

Kate Bulkley says one of the best kept secrets of the UK's production sector is the steady advance of Sony Pictures Television International

It has taken the better part of eight years for Sony Pictures Television International (SPTI) to become more than just a bit player in the UK production scene. Patience, putting significant funds in the right places at the right time and a little bit of old-fashioned luck have made it happen.

The international TV unit of Tokyo-based Sony has traditionally been in charge of selling programmes to broadcasters around the world and running international channels. But in the past decade it has increasingly involved itself with TV production in local markets with local broadcasters and its

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latest hotspot is the UK. SPTI has three primetime programmes in production here, including its most expensive project to date, a medical drama with ITV said to be costing around £800,000 an hour. The company has 10 scripted series in active development – both dramas and comedies – plus a co-development deal with the BBC covering two comedies and one drama.

Sony's local production strategy has been beefed up recently with the blessing of Michael Lynton, who was brought in by Sony CEO Howard Stringer as chairman of Sony Pictures Entertainment in late 2003. To that end, last month Sony hired the British ex-president of Granada Entertainment USA, Antony Root, as its new head of Europe for SPTI.

Also coming on board is long-time British producer and director Mike Dormer who is working with SPTI in London in a production role, bringing experience from projects like *Clocking Off* and *The Bill*.

Intriguingly, there are rumours that SPTI is poised to take a 10% to 15% stake in Elisabeth Murdoch's independent production company, Shine. Sony won't comment directly on Shine, but John McMahon, the managing director of Europe for SPTI, says the company would "absolutely look to acquire a UK independent producer" as a way to grow its local production business.

How to keep a low profile

Given all this activity, it's somewhat bemusing that SPTI has such a low profile. There are perhaps two main reasons why: first, a Brit has been calling the UK tune for the past five years – the savvy and highly respected Ann Harris, known within the industry as someone who gets the job done quietly; and second, she and Sony insist on not being another "big and ugly" American studio.

The combination of Harris's know-how and her blueprint for a long-term growth strategy has led to an increasing number of deals with the top terrestrials and even a supernatural teen drama, *Hex*, on Sky One that netted SPTI (and co-producer Shine) its first British TV award in the shape of the Broadcasting Press Guild's Multichannel Award.



Ann Harris, vice-president of UK production for Sony Pictures Television International



Think global conglomerate Act local producer

Says Jane Tranter, head of drama commissioning at the BBC: "Ann is perhaps the industry's best kept secret. She's a good person and really savvy. I think it's taken a while for Sony to get noticed because Ann and Sony have been getting used to the rhythm of drama development in the UK. But four or five years is not really a long time in drama, so it's not surprising they're just getting traction now."

It all began with a pitch by Harris in 2000 to Michael Grindon, the president of Sony's international television division. Working at the time as a consultant for a variety of broadcasters, including Channel 4 and A&E, Harris created a business plan that centred on building relationships with UK broadcasters and ramping up Sony's involvement in UK TV production stage by stage.

It was a clear departure from a prior joint-venture with UK independent, Golden Square Productions, that over its three-year life never quite worked. "I mapped something out that started as a gentle toe in the water, with low overheads, low exposure and a distribution-driven approach," says Harris.

Armed with a "low-six figure development fund", her goal

was to build more and more creative involvement and eventually put Sony's development money into its own ideas.

Harris has worked hard on UK commissioners to differentiate the perception of Sony from that of the other big US studios. "We don't want UK TV people to think that we would send in hoards of Americans and insist on American casting and everything else a UK broadcaster might fear about doing business with a US studio," she says.

Sony may be acting local, but Harris and her small team (including an assistant, a head of development and "half a legal and business affairs person") can also go global thanks to Sony's worldwide ties and distribution footprint.

Harris, whose official title is vice-president of UK production for SPTI, began her TV career with the BBC in programme acquisitions in the mid-1970s, then moved to the embryonic Channel 4, where she helped raise co-production finance. Eight years later she went to work for ITV company TVS in the same capacity until it lost its franchise. She then worked at indie Circle Productions, until it was sold to Southern Star.

"Ann has a wealth of experience from the UK production

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market, but she also knows what will travel well so she's able to see what will fit for us," says McMahon.

"A lot of the time, the approach of the US studios has been strictly as financier and distributor. But we're actually getting in there on the creative side, putting people in locally or bringing them in from the US and getting involved in story arcs and the physical production of the show.

"We've got money, we've got distribution and we have all this creative talent that we want to put in this as well, and Ann is a part of that."

Harris sees access to funds as increasingly crucial since Ofcom has mandated that broadcasters share programme rights more equitably with producers.

Broadcasters are increasingly loath to fund an entire project by themselves, especially with the new limits on back-end rights. "We all want to believe that essentially this is a very creative business, but increasingly if you don't have the front-end money and the back-end money then it's a struggle," she says. "And if you've got front-end money and back-end money coming from the same company then you are in a very strong position. That's our edge, our USP."

Sony goes in search of laughs

When it comes to the bottom line for Sony's international TV production, the actual income is a tiny percentage compared with SPTI's global programme licensing business, but it is profitable as a business and is "growing exponentially", according to MacMahon.

Harris's "mixed economy" approach to her schedule of projects in the UK has helped. She's happy to have different levels of economic and creative commitment for different programmes.

This means not limiting herself to dramas, like *Sea of Souls* (BBC1) or game shows, like *Russian Roulette* (ITV), and factual programming like *Dragons' Den* (BBC2) and *Rock Face* (BBC2). She is keen to enter the comedy domain as well and started developing her first comedy drama series 18 months ago with the BBC.

Her activities are also drawing in some top-name writers, including one of Britain's best-known comedy writing duos, Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran, and high-profile novelist Fay Weldon. Both are writing pilots for SPTI. Harris says now-adays broadcasters are pro-actively calling her with ideas whereas less than a year ago she had to bang on their doors.

Harris's most keenly anticipated new programme is the aforementioned ITV medical series, *Golden Hour*, a Sony-led co-production with Talkback Thames, which began shooting in April.

But Harris will also be pushing on with already successful shows like the reality business series, *Dragons' Den*, that has just started a second season on BBC 2, and *Hex*, which is now in production for its second season for Sky.

Since starting in 1992 in Germany, SPTI has built up local production bases across Europe, in France, the UK, Italy, Spain and most recently Russia. But the UK is always seen by the rest of the world as a trendsetting TV market, so it's an important place for Sony to be successful in. It looks like the Sony secret is now well and truly out. ■

Sony productions (clockwise from top): *Hex* on Sky One; *Dragons' Den* for BBC2; and *As If* for Channel 4