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Canucks on a syndie crime spree

Program Partners pitching 'Squad,' 'Stone' at NATPE

By [ELIZABETH GUIDER](#)

On the heels of a hot November ratings book for its syndie series "Da Vinci's Inquest," indie distrib Program Partners has once again plumbed the Great White North for two procedural dramas to introduce Stateside.

Off-net Canuck hours "Cold Squad" and "Stone Undercover" will try to lock up primetime and latenight slots on U.S. stations at the upcoming NATPE trade show in Las Vegas as part of the company's "Crime Watch" programming brand. Big Three affils may be interested for their latenight slots; UPN, the WB and Fox may consider primetime periods.

"Cold Squad" has been airing on CTV for eight years, having amassed 98 episodes, while "Stone Undercover," which aired on Global for two seasons and is now on Canuck cable, boasts 26 episodes ready to syndicate.

Idea with Crime Watch is to provide TV stations with a pipeline of fresh procedural dramas not yet seen in the U.S. to accompany reruns of hot off-net properties like "CSI."

"There clearly is a dearth of original firstrun and even of off-net material out there for 'the out years' -- '08 and beyond," said Ritch Colbert, one of the founders of Production Partners and a veteran of the syndie trenches.

Colbert told *Daily Variety* that Production Partners has so far cleared about 20 markets with the two new shows, but is holding back on making a big announcement until nearer to NATPE in late January.

A half-dozen other projects, all from major studios, have already charged into the syndie fray, but they are in the talk and court genres. The only competition for the slots Colbert wants will be from other off-net and off-cable dramas coming into syndication, such as "Without a Trace," "The Shield" and "Strong Medicine."

Weekends in U.S. syndication have lately been dominated by off-net reruns of primetime hits "CSI," "24" and "Alias"; very little original material has been made available since the firstrun action hour genre ("Andromeda," "X-Mutant") dried up five years ago.

"The dominant trend in network television and now in syndication is the rapid growth of procedural crime drama blocks," said Josh Raphaelson, the other principal in two-year-old Program Partners.

The two Canuck-originated series are designed to air in primetime on weekends, replacing down-trending movie showcases on UPN, the WB and Fox, or in latenight on Big Three affiliates, Colbert said.

"Da Vinci's Inquest" has done better paired with "CSI" reruns than either "24" or "Alias," Raphaelson noted.

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To give stations programming and scheduling flexibility, Program Partners will provide Crime Watch affils a choice of satellite feeds, with two different episodes of "Cold Squad" and one of "Stone Undercover" available each week. Neither show has been seen Stateside.

Colbert said his company has locked up several additional Canuck properties for exploitation Stateside and, in a few cases, will come in on projects at the front end.

Colbert grew up in the syndie biz, working first with his father, Dick Colbert Sr., now 82, at Colbert TV Sales. Colbert *fil's* later worked at Access Syndication and Orion, among others. Raphaelson, too, has been in the syndie biz for some two decades.

Colbert and Raphaelson's company is one of just a handful of indie players that have found new ways to approach the syndication biz in the wake of massive consolidation of studios and station groups. (Others include Debmar, Litton, October Moon and Perrin.)

"Cold Squad" (which long preceded Jerry Bruckheimer's "Cold Case") features a female central character, Sgt. Ali McCormick (Julie Stewart), leading a team of forensic pathologists who resolve long-abandoned cases. Show has garnered more than 30 Gemini noms in Canada.

"Stone Undercover" is based on the exploits of a pair of commercial crime fighters. Recalling "Moonlighting," the series revolves around the relationship between an ex-cop (and ex-con) and his female boss. Series stars Chris William Martin ("Felicity") and Janet Kidder ("Earth: Final Conflict").

"Da Vinci's Inquest" is one of the top new weekly shows in U.S. syndication. Airing in 98% of the U.S., it consistently ranks among the top four weekly dramas in syndication.

Produced by Haddock Entertainment and Barna-Alper Prods., "Da Vinci's Inquest," in which coroner Dominic Da Vinci (Nicholas Campbell) solves crimes, has been one of the most widely honored series in Canadian television.

Program Partners is marketing the shows as part of its worldwide distrib pact with Vancouver-based Thunderbird Films.