

Get with the Program

It's true – crime really does pay. More specifically, Canadian crime drama pays; especially if you're Los Angeles syndication specialist Program Partners.

In all, through its partnership with Vancouver-based indie producer/distributor Thunderbird Films, Program Partners is representing five Canadian scripted series for primarily first-run sales into the US syndication market. It has marketed some of the programming as *Crime Watch*, a primetime weekend or late-night block, capitalising on the ongoing appeal of procedural crime drama, spurred on by the likes of *CSI* and *Law & Order*.

The cornerstone property of the *Crime Watch* brand is *Da Vinci's Inquest*, a gritty one-hour series originally created for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) by crime drama master Chris Haddock. In its second year of syndication now, and being renewed for a third, the series is cleared throughout 98% of the US, continually sitting in the top five among nationally syndicated series in the US, and even hitting number one in its timeslot in several key markets.

Other Canadian properties comprising the crime block and hitting the market this fall include forensic investigation show *Cold Squad*, and ex-con undercover series *Stone Undercover*. "If it's scripted and it's Canadian, then we want to take a shot at putting it into this market," says Program Partners co-founder Josh Raphaelson. "We're really aligned with Thunderbird in our acquisitions. They deserve a lot of credit for seeing this opportunity in the States and finding these gems in Canada."

Having been somewhat lax in the

lucrative opportunities have opened up for Canadian scripted programming in the US syndication market, a niche LA-based Program Partners is taking advantage of. By Jenn Kuzmyk

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Josh Raphaelson, Program Partners

past few years, the syndication market for those who have available scripted fare is now once again robust. Increased cable budgets, consolidation among station groups and the emergence of MyNetwork TV and The CW have all changed the landscape. The US syndication market reached another pivotal moment last year when Lionsgate-owned Debra Mercury sold sitcom *Tyler Perry's House of Payne* first to TBS and four major-market Fox-owned TV stations, and also lined it up to clear sales in more than 90% of the US when it becomes available for syndication in fall 2008.

Apart from this, a dearth of sitcoms and a glut of reality shows, which don't always do well in syndication, are mainly responsible for the new opportunities. "Networks have introduced some new formats and sitcoms in prime, and a few have percolated to the top, but reality still dominates and I don't think that's going to change soon," says Program

Partners co-founder Ritch Colbert.

For the Monday to Friday stripped market in particular, Program Partners foresees a continuation of gamers and court shows but a fall in the number of talk formats. "With fewer half-hours available [only two such network shows were up for syndication this year: *Family Guy* and *Two and a Half Men*], stations here are looking at a pretty bleak period starting this fall and over the next four years because there is very little that is going to come off the networks," says Raphaelson. Couple that with the fact some of the shows that do come off network are going straight to cable, such as A&E's pick-up of *Law & Order*, and the outlook for selling first-run shows to US independent stations seems even brighter.

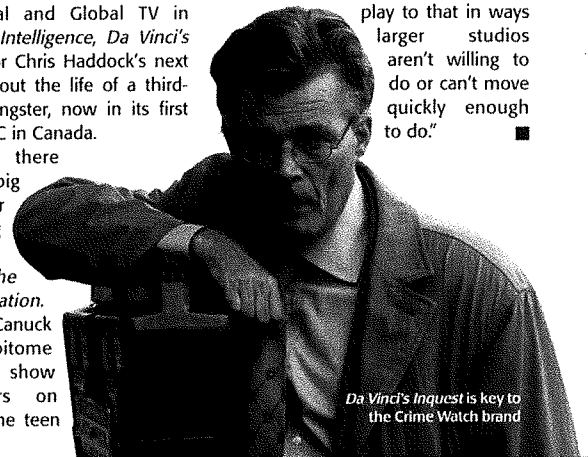
With this in mind, Program Partners recently signed on to sell *ReGenesis*, Shaftesbury Films' bio-science thriller produced for The Movie Network, Movie Central and Global TV in Canada; and *Intelligence*, *Da Vinci's Inquest* creator Chris Haddock's next procedural about the life of a third-generation gangster, now in its first season on CBC in Canada.

Meanwhile, there will be a big Natpe push for long-running teen drama *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. Produced by Canuck indie Epitome Pictures, the show currently airs on Nick's nighttime teen

net The N! and on CTV in Canada. For Program Partners, all of the Tribune stations have picked it up for fall 2007, plus a number of other station groups as well. This month Raphaelson and Colbert expect to have cleared the show across at least 70% of the American market, making it the first Canadian series ever to be stripped Monday to Friday in primetime.

Despite the obvious optimism about the outlook for Canadian series in US syndication, it is not an easy game to play. Going up against the leverage that the major studios have is tough, and Americans in the industry remain a generally provincial group. "They still move first on familiar off-net US series and continuously need to be convinced of the value of first-run, quality Canadian dramas," says Raphaelson, but he's quick to add: "We've found a way to hone in on what stations need and

play to that in ways larger studios aren't willing to do or can't move quickly enough to do." ■



Da Vinci's Inquest is key to the *Crime Watch* brand

Fox forms Spanish-language prodco

News Corporation's global pay-TV subsidiary Fox International Channels has created a production company dedicated to Spanish-language television content.

Dubbed Fox Toma 1, the unit will produce unscripted shows to be aired mainly on Latin American cable channels Utilisima, Fox Life, FX, Fox and Speed Channel. Fox said the prodco would increase its production capabilities in Spanish, contributing over 2,000 hours of original content per year.

The new company is being developed in partnership with Ernesto Sandler, founder of Utilisima, which produces TV web content and formats targeting women and families in Latin America and the US, claiming to reach eight million homes.

Sandler, based in Buenos Aires, will be president and CEO of Fox Toma 1. Under the alliance with Sandler, Utilisima is expected to become part of Fox International Channels.

NBC dramas kick off pilot season

The US pilot season has swung into action with three one-hour dramas picked up by NBC: *Fort Pit* from actor Denis Leary; *Chuck* from *The OC's* creator Josh Schwartz; and a remake of 1970s series *Bionic Woman*.

Fort Pit is a comedy-drama from Leary's prodco Apostle and Sony Pictures TV and is set in one of the worst NYPD precincts in Brooklyn. Peter Tolan, who created FX firefighters drama *Rescue Me* with Leary, is to direct the pilot. It will be exec-produced by *Law & Order's* Michael Chernuchin and Apostle's Jim Serpico.

Elsewhere, Schwartz has teamed up with Chris Fedak on *Chuck*, a high-action comedy-drama about spies and 20-somethings, while *Bionic Woman* is from Laeta Kalogridis (*The Dive*) and David Eick (*Battlestar Galactica*) for NBC Universal Studios.

New adventure for Rangers prodco

Educational Adventures, the US prodco behind animated kids series *Danger Rangers*, has set up distribution and coproduction arm Educational Adventures International (EAI).

Headquartered in the company's new Los Angeles offices, EAI will oversee global coproductions, acquisitions and international television/DVD distribution and merchandise licensing on behalf of the *Danger Rangers* franchise, as well as other children's brands in development.

Ex-Warner Channel exec Luca Bentivoglio has been brought onboard to head the new division as president and CEO, reporting to Mike Moore, CEO of Educational Adventures. In addition to his time with Warner Brothers, where he was general manager of The Warner Channel (Venezuela), Bentivoglio's career has included senior production positions at Telemundo, Univision and Latino Public Broadcasting.