Europe’s ever-growing demand for scripted titles is opening up new opportunities for Turkish and Latin fare across the continent.

By Joel Marino

By all accounts, the drama fever that’s swept the globe over the last few years shows little signs of breaking. And now here is this truer than in Europe, a region whose frenzied hunger for all things scripted has created ample space for new types of productions to prove themselves. Chief among them: fiction’s current belle of the ball, the Turkish drama.

“For some time now, Europe has been a very rich market for series from Turkey,” says Can Okan, the president and CEO of ITV Inter Medya, which sells Turkish fare such as Black Money Love and In Between. “It’s really where the dramas first took off. Once global buyers saw how well these series were doing [for European broadcasters], they wanted to be a part of the success as well. So, selling into Europe has always been an important strategy for us.”

But it’s not just Turkish distributors who are profiting from Europe’s booming Turkish mania—even global players now count series from that country in their catalogs.

“We have more than 700 hours of Turkish dramas that we’re bringing to various markets,” says Prentiss Fraser, the senior VP, global head of content sales at FOX. “We’ve only had these titles within the last two years, and even though they’ve been late entering the FOX catalog, they’re taking the region by storm. It’s been a fun ride.”

DIZZY FOR DIZI

Whether old pros or new to the game, many distributors of the glossy dramas (known in Turkey as dizî) point to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) as key pieces of their business plans. This is, after all, where the genre first gained a foothold on the continent, says Oszlén Oszunbul, the head of sales and acquisitions at Kanal D.

“We started working with Eastern Europe in 2008, and we continue to have great friends and colleagues there who like our productions;” she says. “We sold many titles from our catalog [into that market]. Because they’ve already acquired and aired so many of our previous series, we’re now in the process of offering them our latest titles.”

Besides hits such as Fatmagül, Forbidden Love and Mercy, Canal D’s library also relies on more recent series, among them For My Son and War of the Roses.

“Obviously, our first success was in the Balkan region and Eastern Europe, because of how close those countries are to Turkey,” says Okan of ITV Inter Medya. “Former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania—it all started there.”

But Okan also chalks up the ongoing triumph of dizî in these crucial territories to more than just geographical happenstance.

“The stories we are creating tend to be quite international,” he says. “However, when we’re talking specifically about this part of Europe, I think that our cultures are very similar. We share a strong sense of family values, and that is a theme that is very important to the plots of our dramas. [Audiences in CEE] have always identified with that, which is why they keep returning to our titles.”

FOX’s Fraser agrees that noticeable cultural links are at the crux of why these series have resonated so well in this market.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

“Central and Eastern Europe have always been strong supporters of the Turkish drama, and it’s true that people there can relate to the family dynamics in these stories,” she says. An example is the FOX hit Cherry Season, a romantic comedy offered to buyers at MIPTV this year. Though the series focuses on its heroine’s hurdles to find true love, it also showcases her domestic life with her mother and younger brother. According to Fraser, this is the type of balance that makes characters stand out in the increasingly cluttered drama space.

“One of the most unique things about these series is that they come every night to see what happens next,” she says. “[Broadcasters are finding that it’s a useful tool in helping to increase ratings for their channels]”

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In fact, a strong focus on family ties and chaste romances is what has helped differentiate Turkish dramas from the glut of U.S. imports jostling to find space in CEE schedules, says Besir Tatli, the general manager of Calinos Entertainment. “Our series are very different from American series;” he says. “We have high production values, like dramas from the United States, but we’re not making science fiction or fantasy. We are telling stories about love, family and passion, so broad-casters who want something truer to life will turn to our content.”

CONTINENTAL EXPANSION
“I think there’s been a backlash to American series in CEE,” says Mark Lawrence, the executive director of Europe, the Middle East and Africa for Endemol Shine International. “[Turkish dramas] feel safe, and they fit better with their schedules.”

Endemol Shine will be presenting its first self-distributed Turkish production, Intersection, at NATPE Budapest. (Endemol Shine Turkey’s first domestic production, Broken Pieces, is sold by Global Agency.)

“These dramas are something new and different,” says Lawrence. “Rather than just having a programming slate full of American stuff, you have something like Turkish drama, which is sunny and glossy and full of good-looking people. It adds a great deal of diversity to the schedule.”

And the dizis competition with Hollywood productions isn’t just happening in CEE.

“Though there’s a big appetite in Central and Eastern Europe for this type of content, there are countries throughout the continent that are taking a second look at this genre,” Lawrence says. “We’ve shopped it around Benelux, France, Spain and Germany. There are plenty of territories that are searching for new dramas.”

Indeed, Western Europe has long been a holy grail of sorts for Turkish-content distributors; though the series have made strong headway in regions as diverse as Latin America and Asia, markets like Spain, Germany and France have, for years, seemed out of reach.

“Maybe because of our different cultures, Western Europe didn’t look at our series at all,” says Tatli of Calinos Entertainment. “Our series meant nothing to them.”

Times have changed, though, as have strategies.

“Selling the ready-made products in Western Europe has always been difficult,” says ITV Inter Medya’s Okan. “But there is interest in several territories for our scripts. We expect to be selling our drama formats there very soon, and that is a big, positive change for us.”

Kanal D’s Ozsumbul acknowledges that “because of the success of the finished dramas in many parts of the world, the format side was second-tier for us.” However, the company now offers a slate of format rights for international remakes.

“We have several format requests from our clients,” Ozsumbul says. “To remain competitive, it’s important to become a key content provider to all markets.”

THE LATIN FACTOR
The Latin American players are very familiar with competition. Until the advent of dizis, they offered Europe’s de facto programming alternative, the telenovela.

“There’s no denying that Turkish romances have resonated very well throughout the continent,” says Claudia Sahab, the director for Europe at Televisa Internacional. “They’re certainly taking up many [programming] slots, though fortunately novelas continue to have their own spaces, too.”

As with Turkish dramas, Latin telenovelas first made a splash in Europe via CEE. That was around two decades ago, when classic productions such as The Rich Also Cry (Los Ricos También Lloran) and Esmeralda found wild success in a region broken by the Cold War.

“The countries that had formerly been under the Iron Curtain just fell in love with these productions,” says Sahab. “These were places that had suffered so much, and in our novelas they found a means to escape their problems.”

Turkish broadcaster Kanal D has a robust distribution business for bringing its titles, among them the drama War of the Roses, to international buyers.
Televisa Internacional is touting *Secrets at the Hotel*, a long-running series that has a shorter episode count than typical novelas, for CEE buyers.

Despite the threat of competition posed by Turkish dramas, Sahab says that CEE markets will always find room for telenovelas based on the strong track record the genre has in the region.

“We have a permanent presence there, plus long-standing partnerships with clients who trust us,” she says. “Logically, every market has its cycles: there are lean years and then there are years of plenty. It’s a natural progression in the TV industry, and we’ve been here long enough that we can easily acclimate ourselves to any changes.”

**NOVELA NOVELTIES**

But evolving markets also provide new opportunities, says Paloma García, international sales executive for Caracol Internacional. The Colombian distributor first broke into CEE in 2004 and has since fed a steady pipeline of novela finished tapes and formats into the territory.

“A period of diminished activity in the region, audiences there are just beginning to refresh their taste for Latin content,” says García. “This is true of telenovelas, but also, in particular, of our series.”

In fact, a pivot away from the classic novela format and the introduction of shorter, higher-quality series has become the secret arsenal of Latin American companies fighting for relevancy on crowded broadcast schedules. At NATPE Budapest, Caracol is offering two such productions: *The White Slave*, a period drama that has already sold into Poland, Armenia and former Yugoslav countries, and *La Niña*, which is based on true events. Both series have much lower episode counts than traditional novelas.

“To surprise audiences, we’re always looking to innovate the stories we tell,” says Caracol’s García. “We’ve done this through novelas with a focus on humor, our ‘narco’ productions [about the drug trade] and now with series based on real-life people. I’m sure this is the strategy that will allow us to reach larger audiences in new territories.”

Even market stalwart Televisa has begun tinkering with its formula. Though ready-made telenovelas continue to form the heart of its catalog, the company is expanding into other forms of storytelling.

“We are now starting to produce more series, which in the past had never really been a big [area] for Televisa,” says Sahab. “We also have long-running series, such as *Secrets at the Hotel*, which at 80 or so episodes are far shorter than what you’d expect from a novela.”

The expansion into new genres also allows Latin companies to branch out of the well-worn constraints of novelas, Sahab says. “These productions are very different from what you’d expect from telenovelas, in fact, not only do they look more polished, they can also tackle stronger themes such as murder and crime, and even add a more sensual element,” she says.

However, both Latin and Turkish distributors concur that the real tug-of-war is not with each other, but with the U.S. dramas that continue to fill slots from daytime to prime time.

“In reality, we’re not looking to replace American series, because we can’t compete directly with them,” says Sahab. “But we are hoping that our new productions will at least be able to reach territories such as Northern Europe, where telenovelas have never been accepted. There’s space for all types of programming in Europe’s schedules.”

For Endemol Shine International’s Lawrence, the real promise lies outside of traditional programming slots.

“Broadcasters realize that they can offer this content on their SVOD services,” he says. “They see the appeal and the opportunity of these titles. A few years ago, picking them up would have been a problem because distribution was so limited. Now, with so many devices and so many services, they have the opportunity to do something different from just filling a slot with traditional English-language fare from the U.S. or the U.K.”

And who’s to say that this ultra-connected world won’t bring more opportunities for collaboration between producers from different cultures? At NATPE Budapest, Televisa Internacional is offering *Yugo*, the latest in its experimentation with shorter-run content, which also happens to be an adaptation of a hit Turkish drama (*Ezel*).

“There’s no lack of quality drama content in the market whatsoever,” says FOX’s Fraser. “There’s an opportunity to do a lot of new things out there. And really, it’s a buyers’ market right now. They have a complete selection of anything they could want in front of them. It is an exciting time.”

Caracol has high hopes for *The White Slave* in Europe, with deals already signed in a few countries.