



Less is more

By Michael Pickard
December 7, 2018

The rampant demand for long-running series is seemingly unstoppable, yet TV movies and one-off dramas are becoming a powerful tool in addressing single issues or themes. They're also evidence that not every story needs to run to multiple episodes and seasons.

TV movies come in many forms, whether they're single dramas with a feature-length running time or topical one-offs that dramatise a contemporary or historical theme or event. And while it might seem logical that the current demand for binge-worthy series would temper the desire for small-screen movies, in truth they are as sought-after as ever as viewers seek a quick storytelling fix before starting the next must-watch 10- or 13-episode show.

"They have their place, for sure," says Ian Whitehead, a producer at Canada's Incendo Films. "But subscription-based firms are always looking for newness. Yes, they might have Breaking Bad to attract viewers, but they're trying to broaden out and have something new."

Europe has long been keen on TV movies, with schedules built around 90-minute dramas. This remains the case in Germany, where Rowboat Film und Fernsehproduktion is behind *Die Toten vom Bodensee* (Murder by the Lake), a series of small-screen movies produced twice a year, following two cops as they investigate murders at a lake that borders Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Distributor Beta Film has sold the series, produced for Germany's ZDF and Austria's ORF, into more than 50 territories.



Brain Power Studio's *After the Storm*

"Every market's different but Germany somehow kept the 90-minute timeslots in abundance," says Rowboat producer Sam Davis. "We produce two or three a year with the same cops and the audience responds to it because it's a cinematic experience in a serial context. We find there's still a big audience for that."

"We can't ignore the fact the audience has become more serialised. And because they've become more serialised, we've adapted to more serialised TV movies, as we know the audience can keep a lot of subplots and complex characters in the air at the same time."

Ontario-based Brain Power Studio has a slate of family movies, Christmas-themed films and romantic comedies, and also has a deal with Harlequin Books to adapt some of its novels for television. Titles include *After the Storm* and *Christmas With a Prince*, while *My Perfect Romance*, *Christmas Wedding Planner* and *Christmas With a View* have all been sold to Netflix.

“As well as higher expectations from viewers, there is also greater sophistication to those films than there was in the past,” says Beth Stevenson, Brain Power founder and executive producer. “There are great concepts you can do with standalone films, and when you adapt a novel, there’s a whole backstory that’s been created within that book that you can actually utilise during the storytelling. That makes a really big difference. It may not attract the same audience that’s watching complicated and complex dramas, but those viewers still have very high expectations of not only being entertained but also being carried along with the story.”

Japanese biopic *Kurara: The Dazzling Life of Hokusai’s Daughter* (pictured top) tells the story of O-Ei, who lived in the shadow of her father, celebrated artist Katsushika Hokusai, before creating a name for herself with her own style of painting. The film emerged when Taku Kato, a senior producer in Japanese pubcaster NHK’s drama production department, sought a local story that would create interest abroad. A Hokusai exhibit at the British Museum coincided with his discovery of a book about Kurara, leading him to believe the story would appeal to viewers at home and around the world.



Christmas with a Prince, one of a number of Christmas-focused films on Brain Power’s slate

The decision to make a TV movie, as opposed to a series, came from Kato’s preference to focus on the core theme of the story. “In real life, Hokusai and O-Ei had debt problems and a complicated relationship. By making a one-off drama, I was able to focus on their affection for each other in the context of art,” he says.

However, this approach was not without its challenges. “Summarising the life of a great artist in a single story is difficult because diverse elements of the circumstances, motivations and processes behind the artworks are interwoven in complex ways,” Kato adds.

The power of TV movies to shine a spotlight on topical or weighty subjects is one of the best uses of the format, with the BBC a particular champion of this type of TV drama. Films such as *Murdered by my Boyfriend*, *Murdered by my Father* and *Killed by my Debt* have told fact-based stories via dramatic reconstructions, while others have dramatised sensitive and often invisible issues.

Upcoming BBC single *Care* stars Sheridan Smith as Jenny, a single mum-of-two whose world comes crashing down when her beloved mother Mary (Alison Steadman) suffers a devastating stroke, leading to dementia. Written by Jimmy McGovern (*Broken*, *The Accused*) and Gillian Jukes, it is produced by LA Productions and distributed by Kew Media Distribution.

Producer Colin McKeown says the story, based on Jukes’ real-life experiences, was always destined to be a single drama. “It had a beginning, middle and end,” he says. “To me, a series is designed as a series. It’s about knowing when to stop and also what animal you’ve got. If it’s a single one-off, it shouts at you and says, ‘This is more poignant if you treat it not as some sort of commercial exercise but as a piece of storytelling that’s got maximum impact by being what it is in the first place – a unique story.’”



Japanese biopic *Kurara: The Dazzling Life of Hokusai's Daughter*

LA Productions has good form with singles, having produced *Common*, another McGovern film, which explored the UK's Joint Enterprise law when a young man gives friends an impromptu lift to a pizza parlour and ends up being charged with murder. The film helped change British law. "We're very proud of what it achieved. Would it have achieved that if it was a series? I don't think so," McKeown says. "What Care will achieve in flagging up the problems that families are subjected to when a member of the family unfortunately contracts Alzheimer's will be that much more rewarding because it's a single film. It's always the films that touch people's hearts a lot more and have a bigger impact."

Dementia is also key to another upcoming BBC feature-length drama, an adaptation of Emma Healey's novel *Elizabeth is Missing*, about a woman struggling with the illness as she sets out to discover the truth about her friend's disappearance. Shooting is set to begin in March 2019.

"It deals with an incredibly current and relevant issue to a lot of people but did it in such a fresh and accessible way," producer Sarah Brown, head of drama at STV Productions, says of the source material. "There hadn't been many dramas about dementia and it is such a huge issue of our time. We were very keen it should be on a mainstream channel for a mainstream audience because it's an issue that touches so many people's lives."

The book's unique viewpoint – the story is told from the perspective of someone with dementia – meant *Elizabeth is Missing* suited a 90-minute format, rather than the three-parter that was originally discussed. "There was no agenda, we just all felt creatively and editorially that a single was the best form for this story," Brown says. "Some stories are designed and meant to be told as a multi-part show, and we all love those long-running stories that unfold slowly. But not every story is suited to that format, and we felt this story was best told in a single immersive experience."



Sheridan Smith in BBC one-off drama *Care*

Whitehead says that, like serialised dramas, TV movies are introducing more flawed characters and complex situations. “In our movies, we go in different areas and have villains we enjoy as much as the heroes. Some broadcasters invest because the film is about a controversial subject or it’s a historical piece. We try to have interesting characters, and don’t believe we have to go big budget or big name. What I hope to do is more a mix of characters and languages. People are more open to that, so I hope it translates with movies.”

TV movies also allow stories to be told more directly, without becoming consumed by the side plots and peripheral characters needed to flesh out multi-episode series.

“Movies allow you to tell a story in a very condensed way. As you have only about 90 minutes of runtime, you can’t allow yourself to explore too many facets of a character’s life – even if it would be interesting,” says Caroline Labrèche, the director of *Incendo* thriller *Second Opinion* and the forthcoming *Thicker than Water*. “So everything in the film, be it story beats or character beats, needs to be very precise. You need to watch a scene and know exactly why you’ve just watched it. It can’t be too vague or subtle. There’s just no time for that, especially in plot-heavy thrillers. But that’s the challenge.”

Brown laments the way quieter single stories have been squeezed out in favour of multi-part dramas. “So the ones that tend to be commissioned are either big, topical, campaigning issue pieces or based on a really big well-loved book or with

a bit of talent attached,” she notes. “In our case, it’s a combination of the subject matter and the book. Hopefully the way we make that and cast it will further enhance its visibility.”

With the trend for serialised stories showing no signs of stopping, TV movies can offer themselves up as a bitesized drama that can be watched in the time it takes to watch two episodes of a series. Meanwhile, investments in the genre made by Netflix, Amazon and other streaming platforms continue to blur the boundaries between TV movies and feature films on TV.



Incendo thriller *Second Opinion*

NHK’s Kato believes that as creators cross the boundaries between film and television, stories will too. “Given that TV movies allow suppliers and buyers to have informed negotiations after watching the programmes in their entirety and are generally cheaper than drama series, I believe there will be further growth in the market,” he says. “So it’s very likely I will stay involved.”

Stevenson adds that in the current political climate, feel-good TV movies that offer viewers something wholesome and heartwarming can be a tasty antidote to the turbulent and tempestuous news cycle.

“For anybody who grew up in the 70s and early 80s, that was a time of a lot of political upheaval. So *Happy Days* and *The Waltons* started, and that’s when television movies really took hold,” she says. “It feels like viewers are seeking out TV movies right now to be able to take a break and enjoy a beautiful Christmas

story or be wrapped up in a cosy mystery or suspense tale that's not as awful as the news coming into everybody's house every day. That's what's making the difference. It feels like there's a little resurgence of the television movie genre."