

# TBI Television Business International Scripted

Package deal  
Will US model dominate? 2

Going underground  
Re-imagining *Germinal* 10

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# TBI Scripted October/November 2021



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# In pursuit of packaging



While packaging is common in the US, the practice is less known in Europe but its prevalence is beginning to become more widespread. Nick Edwards find out what this spells for the future of scripted TV in the region



**I**n its most traditional form, ‘packaging’ refers to the practise of approaching channels or streamers with an idea for a show that one or more well-known actors, and/or possibly a famous director or established screenwriter, are attached to.

The term has been in US headlines over recent years as a stand-off between writers and their agencies reached an impasse. In America, where almost 90% of the series produced are ‘packaged’ – and of those around 80% are done so by the larger talent agencies (Creative Artists Agency, William Morris Endeavor, United Talent Agency, and ICM Partners, often referred to as the big four) – writers felt working practises had evolved into a pandora’s box of conflicts of interest between them and those who were supposed to represent them.

The main issues stemmed from the fact that rather than fighting to increase writers earnings, those earnings had simply become one component of a negotiable ‘package’ (along with the other individual components directors, actors, and so on) to be sold to studios. Indeed, it may even have been in the interest of the agency to reduce writers rates in order to get the overall ‘package’ sold.

The process “has been prevalent for a number of years in Europe,” says Hannah Ladd, dramatic rights agent at the Madeleine Milburn Agency, “and it is likely to become more so as there are more TV production companies and drama series than ever vying for funding and distribution slots.”

### **Evolving agency involvement**

A recent example is *The Pursuit Of Love*, an adaptation of Nancy Mitford’s novel for the BBC that was written and directed by Emily Mortimer. She also stars in the series, alongside Lily James, Dominic West and Freddie Fox, all of whom are represented by the agency Tavistock Wood.

In France, the packaging trend is also emerging although at a more nascent stage. “It is true that agencies are starting to be a bit more upstream regarding packaging,” says Olivier Bibas, who is currently shooting *Django* for Canal+ and Sky Studios. “But this is a very slow trend,” he says. Another recent example however, *Infinity*, also for Canal+, is directed by Thierry Poiraud and written by Stéphane Pannetier, both of whom are with the agency, Quelle Belle Histoire.

While the practice can make for efficiencies, some argue that packaging can have a detrimental impact

*The Pursuit Of Love* was written and directed by lead actor Emily Mortimer, who is represented by the same agency as several of the show’s other main stars

on the industry. “A recent large concentration of ‘bankable’ talents in the hands of a few agents can lead to abuse of a dominant position,” says Sandra Ouasiss, executive producer at Elephant, talking from France’s Series Mania festival in September.

She says she has observed that “these agents have the power to impose castings on producers as well as high salaries, preventing sometimes the emergence of new talents and smaller competitors. The scarcity of bankable talents (authors, directors, actors) faced with a great demand for content will further increase the power of agents and their demand for remuneration.”

In America, the stakes are higher as the larger agencies have become more involved not only with the initial ‘packaging’ of projects for studios, but increasingly with content production, financing and distribution. In the UK, larger agencies now also represent above and below the line talent, while also developing and producing content in house or with partner outfits.

### Subtleties & sensitivities

The matter is certainly a sensitive one. The big agencies not normally known for their reticence were noticeably reluctant to come forward to discuss the matter for this article.

However, many of the most contentious issues are unique to America. Particularly, the practice of waiving traditional commission fees in exchange for a ‘packaging’ fee.

In this situation, the studio pays the agent directly rather than seeking a commission on behalf of their client. Agencies’ are also paid out of a show’s overall budget and profits. Normally agencies also get a better cut of the ‘back end’ profit than creators do. But as Ladd notes, “agencies in the US have been forced to divest stakes in their production outfits.”

“There are no such things as packaging fees in France,” adds Bibas. “Things are still very artisanal for now.” Yet the lines between agent, producer, distributor and studio are becoming increasingly blurred and the issue is of growing concern.

“In France we consider it up to the producer (who pays for the development) to put together the artistic team, according to his choices and those of the director and/or showrunner,” says Ouasiss, who was showcasing *Rebecca* (TF1’s remake of the UK show *Marcella*) in Lille. “The French system is centered on ‘le droit d’auteur’, inherited from ‘la nouvelle vague’ period when feature film directors used to write and direct their own movies.”

Berlin-based Donna Sharpe, the co-writer of *West Of Liberty* for ZDF in Germany and Sweden’s SVT, and Viaplay’s upcoming *TROM* (Viaplay/ ZDF-Arte), also points to a situation where the writers position has

### “How do you make a show stand out? Recognisable IP, directors and screenwriters with recent and notable track records, and name casting that moves the needle”

Mark Lorber,  
Lionsgate



actually been strengthened in Germany. Outlets have come to recognise that content that stands out from the crowd can only be achieved with a good writer at the heart of the process.

“It has become not uncommon to directly deal with the channel or streamer before producers become involved,” she says, “then a suitable or ‘preferred’ producer is invited on board. Something like that would never have happened five years ago.”

This highlights how global markets are less homogenous than they may at first appear. The question is most pronounced for shows that have large international audiences in their scope. For producers making such shows, “you’re probably trying to package elements to make it more attractive” says Marc Lober, SVP of international co-productions & acquisitions at Lionsgate.

These tend to be made exclusively in English or made with a majority in the English language. “They are not just being made by the English speaking countries, but also Israel, France, Germany and so on. How do you make that stand out?” asks Lorber.

“Recognisable IP, directors and screenwriters with recent and notable track records, and name casting that moves the needles. Elements that make a broadcaster or platform say, ‘We gotta take a look at that.’”



Rebecca exec producer  
Sandra Ouasiss warns that  
packaging can lead to the  
abuse of talent dominance

In this sense, the concept of ‘packaging’ is simply a response to the current circumstances of the market and the need for companies risking millions of dollars per episode to feel at least some degree of reassurance about their investment.

Packaging is one component, along with many ranging from finance to distribution, all of which need to be in place in order to get a show made. The issue, however, is the shift in power and the demand for talent. As one deflated exec summed up to TBI: “They all seem to want Nicole Kidman,” he says. **TBI**

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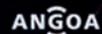
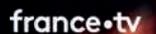
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# Striding out amidst the epic fantasy boom

With a slew of new epic fantasy shows on the horizon, *Britannia* exec James Richardson tells TBI's Mark Layton how his series has carved its own niche in the increasingly crowded genre

**A** high-end epic fantasy heyday may soon be upon us, with streamers and broadcasters investing heavily in the genre in the hopes of replicating HBO's *Game Of Thrones* success.

No shelf-bending fantasy book series has gone unread, it seems, in the hunt for the next global watercooler show. Netflix is currently building a franchise out of Andrzej Sapkowski's *The Witcher* series, while also acquiring the rights to both CS Lewis's *The Chronicles Of Narnia* and Brian Jacques' *Redwall* novels.

Amazon is soon to launch an adaptation of Robert Jordan's *The Wheel Of Time* series, while its show based on JRR Tolkien's *The Lord Of The Rings* looks set to become the most expensive TV production of all time.

HBO is meanwhile hoping that lightning will strike twice, beginning extensive spin-off plans for George RR Martin's *Game Of Thrones* with the upcoming *House Of The Dragon*.

Amid all this movement, Sky Original *Britannia* is hitting its stride with the third season of the epic drama, which is produced by Vertigo Films in association with Neal Street Productions, Sky Studios and MGM's cablenet Epix, having recently launched on the UK's Sky Atlantic and sibling streamer Now.

## Contenders for the fantasy throne

James Richardson, Vertigo co-founder and *Britannia* co-creator and executive producer, tells TBI he sees no cause for concern in the steadily crowding market; despite these literary heavyweights stepping into the ring, there is plenty of room to go around in the epic fantasy genre.

"There's lots of opportunity; they're so popular those shows and rightly so, they're brilliantly made," says Richardson. "*The Lord Of The Rings* is a masterpiece of a book and I'm sure they'll make a

**"We're creating our own little world. That's one of the greatest strengths and freedoms that we have"**

James Richardson,  
Vertigo Films



fantastic TV show out of it."

Still, it doesn't hurt to stand out from the crowd and Richardson's own show brings something rather different to the table than traditional swords and sorcery fare. While it certainly has its mystical elements, *Britannia* errs towards the historical – and the irreverent.

Set during the Roman invasion of Britain in the



first century AD, *Britannia* takes place at a time when the country was ruled by powerful druids and tribal warriors, and follows a young woman as she sets out to fulfil an ancient prophecy by defeating the Roman occupiers.

The series tackles weighty issues such as faith and power, but comes with a pop soundtrack and an often wildly contrasting tone, with moments of absurd

David Morrissey portrays real-life Roman general Aulus Plautius, though the show is not beholden to historical accuracy

humour punctuated by great horror and violence.

“All of those shows, as brilliant as they are – I was a huge *Game Of Thrones* fan – there’s a seriousness to them,” says Richardson, who is keen to explore the lives of characters in this historical era who “were just as much having a laugh and getting high or getting pissed or doing crazy shit as any of the people today.”

What’s more, unlike many of the weighty tomes



currently headed to the screen, *Britannia* is an original IP, rather than being based on an existing book series. Writers Jez and Tom Butterworth and Mackenzie Crook, who stars and wrote for season three, are also not beholden to historical accuracy.

“We’re creating our own little world. That’s one of the greatest strengths and freedoms that we have,” explains Richardson.

“We don’t have anything to go on; it’s a challenge because it means we have to come up with all this stuff, and that takes a lot more work than just coming off the page of a book, where someone has already done all that hard work for you.

“But it gives us great freedom, because it means we can completely go wherever we want. History is just in the background, it happens to be quite a major period of history, but it’s there and we can tap in and out of it whenever we want.”

## Budgeting for the big stuff

Producing in the epic fantasy genre does not come without its challenges, of course, and maintaining the high level of production quality typically required by these shows comes with a significant price tag.

The recently launched season, for example, includes one of the biggest action sequences that the show has ever done, with a huge battle taking place around a Roman aqueduct.

“I think this specific type of show is always challenging because of the scale of it,” says Richardson. “You’ve got these huge, amazing costumes and makeup and action sequences and art department and design, and all those kinds of things, so the budgets can be very challenging.”



Top: Eleanor Worthington Cox returns as reluctant hero Cait in season three, while (below) Sophie Okonedo joins the cast as a newcomer with shocking appetites

Richardson notes, however, that Vertigo has been “very lucky” with its international production partners, with Sky helping to finance the show through all three seasons and US-based Epix coming on board the production in season two. *Britannia* had originally been co-produced with Amazon Prime Video for its first season.

“If you’re making a show at scale, they’re incredibly important to help finance it and they will help with the fans in those territories,” says the exec. “With a show like this, which is global, you very much want those kinds of partners.”

## Miracles and taboo topics

Like most scripted productions, *Britannia* had its share of set-backs due to the pandemic, necessitating a drop from 10 planned episodes to eight for the season, which Richardson says was “a good call” given the circumstances.

With filming halted in March 2020 and unable to resume until September, the exec says his proudest accomplishment on season three was simply ensuring that it was completed.

“From a production point of view, it was the most challenging thing any of us had ever done,” the Vertigo exec says. “The producer and the production team and the cast and crew just worked miracles pulling this together.”

Still, the delays did not dull ambitions for the season. Aside from the aforementioned aqueduct sequence, Richardson says the latest installment features some of the “craziest” and “funniest things I think we’ve ever done.”

Returning regulars including David Morrissey, Eleanor Worthington Cox, Mackenzie Crook and Zoe Wanamaker are joined this season by new cast addition, Sophie Okonedo, who arrives on the scene with some shocking appetites.

Despite the show’s penchant for pushing taboos though, Richardson says: “We think it is incredibly important to be surprising and to have all those twists, but we also think it is incredibly important not to be gratuitous.”

One particularly horrific act, carried out by Okonedo’s character at the start of season three, for instance, becomes the driving motivator for one of the regulars throughout the season.

“It’s not just something that happens and we forget about it, it means something,” Richardson says.

That said, Richardson promises with a chuckle that fans of the show are going to be “completely shocked” by the end of this latest run. **TBI**

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# Script to Screen: *Germinal*

Émile Zola's 19th-century novel *Germinal* is a French classic that required dextrous handling to make it to screen. Richard Middleton talks to Banijay's Frederic Balmory about its journey

**S**et in the barren, coal-strewn landscape of 1860s northern France, Émile Zola's seminal novel *Germinal* is a clear reflection of a country at a certain point in its history. Yet the novel's power really lies in its ability to transcend time and, for that reason, it has become a French classic, a necessary read for school children and a readily known tale across the country.

All of which makes a TV adaptation that little bit more fraught, with viewers already holding an affinity for key characters and the storyline. It also had some form to maintain; the novel has been adapted throughout the past century and its last incarnation appeared on the big screen with a big budget in 1993, with Claude Berri directing, and Gérard Depardieu and Miou-Miou starring.

## Scene One

Such history did not hold back the producers, however, who were keen to create a nuanced adaptation that reflected themes of social injustice within a more modern framework. Indeed, as the show was getting off the ground in 2018, the gilets jaunes protests began in France, highlighting the economic inequality that continues to impact large swathes of the working population.

"It is a universal story that's still relevant, not just in France but elsewhere too," says Frederic Balmory, COO at producer Banijay Studios France. "The challenge was to make the novel a bit more contemporary than it was. We worked with young talents, directors and writers and they gave us their more modern view."





Underlining this was the snagging of David Hourrègue as director, the man behind the French adaptation of youth-skewing drama *Skam*, while Julien Lilti was attached as creator and writer. France's Pictanovo is also attached as co-producer.

"The director was inspired by shows like *Peaky Blinders* and modern westerns, and he wanted to create a more modern feel with more characters," adds Balmory, who says that the series has also given priority to female characters – "we really pushed that in our adaptation."

## Scene Two

The story itself is a fascinating, sad but engaging tale that tracks a miners' strike during the latter half of the 19th century. Written in 1885, Zola researched the novel exhaustively and the resultant story provides characters that inspire and anger.

At the centre is young miner Étienne Lantier, played by Louis Peres, who flees Lille after assaulting a superior and finds refuge in the coal mining town of Montsou. Once there, he befriends veteran miner Maheu, who secures him a job pushing carts down the pit and offers him a place to stay.

But the conditions are harsh and unfair, prompting the young miner to take a stand in the form of a strike that strains the sinews of the community. At the same time, Lantier falls for Maheu's daughter, providing another storyline strand to explore.

"We also added a few new characters to give a bit more rhythm to the series, including more female and more diverse characters, and we worked on the music and how we shot it," says Balmory. "We wanted to have that western feel, we wanted it to feel grey and dirty, because it was."

With scripts largely complete, the show was preparing to shoot when the first lockdown hit last

year. Like almost all drama production worldwide, the pandemic caused a hiatus and once crews and cast were allowed back on set, the budget had increased. "We shot from October 2020 to February 2021, and we also had some Covid cases during that period so we had to work around it," says Balmory.

Canteens were closed and bubbles created, he adds, with teams having to go directly to their hotel rooms after wrapping for the day and being served meals in their rooms. While the impact is not seen on screen, there was an inevitable - and considerable - strain on cast and crew.

## Scene Three

The result, however, is a show with grit and depth. It is already available on French streamer Salto – the joint venture between TF1, M6 and France Télévisions – while a debut on the latter's linear service and Rai in Italy are also in the works.

And the input of younger writers, a focus on developing the story for contemporary audiences and storylines that global viewers can empathise with has created a six-parter that has more of an international outlook than previous incarnations of the novel.



Louis Peres plays novel protagonist Étienne Lantier (above), while new characters were added to provide more diversity

For those reasons, Balmory is confident that the adaptation will travel via Banijay Rights, helped by the fact that the novel has been published in more than 100 countries. Public broadcasters will be the natural home, he says, with the first international sale being to French-Canadian network Radio-Canada.

"Our challenge was to not distort a well-known epic," Balmory says, "but also to modernise it and attract younger audiences." The series, whose budget topped €12m (\$14m), remains a "French show, for sure" the Banijay exec says, but "there is an echo of the story everywhere." **TBI**

# Scripted Hot Picks

The very best scripted shows heading to market

## Pushers

**Producer:** Yoav Gross Productions, Yes TV

**Distributor:** Yes Studios

**Broadcaster:** Yes TV (Israel)

**Logline:** Raw coming of age story about underprivileged teens from a neglected neighborhood, who decide to make money the only way they know how – by selling drugs

This 8 x 40-minute Hebrew-language action-drama was created and written by Guy Balila and Elad Biton, with a second season already commissioned following a critically acclaimed debut in its native Israel.

The series follows a group of teenagers from the Bnei Or neighborhood in the remote desert city of Be'er Sheva, who set out to make ends meet by selling drugs – each for their own reasons.

Chief among them are Eli, a charismatic and intelligent teen, who wants to admit his father into a rehab center in a final attempt to help him quit the drugs that broke down their family, and Johnny, a local kid, who's just been released from the juvenile center.

Johnny brings with him a bag of stolen marijuana and the connections to the right people who can help them get more. While the business soon turns into a success, trouble follows from local gangs who want to take over – as well as the police who are on their trail.

Meanwhile, the young drug dealers must learn to deal with the consequences of their actions as they attempt to turn their lives around.

“Despite growing up in the same neighborhood, Eli and Johnny greatly differ; Eli is smart, hard-working and has a strong set of morals, while Johnny has already spent the majority of his young life on the wrong side of the law,” says Yes Studio MD Danna Stern.

“Eli seems to have what it takes to rise above his harsh surroundings but is bogged down by his destructive relationship with his father – a drug addict who is in and out of rehab. Johnny and Eli meet and bond over their common need for fast cash – each for an entire different set of reasons.”

Stern reveals that the series, which is inspired by real events, explores “the importance friendship, family and the unbreakable bonds which one forges in youth,” while also being “fast paced and action-filled.”

The cast is also made up of young actors in their first roles, which Stern says contributes to the show's notable authenticity and accessibility.

“The series is high on adrenaline, full of twists, turn and cliff-hangers,” she adds. “We grow to care and identify with our ‘anti-heroes’ and get hooked on the action; perfect for binge viewing.”





### The Newsreader

**Producer:** Werner Film Productions

**Distributor:** Entertainment One

**Broadcaster:** ABC (Australia)

**Logline:** Drama diving behind the headlines of the most iconic stories of our time through the lens of a television newsroom team

Anna Torv (*Fringe*, *Mindhunter*) and Sam Reid (*Anonymous*, *Belle*) head the cast of this 6 x 60-minute drama set in a commercial television newsroom in 1986, which follows a tumultuous three months in world history through the eyes of a young reporter and a notoriously 'difficult' newsreader.

From the shock of the Challenger explosion, to the hype of Halley's Comet, and the complexities of the AIDS crisis, the two journalists form a deep bond – after an initially hostile start – as they attempt to cover the headlines in a world on the cusp of change.

“This fiery drama is layered with wit, nostalgia and warmth featuring nuanced

characters that are beautifully written,” Noel Hedges, EVP of

acquisitions at Entertainment One, tells TBI. “Delivering brilliant performances by Anna Torv and Sam Reid, *The Newsreader* hits on many universal themes from romance to office politics.”

The series also works hard to capture the feel of the period,

Hedges explains. “From the costumes and lighting to the iconic news stories that have defined our time like The Challenger explosion, Chernobyl and the AIDS crisis, *The Newsreader* expertly captures a high-octane TV newsroom set in the 1980s.”



### Children Ruin Everything

**Producer:** New Metric Media, in association with CTV

**Distributors:** New Metric Media, Bell Media

**Broadcaster:** CTV (Canada)

**Logline:** Comedy about living with the worst roommates of all – young children – through the eyes of parents who struggle to find a balance between being 'Mom and Dad' and being who they were before

Created and exec produced by Kurt Smeaton (*Schitt's Creek*, *Kim's Convenience*), this 8 x 30-minute comedy series follows Astrid and James, parents who are struggling with being 'Mom and Dad' while also holding onto their own pre-offspring identities.

“Astrid and James struggle to find their old, pre-kid selves while at the same time deliberating whether to have a third child,” reveals New

Metric Media president, Mark Montefiore. “They can't have a civilised meal, a decent workout, or even enjoy an intimate moment together without the kids interfering.”

It's a situation with which parents can easily identify, adding to the show's global appeal and, as Montefiore adds, the show is ultimately about family, love, parenting and the ability to adapt to change.

“It's universal in its themes as

everyone in the world, parent or not, is having to learn to adapt to a new life in one way or another,” he says. “Plus,

regardless of culture or language, parents used to have a life before kids that some part of them desperately tries to hold onto.”



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### Ever After

**Producer:** Indigo Films, Rai Fiction

**Distributor:** About Premium Content

**Broadcaster:** Rai Uno (Italy)

**Logline:** Drama series following the collapse of a marriage at different points in the relationship, as a couple battle one another for custody of their son

This 6 x 52-minute Italian-language drama tells the intimate story of Anna and Enrico – a couple who, after their happy wedding 11 years ago, now find themselves in a bitter custody battle for their young son Pietro. Over the course of the series, the show dissects their relationship with a back and forth between past and present to uncover what made their love story fall apart.

Offering some insight into the friction between the two once-happy protagonists, Emmanuelle Guilbart joint-CEO and co-founder at APC, says: “Anna and Enrico are a young couple when Anna gets pregnant and they decide to get married and move in together.

“They have different social backgrounds, which eventually

leads them to want different things in life. Anna wants to stay in her flat in Rome when Enrico would like to move to a house in the countryside closer to his parents; she wants to continue her studies, he wants their son to play soccer... very common situations that can, little by little, pulls them apart.”

Guilbart says what makes this show stand out is that it follows two people dealing with “down-to-earth issues”, while delivering plenty of drama.

“*Ever After* is a unique series, it differs from what we are used to seeing: it is not a crime series nor a thriller. It’s a story about love that dissects with a lot of finesse and authenticity what makes two people fall in love, and how a marriage can gradually fall apart.”



### Conviction: The Case Of Stephen Lawrence

**Producer:** Hat Trick Mercurio Television, in association with Baby Cow Productions

**Distributor:** Hat Trick International

**Broadcaster:** ITV 1 (UK)

**Logline:** Fact-based drama about the cold case investigation into a racist murder that forced deep questioning of the UK police and legal system

The 1993 murder of Black British teenager Stephen Lawrence in a racist attack was a shocking crime with reverberations still being felt in the country today.

This 3 x 60-minute event drama tells the true story of a fight for justice and the eventual conviction of two of the suspects in the crime in a case that also exposed institutional racism within the British police force.

“The murder at the centre of the story happened in 1993, but our drama opens in 2006 when a detective comes across the files relating to the case gathering dust in a closed down police station,” reveals Sarah Tong, director of sales at Hat Trick International.

“It’s not a whodunnit – everyone knows who dunnit. The scandal is that the original investigation was incompetent and institutionally racist

and no one was brought to justice. The case has been gathering dust for years and the challenge is to put together a cold case long after the event in the teeth of opposition and mistrust,” she says.

Tong adds that by focusing the drama on the follow-up investigation, which took place more than a decade after the murder, the series “explores a very current and important global social and political theme.”

At the heart of the story are the parents of the murder victim, Neville and Doreen Lawrence, as well as Inspector Clive Driscoll, the detective who led the investigation, and the relationship they formed.

“It’s both an intense, disturbing and compelling real-life police procedural, but also a moving, and inspiring story of unlikely friendships,” reveals Tong.

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