

Series Mania: Mediapro's Javier Mendez, Ran Tellem Talk 'The Head'

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Series marks one of the first high-end dramas from one of Southern Europe's major fiction forces

PARIS — Spain's Mediapro Group has been making waves with its drive into premium international TV content for some time now, co-producing "The Young Pope," of which Season 2 is currently set to shoot next year, acquiring a stake in Daniel Burman's Burman Office, teaming with Finnish pubcaster YLE for Nordic Noir "The Paradise" and "El futbol no es asi," with DirecTV. Javier Mendez's contents director and Ran Tellem, Mediapro head of international content development, were in Paris this week for the Series Mania European Co-Production Forum, looking to contact potential partners for their new English-language survival thriller "The Head."

Already boarded as a co-producer is Patrick Nebout's Swedish production company Dramacorp, a joint venture with Germany's Beta Film.

The series, which featured an impressive multimedia presentation at Tuesday's Co-pro Forum pitching sessions, draws inspiration from enclosed space thrillers like "Alien" but will itself remain terrestrial. Taking place inside Antarctica's Halley VI research station, the series is more science fact than fiction, calling on the British Antarctic Survey to help keep the series as authentic as possible. David Troncoso, who originated the series has even spent time in the Arctic, where the idea for the series was born.

"The Head's" action kicks in on April 29, the day of sundown over the Antarctic research station. This is the day that most of the 32 person staff will leave the station in the hands of the "Winterers" before 100 days of darkness. The scientists gather for one grand party. After the the plane leaves, when the Winterers wake up the next morning and convene in the main hall, they are greeted by what's left of the communications expert of the station, his severed head lying in the middle of the floor.

The series will not be a whodunit but rather a whosdoingit, said Tellem. There will be no police, no investigation, just the remaining crew, splintering into "Survivor"-like alliances and trying to decide who they can trust as they attempt to figure out who among them is a killer. The audience won't know anything the people inside the station don't and the time-line will be linear. Viewers and characters will experience the events together as they happen.

Mendez and Tellem sat down at Series Mania for a Q&A with Variety to talk about the series.

The series is described as a survival thriller. What are its original elements in a market where people insist series have to be original?

Tellem: When we started creating this we wanted to create a crime series with no investigation. No police, detectives, no questioning, no flash backs, nothing. We wanted this to happen in front of your eyes. We are saturated with police investigators in all kinds of places. We do some of that too, and we like it, but we wanted to do something different. For us this is a brand new way of telling a crime story. When we tell the story everyone assumes it's one plot line and one possible assassin, but I'm not sure it's gonna be like that.

Is this inspired by any other series?

Tellem: For us the metaphor we used is a space ship. I think if you want to think inspiration with a different motive and engine, maybe it's closer to the "Alien series." You are in an enclosed place, there is great danger, it's coming from all directions and you have to confront it to end it. I know that's not a TV series but I think it's the closest inspiration we have.

You have said there could be fantasy elements in the series. Would those elements be real or imagine by the people living in the habitat?

Tellem: Both ! We are used to assuming there is one story line, that we nail down the killer. In our example, you can make mistakes, you can think somebody is the killer and you kill him and it's not the killer. There is another body the next day. The plot starts going in different directions.

So there could be more than one killer by the end?

Tellem: When there are people killing people it's an interesting environment to close old arguments and feuds because it's easy to dump the blame on the mysterious killer so more than one thing can happen.

How are you developing? Whose idea was it, who is creating, will you have a writers room? This is a very interesting early look at Mediapro developing a series.

Tellem: It started with an idea from David Troncoso who actually spent some time in the Antarctic. He came inspired by this place and this is how it started. We started with Halley VI, which is a very interesting caterpillar moving building, and we knew we wanted to create a drama that takes place in a closed place. Then we teamed with Dramacorp.

Can I ask why you teamed up with them? They are part of a very interesting company, Beta.

Mendez: We love our partners. It's always better to work with someone and that is a great company to work with.

Ran: I believe in a writer's room. When a group of people get really close and start pitching back and forth the best ideas come. I think the era of this writer in the attic writing a story is long gone. On almost every project we do we team up with another creative team and I think our ideas are getting much better. This is international television for me. It's what's happening now.

The show will have a writer's room then. What will you do for a head writer?

Tellem: We are in discussions now for a writer and director to run the show. We will be part of the writers room but like you said there must be one manager and one voice deciding, it will be their voice.

Mendez: This show needs a head writer!

Do you know where the head writer will come from?

Tellem: It depends on who we bring in and what they are used to and what they want to do. What we will do first is delve into the project, do full-length research, and then start creating again.

With a show that takes place in one interior location you have tremendous freedom in where you can shoot. Any idea where that might be?

Tellem: That's exactly it. As I said before, it's like a spaceship show. As we know the Enterprise never actually went into outer-space, it was in a studio. It's the same thing here which makes it much easier and economical to shoot the show because it's inside the Halley VI, the icon of our show, possibly for seasons to come.

Mendez: We would prefer to shoot in Spain as we have the tax rebates and it's a great place to shoot.

How authentic will the interior be? Do you have connections with people working or who have worked there?

Mendez: We have actually been in contact with the people in charge of the station and that's how we got the images.

Does shooting in one space allow you to allocate more of the budget to

Mendez: I think in Spain and Israel we are experts in that, delivering high-quality production with the lowest cost. In many shows you are limited by weather conditions, light hours, all these things that drive you crazy as a producer. Once you go inside a studio you turn off the electricity and we start working. It's so easy to consolidate the hours and the time and the people coming from other countries to shoot.

Tellem : I think when your budget is limited you understand you need to amaze your audience with plot moves and characters which are the strong weapons of a drama series.

The cast sounds like it is still yet to be determined. What are you hoping to do with the characters?

Tellem: The reason why we liked pitching here at Series Mania is that we hope that we can find partners before we start writing. This way we know exactly what kind of nationalities we have and we write specifically for them.

How do you get people to keep coming back to the show?

Tellem: Usually when you create a drama you are looking for your engine, the ticking clock, for the reason to watch the next episode and suspense is the easiest. It's always fatal, dramatic, do or die, it's not a question of emotion. If you watch the first season of the reality Survivor, there was a strong element of watching who would be eliminated every episode. There is a bit of that in our show. There is an elimination in every episode. Maybe when you do it really well there could be a double elimination or no elimination at all.

Is there a pattern in the projects you are doing?

Mendez: We are very story-driven. Story is the most important thing regardless where it takes place.

Are you looking to add more talent? For example with Daniel it's a kind of joint venture.

Mendez: That's the idea. We are about to start our first Netflix show, with Daniel Burman: "Edha" Daniel has a great mind to identify the talent to create writers rooms. The idea is to help us identify the best talent especially in Latin America to create premium content for all the world. For us Latin America is a key territory. Argentina, Colombia, Miami with Imagina US. Our colleagues are ready and will have something soon hopefully.

When you say Latin America is a key territory is that because of the growth potential you see?

Mendez: I think that the audience there is getting sick of telenovelas. They have just found through Netflix something different so there is a new narrative. They are hungry. 10 years ago "Narcos" was impossible. Now you see it as very natural. It's mostly Spanish, some English, through the eyes of an American DEA agent. Now this is no problem.

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