pleasure for a number of reasons: "I am a huge comic book nerd, a huge genre fan. So to get to be a part of a project that, for all my Comic-Con-going, to see those characters become heroes and be celebrated, it's super fun."

She also cites the "great collaborative process" and working with Flynn, who she describes as one of her favourite authors, and laughs as she adds: "The cherry on the top for me is, as a child of the 80s; oh my god, it's John Cusack, right? As a fan-girl moment, that was a big deal." **TBI**

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Script to Screen: Brave New World



US showrunner David Wiener tells Mark Layton how he approached updating the 'prescient' vision of Aldous Huxley for Peacock's adaptation of *Brave New World*

Aldous Huxley's seminal 1932 science fiction novel *Brave New World* is knocking on 90 years old now, but many would argue that its themes have never felt so relevant.

David Wiener, showrunner on this year's TV adaptation of the story for NBCUniversal's nascent streaming platform Peacock, is among them. "What's remarkable about the book is that it's one of those rare works in literature that actually becomes, at least thematically, more resonant and more relevant over time," he says.

At the heart of the story is the notion of a society that is so consumed by the superficial that it is blinded to its loss of liberty. It's not a hard sell to find parallels in the real world today.

"It's a cautionary tale on some level, right?" says Wiener. "I think Huxley was very tuned into humanity's capacity to use technology to alleviate our anxiety and what he feared most is that we would become so sexually stimulated, so concerned with the shallow aspects of our society, so numbed by pharmacology, that we wouldn't consider history, we wouldn't look inside ourselves in an uncomfortable way, we wouldn't look at systems around us in an uncomfortable way, and all of that obviously feels extremely relevant today."

Act One - Updating the future

Set in the futuristic city of New London, *Brave New World* depicts a utopian society that has managed to achieve peace and stability through the prohibition of concepts such as privacy, family and monogamy. Its citizens are each assigned to a social class at birth and kept placid through the widespread use of a happiness-producing drug called soma, alongside sporting and social events and communal sexual encounters.

But things start to change when Bernard Marx (Harry Lloyd) and Lenina Crowne (Jessica Brown Findlay) begin to question their society's mantra of 'everyone belongs to everyone else'.

Meanwhile, outside the walls of this supposed paradise is The Savage Lands, a last vestige of the way humanity used to live, turned into an amusement park for the likes of those from New London. Here, John 'the Savage' (Alden Ehrenreich) is reluctantly pushed to join a revolutionary uprising that brings these two very different worlds crashing together.

The series was produced by Amblin Television and Universal Content Productions and had been in development for several years before Wiener was brought on to the project. At first enlisted to rework the draft written by Grant Morrison and Brian Taylor,



Lenina Crowne (Jessica Brown Findlay, above) was given a greater narrative arc in the series than the original novel, while the look of New London (below) was carefully designed



Wiener decided that what the story needed, more than a direct adaptation, was a reimagining.

“I said, look, I think actually this show could really be reimagined, that there’s a way to take Huxley’s work and his ideas and pass it through the filter of our culture, our time, our notions of technology and make a show that was timely and yet timeless, because it is based on these really enduring themes.”

Wiener pitched Amblin and then the studio, which responded to his “substantially different” take on the story. Heading into a mini room with a writing team, they emerged with “the majority” of the scripts.

Act Two – Problematic prose

While Huxley’s novel is highly regarded as a work of literature, it has not aged well in some respects, and Wiener says that changes were clearly necessary.

“The book was written in 1932; it is problematic, particularly with concern to how it deals with ideas of gender and race,” he explains. “There are a lot of things that viewed through our current lens are really difficult to put on television in a way that people might consider faithful [to the novel].”

But more than that, Wiener says that the story is also difficult to adapt from a narrative standpoint. “The characters in Huxley’s book are in some sense vessels for philosophical ideas versus what they have to be in a narrative TV show, which is characters with emotional needs. It became necessary to investigate what the deeper spaces of these characters are and it’s something that the book doesn’t always concern itself with.”

One notable example where Wiener sought to expand upon the book was with the character of Lenina Crowne, whose literary counterpart Wiener describes as “kind of vapid and concerned with her liaisons with men” and by the end of the book is “really unchanged by most of the events of the novel.”

“That was a huge opportunity for us, to think about who is this character, who is in a really unique position,” says Wiener. “I thought she could be our

lens into the story, she could be the center of our story and I’d argue that in the show, unlike the novel, she is the character that probably changes the most.”

One of the reasons Huxley’s book is so regularly name-checked is that the author foresaw trends and innovations years before they actually arrived. But with 88 years since publication, a lot has changed in the world of technology and Wiener knew that had to be reflected on the screen, including the addition of Indra, the AI that keeps the citizens of New London connected at all times – not unlike social media.

“Huxley was so prescient and had such an incredible mind, he predicted everything from in-vitro fertilisation to oral contraception. Of course, the one thing that he couldn’t anticipate is the advent of the computer.”

Wiener suggests that, if Huxley had more time, he “certainly” would have predicted the rise of social media. “Because it’s such a natural extension of the ideas of the book; how it would be branded as connection without really being connected.”

Act Three – Everything in its right place

When it came to creating the look of this new world, Wiener and the team set out to ensure that the city of New London made sense and to avoid the ubiquitous grand but ill-defined sci-fi worlds seen elsewhere.

“We wanted to make sure that the city reflected the dogma of New London; this idea that stability was the most important thing, but also a city which reflected the necessity of the social body constantly being forced into proximity and a place where privacy doesn’t exist.

“So there’s a lot of glass, there are a lot of concourses which feed into public spaces where people can go to see and be seen. It was important from early on that if we’re going to build this city then it was really necessary that everything had a function to it and that the shape of the city itself would have a story and a reason.”

When it came to *The Savage Lands*, Wiener says that they sought to tell a different story through the visuals that felt like “a future of the past” including the remnants of a 21st century America mixed with vestiges of the 22nd century.

Wiener describes the whole experience of working on *Brave New World* as an “amazing adventure”. It’s a world that he is clearly keen to revisit, telling TBI at the time of writing that he had just concluded a mini room for a second season that he was about to pitch.

The finale left the heroes “in a place of fracture” and Wiener reveals that if the show does get picked up for a second season it “would be very much about having those stories converge again and why.” **TBI**



Bridging the gap

Serialised drama has soared in popularity over recent years but as the number of shows on offer continues to multiply, are audiences getting tired of long-term commitment? Nick Edwards reports

Long-running, immersive TV series have come to define our drama consumption over recent history. First, there were the early pioneering shows such as *Hill Street Blues* and *E.R.*, where longer storylines and character arcs were first introduced, then classic series including *The Sopranos* or *Mad Men*, and now we have ‘peak’ TV and the current streaming era.

Much has been made of these shows, which have been widely celebrated for offering the public something different to what was once a staple of ‘episodic’ TV drama that filled the primetime slots on linear public service broadcasters or their commercial rivals for as long as anyone can remember.

The shift away from this type of storytelling to the serialised style has long been considered a boon for writers, producers and directors, who can develop characters and storylines over many episodes and

ITV’s *Midsomer Murders* is a textbook example of episodic storytelling

seasons. This is in contrast to what is seen by some as the creative straight-jacket of the ‘old-school’ style of TV storytelling, with storylines neatly wrapped up each week, a clear-cut morality eschewed, and where the main characters age but do not necessarily evolve.

Midsomer Murders is a go-to example in the UK. A light hearted crime drama set in a fictional English county, based on Caroline Graham’s Chief Inspector Barnaby book series and adapted for television originally by Anthony Horowitz, the show is hugely popular – airing on the UK’s ITV since 1997 and sold to over 200 countries.

Midsomer’s run of well over 20 seasons is impressive but Germany’s procedural, the ARD-produced *Tatort*, has been running continuously since 1970 and still achieves audience figures in the millions. In the US, Dick Wolf’s *Law And Order* epitomises the North American version of the episodic format, while

The Rookie is a more recent example. When done well, such shows deliver high audience figures, large advertising revenues and can be sold all around the world, not to mention air as repeats in daytime slots, with their inoffensive content not troubling pre-watershed rules.

Serial analysis

Despite the amount of media coverage that serialised drama gets today, Ampere Analysis's Guy Bisson points out that his company's data "suggests that across the TV market as a whole, there are still plenty of episodic shows making the rounds and airing."

However, the extent to which serialised storytelling is now established within popular culture – especially in comparison to its elder sibling – has created some challenges. "It is a common complaint from clients with regular 'detective slots' that the market went through a shortage of detective procedurals while being overly focused on the serialised drama boom," says Stephen Driscoll, EVP for EMEA at All3Media, which distributes titles that range from *Fleabag* to the aforementioned *Midsomer Murders*.

"I sense a fatigue of long-running series," adds Nicola Söderlund, managing partner at CJ ENM-owned Swedish distributor Echo Rights, which sells Viaplay's *Conspiracy Of Silence* and *Love Me*. Audiences who have enjoyed the longer form model of storytelling for so long are now changing their consumption habits. HBO duo *I Know This Much Is True* and *Chernobyl* – the latter produced in collaboration with Sky – exemplify the trend, with others such as Showtime's *Escape At Dannemora* and Netflix's *When They See Us*, highlighting how mini-series have become as popular and talked about as the longer serialised form. The UK's *Fleabag* and the BBC's *Normal People*, though multi-episode, are only around six hours of screen time per season, yet have become 'must-see' TV in the way that novelistic classics such as *The Wire* or *Mad Men* once were.

Impatience & investment

Current shows that epitomise the high-end serialised model such as HBO's *Succession* have been widely praised yet criticised by some viewers who get impatient having to watch three or four episodes of exposition in order to experience one or two episodes of 'greatness', before it's all over and the following season's storylines are set up. And if, at the end of a first season, there's no resolution, viewers can be left unsatisfied. "It's quite an investment of peoples' time," says Söderlund.



Fremantle's real-life drama *Salisbury Poisonings* is a self-contained mini-series

As more new players enter the market, that pressure on time becomes a major challenge – as does the necessity to create stand-out series that create the buzz required to attract subscribers. Such a focus on shows that push artistic boundaries to achieve this has led some to believe there is a certain attitude in some areas of the creative community. "There can be a danger of people in this industry producing shows for their friends, or they want to do a cool show for a cool commissioner," says Söderlund. "Sometimes they forget the mainstream viewer."

There is also perhaps an assumption that serialised drama is a 'writers' medium', which insinuates that writing episodic shows is less of a craft. But this is not the case, as Marc Lorber, SVP of international co-productions & acquisitions at Lionsgate, points out. "Good writing is good writing, it's just a different form of the same genre."

Indeed, episodic shows present their own challenges. "If you write in an episodic style it's set in a confined area, around a single central character, like the detective in *Midsomer Murders*, or in a single arena, like the hospital in *Grey's Anatomy*. In a way, creatively, it's more difficult. You need a new plot for every episode, you have to introduce new characters, make it exciting enough for viewers to stay for the whole episode and also have the resolution," says Söderlund.

Fremantle recently partnered with 87 Films, whose creative team produced many episodes of *Silent Witness*, one of the BBC's most successful primetime episodic series of all time. Christian Vesper, the production group's creative director, points out that episodic's 'lean back' veneer often hides what goes on under the bonnet. "It's harder to get right than you would expect," he says. "It takes a very disciplined type of storytelling."

"There can be a danger of people in this industry producing shows for their friends, or they want to do a cool show for a cool commissioner. Sometimes they forget the mainstream viewer"

Nicola Söderlund,
Echo Rights



Pandemic push

As in many areas of life, Covid-19 has sped up trends that were already taking place. “History tell us so much,” says Lorber. “In wars, pandemics, depressions – what kind of books, radio and TV were being listened to? A mass group of the audience returns to things that are comfortable, enjoyable and entertaining.” So in today’s exceedingly uncertain world, it makes sense that “viewers may be thinking they’re working longer and harder, and actually don’t want to watch three or four hours. They just want to watch a one hour [drama],” suggests Lorber.

Long-form storytelling on TV is also famously associated with anti-heroes, dark subject matter and

All3Media’s *Van Der Valk* is a hybrid series that is comprised of ‘multi-part’ events rather than the classic multi-episode model



the darker side of humanity, which may further affect demand as viewers look for the familiar. Supporting this theory is the number of spin-offs and remakes on the cards: NBC is producing *Law And Order: Organized Crime*, for example, while Lionsgate-owned Starz is producing *Power Book II: Ghost*, which continues where its parent show *Power* left off.

Yet the episodic show can remain challenging and finding a contemporary edge that will appeal to younger audiences is vital. Classic British shows such as *Midsomer Murders*, *Vera*, *Grantchester* and *Inspector Morse* all feature main characters in their 50s and take place in rural or semi-rural environments and thus tend to skew to older, often retired audiences. For channels and networks looking to reach out to younger city dwellers, this is a problem.

One attempt from the UK aiming to address this is Sky One’s *Bulletproof*, starring the well-known actor and director of *Kidulthood* Noel Clarke and star of *Top Boy* and former So Solid Crew rapper, Ashley Walters. The show, which is set to return for a third season, follows two London detectives and best friends as they investigate some of the country’s most dangerous criminals. Perhaps not coincidentally, Nick Love, the show’s co-creator and writer, previously worked on a movie remake of the 1970s cop show *The Sweeney*, considered to be one of the UK’s greatest episodic TV series of all time.

There are also an increasing number of hybrid shows. All3Media’s production *Van Der Valk* is based on the Amsterdam-set British episodic that ran from the 1970s until the early 1990s and features Marc Warren taking on Barry Foster’s role.

But, like season one, the second season (now on hold until 2021, due to the impact of Covid-19) is a three-part ‘event’ show, as opposed to the classic multi-episode model.

Over in the Nordics, *Maria Wern* – a female-led cop show – is in contrast to famous ‘slow-burn’ Nordic Noir. Though it features character arcs over the season, each individual episode (or two-parter) consists of a self-contained story – a recipe that has proved successful for Ecco Rights across Europe. Then there are shows such as Fremantle’s *Salisbury Poisonings*, again a self-contained mini-series based on real life events, which brought immersive and serious drama to a UK primetime slot and achieved over 10 million viewings in consolidated figures.

Such a variety of shows highlight how primetime episodic TV is evolving, supporting the theory that the future will be more “blended,” says Fremantle’s Vesper. “Even the most popular and entertaining shows have ambition to tell bigger stories. It’s not as easy to distinguish them as it used to be.” **TBI**

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Trickster

“**T**rickster stands out because it takes folk horror and the supernatural coming-of-age story and refocuses them through a distinctly Indigenous lens,” says Jennifer Kawaja of this Canadian series that is based on Eden Robinson’s unique novels, *Son Of A Trickster*.

They form the inspiration for co-creator and director Michelle Latimer, who exec produces with Kawaja on the series, which tracks Jared, an Indigenous teen living in a coastal town in Northern British Columbia who is struggling to keep his dysfunctional family above water. When he starts seeing strange things - talking ravens, doppelgängers, skin monsters - his already chaotic life is turned upside down.

“The supernatural coming-of-age story is always really relatable, but we think this story is particularly because of issues of colonisation, systemic racism and climate change,” Latimer tells TBI. “The use of genre

to explore those issues really resonates in shows like *Watchmen* and *Lovecraft Country*, and *Trickster* captures a distinctly Indigenous take on social horror.”

The drama’s family-focused storyline was also reflected in the cast, with two families featuring. Joel Oulette plays Jared, while his mother Laurie plays Crashpad’s mother and his brother Grayson served as stand-in and double throughout the shoot. “Then we have Crystle Lightning playing Maggie, and her real-life mother Georgina Lightning playing Maggie’s mother Sophia,” says Latimer. “Crystle’s son Keesik, who was only days old at the time Crystle auditioned for the role, also appears as the newborn Jared.”

For Kawaja, the show offers insights into a specific community but will also generate global appeal for viewers around the world because of its exploration of common experiences.

“The best thing about using genre to tell meaningful stories is that it gives a universally understood framework to explore very specific places, communities and problems,” Kawaja says. “And no matter where you come from, some things are universal experiences - like falling in love and becoming an adult. Audiences around the world love finding those commonalities in people who are otherwise very different from them, or leading much more fantastical lives. We think *Trickster* gives audiences all of that in spades.”

Trickster

Distributor: Abacus Media Rights

Producers: Sienna Films & Strel Films

Broadcaster(s): CBC (Canada)

Logline: Inspired by a world you’ve never seen before and based on the best-selling novel *Son Of A Trickster*, by Eden Robinson

Romulus

‘Epic’ tends to be rolled out fairly frequently during the launch of drama series but this show – exploring the formation of Rome – looks like it might just deserve the adjective.

Set on the banks of the River Tiber, producers recreated two entire medieval villages for filming, employed thousands of extras and required more than 700 stunt people. Hundreds of authentic weapons and costumes were also made, and – in a bid to recreate the period – actors spoke in archaic Latin.

The story itself, set in eighth century BC, follows three people whose fates are decided by the power of nature and the gods. The story tracks their lives as they learn to shape their own destinies and focuses on a ferocious but protective female figure who leads the formation of a new society. *The First King*’s Matteo Rovere is director, series creator and writer, alongside *Gomorra*’s Filippo Gravino and Guido Luculano (*Alaska*).

For Marco Chimenz, co-CEO at Cattleya, the biggest challenge followed the decision to shoot everything in real settings, often using natural locations such as woods and caves.

“We needed to allow all departments to confront the challenges of a period TV series without the comfort

of a studio, dealing with multiple daily organisational hurdles such as building trails to reach the sites where we were shooting, or securing and lighting caverns located several kilometres deep,” he tells TBI.

“Following our cinematic and television tradition (including on *Gomorra*), we dived into the real in order to represent it and reinvent it, a purpose that we believe is revealed on the screen.”

Despite its archaic roots, the show touches on familiar and timeless themes including brotherhood, betrayal, love and revenge, adds Greg Johnson, EVP of sales for EMEA and Americas at ITV Studios, which has already struck deals with HBO Europe and SBS in Australia. For Augustus Dulgaro, ITVS’ EVP of sales in Asia Pacific, it is those universal themes and the “exceptionally high standard” of production that sets it apart. “Romulus offers the much-needed adventure that many of us crave right now,” he adds.

Romulus

Distributor: ITV Studios

Producers: Cattleya

Broadcaster(s): Sky (Italy), HBO Europe, SBS

Logline: Imbued with history, myth and revolution, *Romulus* is a hyper-realistic, ambitious drama that meticulously reconstructs an epic tale of the genesis of Rome



Feudal

This Nova Scotia-set drama straddles numerous genres, incorporating the backdrop of financial hardship with small town intrigue and family secrets.

And as showrunner Sheri Elwood tells TBI, it doesn't really fit neatly into any traditional category. "It is a comedy, drama and crime story that explores the damage secrets can have on a family – an epic romp about generational dysfunction which is both relatable and, we hope, infinitely surprising."

The show revolves around the Finley-Cullens and stars Corrine Koslo (*Anne With An E*) and Peter MacNeill (*This Life*) as the heads of a family who are trying to work out which of their flawed children should take over their much-loved but ailing coastal business, The Moonshine.

"The theme of family is something everyone can relate to," Elwood continues. "It doesn't matter how old you get, when you return home, you revert to being a 12-year-old kid, still craving your parent's love and approval, hell-bent on continuing the dysfunction with your siblings and in the case of the Finley-Cullen's, being willing to fight for control of the family business. Yet while tensions may be high,

we'll see that no matter how insane things get, this family is worth fighting for."

Elwood says the show is anything but "your standard family drama" and as with many of this season's picks, it has come to market despite the challenges posed by Covid-19. Casting took place virtually, Elwood says, but the current climate means audiences are ripe for a show such as *Feudal*.

"The world is a raging dumpster fire right now and we could need a little escapism. Yet while *Feudal* is a fun, raucous show, it also speaks to a broader need: simpler, non-Covid times where our biggest problems were sleeping with a sibling's spouse and finding out your gentle, hippie parents just might be criminal masterminds."

Feudal

Distributor: eOne

Producers: Six Eleven Media, eOne

Broadcaster: CBC (Canada)

Logline: A raucous, one-hour drama that follows the Finley-Cullens, a dysfunctional clan of half-siblings battling for control of their ancestral business





Anna

This dystopian thriller is based on author Niccolò Ammaniti's book of the same name and is another notable addition to emerge from Italy's innovative scripted sector.

The story tracks a young girl who cares for her brother in a post-apocalyptic Sicily, where a virus wiped out all adults four years earlier and marks the second project for Ammaniti, who is working with Sky and Wildside for the second time following the 2018 success of *The Miracle*. Ammaniti is showrunner and director, and has written the show along with *The First King* scribe Francesca Manieri. Filming has taken place across Italy, with the series produced by Mario Gianani and Lorenzo Mieli with Lorenzo Gangarossa for Fremantle's Wildside.

"*Anna* could be considered a contemporary fairytale as it is set in a post-apocalyptic universe in which kids are asked to rebuild a new world," Wildside's CEO Gianani tells TBI. "We live in a modern world where we are all connected, but in *Anna* we are asked to go back to the basics of life, it's a fight for survival."

Production was delayed by the pandemic – something of a challenge for a show using numerous

Anna

Distributor: *Fremantle*

Producers: Wildside, Sky Italia, Arte France, Kwai, The New Life Company

Broadcaster: Sky (Italy)

Logline: In a world burnt-out by adults, the hope of a new birth lies in the hands of children

child actors, whose appearances tend to change quicker than their adult colleagues – but Gianani says script tweaks have made for a stronger series.

"The scenery, makeup and costumes that were used to recreate *Anna*'s world are also incredibly engaging, refreshing, very original and somehow eccentric," he adds, "they're really an absolute joy to witness," comments that are supported by Rebecca Dundon, VP of scripted content, international, at Fremantle, which sells the show.

"This distinct and vivid drama is brought to life by children living in a world without adults and the consequences that come from that," she says. "It is intriguing, playful and terrifying at the same time and it promises to keep viewers on the edge of their seats with the sheer scale of production."



Embezzlement

This remarkable seven-part crime thriller is from the producers of Netflix hit *Fauda* and is set to premiere in Israel next year. It tells the true story of Eti Alon, an employee at a family-owned bank who embezzled its clients' savings and the bank's entire capital to save her brother from his gambling debts.

The story picks up in 2002, when Alon quietly enters a police station to turn herself in and unravels to explore how the mother-of-two became embroiled in a crime that involved illicit casinos, local organized gangs and arms dealing.

The Hebrew-language show has been exhaustively researched, Yes Studios' MD Danna Stern tells TBI, with the recreation of locations, traditions and

situations to deliver an authentic reflection of the late 1990s through to the early 2000s.

"This series is about family," Stern adds, "and how much would you sacrifice for them. In this case a sister who gave up her own future and family to help her brother – though his extreme gambling habit was entirely his own doing."

The show has been created by Yotam Gendelman, who also directs and writes with Shira Port, with the series reflecting on both the crime itself but also the way the society of the time viewed women. "It is an edge-of-your-seat crime thriller and family drama that unveils the customs of a patriarchal Bukharian Jewish family and the importance given to sons over daughters," Stern says.

"The entire story broke after Eti Alon walked alone into a police station to confess her crimes – but only after the bank's coffers were completely emptied. She sat in the waiting room for eight hours before anyone came to get her statement. And then she was let go, because the police didn't believe a demure, boxed blonde, mother of two could be a criminal mastermind." **TBI**

Embezzlement

Distributor: Yes Studios

Producers: Movie Plus, Yes TV

Broadcaster(s): Yes TV (Israel)

Logline: The true story of a bank-teller who brought down a bank after embezzling \$100m to cover up her brother's gambling losses

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