

Producers try new creative and financial models

New ideas touted as television costs continue to spiral

By Steve Brennan

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As a creator, Joss Whedon's mind is traversing the dark corners of the world in which the dolls live. That's his job as showrunner on his new series, the high-profile, darkly fantastical "Dollhouse."

The Fox series, from 20th TV and set for midseason, revolves around a group of characters imprinted with the personalities and abilities they need to carry out specific missions. Afterwards, their memories are erased, and they live together in the "dollhouse," a dorm and lab combined.

As a producer, Whedon ("Buffy the Vampire Slayer") is just as far out on the edge in the all-too-real world of the showrunner at a time when paradigms are shifting at about a 7 on the Richter scale for drama production, a topic that will be front and center next month at an industry summit in Los Angeles.

Whedon is one of a brigade of producers working toward new network production models and financial structures for domestic and international consumption. He's working with Fox to make "Dollhouse" fit a slot with only half the usual commercials as part of the network's audience-friendly "Remote Free TV" scheduling experiment.

Another producer forging new directions is Fox TV Studios president Emiliano Calemzuk, who has devised an inventive, money-saving model at a time when costs continue to spiral. He has pulled together foreign broadcasters to finance the series "Mental," starring Chris Vance and Annabella Sciorra, which will be filmed in Mexico and Bogota, Colombia. Calemzuk is producing the series abroad with foreign broadcast partners before shopping it in the U.S.

They might be going about it in different ways, but both have the same aim: to help the production model work again.

"You see people trying to shake up the paradigm in big ways and small ways as we move away from the odd concept of 'let's make 30 pilots and put them all out in the fall and see what sticks,'" Whedon says of the traditional network development process. "That's neither cost-effective nor sane.

"I think we are seeing an enormous sea change now, and Fox is trying lots of things, including its 'Remote-Free TV.' "

The downsized commercial content under the "Remote Free" plan means that Whedon and his

team must create an extra 10 minutes for each episode. In effect, the model adds production effort and time while reducing commercials -- not exactly in line with the 'cut costs and increase revenue' mantra. Nevertheless, it's a new approach.

"It doesn't change the way we tell stories, it's adding to it," Whedon says. "The windows will run to 50 minutes, not 40, and that's an extra 25% on what you write."

He adds: "If it becomes an industry norm, then great. But yes, you are asking more of people and it will take more people. But at this point we are happy to be just part of the experiment."

Another part of the experience for Whedon is the parallel creation of webisodes. He's even been allowed an extra writer for the online demands.

"They want to squeeze as much out of every episode as they can to be able to hit every venue, and we are working with the network to do as much as possible without actually getting into the marketing business to drive people to the show," Whedon says.

In that sense he probably can be considered a pioneer in a time of change, much like Calemkuk, who has created buzz with his concept of producing U.S. network series in foreign territories using U.S. talent. The plan arose, he says, because that with costs continuing to rise for top product, international broadcasters -- a key factor in financing network production -- soon might not be able to afford U.S. product in sufficient quantity to meet demand.

"We increased our potential pool of buyers from a few networks in the U.S. to around 50 around the world, and so we can provide a U.S. series without the need to provide a U.S. network first," he says. "Several more productions of this nature are also planned."

Then there's the question of whether the networks can successfully transition to a year-round production schedule, with pilots shooting out of the fly trap of the traditional pilot season. Foreign buyers in town this month for the Los Angeles Screenings were being informally surveyed by the studios about their reaction to having so few pilots and more basic presentations in the wake of the WGA strike. The big question is, would they be prepared to shift buying habits to fit a new all-year production model in Hollywood?

These issues will be the focus of the inaugural "Drama Summit: New Frontiers, New Partners," set for June 25-27 at the London West Hollywood Hotel, where Calemkuk will participate in a roundtable along with CBS Paramount Network Television president David Stapf, Scott Free Prods. television president David Zucker and the Opportunity Management Co. managing director Brian Seth Hurst.

The summit is organized by well-known international TV consultancy group MediaXchange. NATPE is a founding sponsor of the event.

"Networks and production companies are all looking at different ways of doing business globally as they move into multiplatform delivery options," MediaXchange CEO Katrina Wood says. "The Drama Summit is a forum for the exchange of knowledge, experience and strategies." She adds that it's also a move toward crystalizing the industry's thinking in terms of new-age international production challenges and opportunities.