

Gunning for a greater slice of US broadcasting

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By Matthew Garrahan in Los Angeles

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Inside the red brick Los Angeles building that houses BBC Worldwide Productions a full-size dalek from *Doctor Who* guards the entrance to the office, while ancient Egyptian artefacts hang on the walls.

It is a quirky setting for a British invasion of the US television industry but it is from here that Jane Tranter is developing scripted dramas and reality programming for the US market.

In her first interview since being appointed to run the corporation's commercial Hollywood production arm 2½ years ago, Ms Tranter says she plans to develop programmes in line with the BBC's ethos – even if they are not set in Britain.

"There's this British obsession that American dramas are better than British ones," she says, citing examples such as AMC's *Mad Men* or HBO's new fantasy epic *Game of Thrones*. "But American cable companies love our drama."

She has sold several scripts she hopes will make it to the screen, including an adaptation of Amanda Foreman's book *A World on Fire*, an account of the Anglo American relationship during the American Civil War.

So far, US cable channels and broadcasters have been receptive: along with more than 20 script development deals struck with US partners, BBC Worldwide Productions also has 17 unscripted series – non-fiction shows or reality programmes – in "different stages of production".

Ms Tranter has extended the remit of the Los Angeles operation since she replaced Paul Telegdy as its head.

Under Mr Telegdy's leadership, the company scored its biggest hit to date with *Dancing with the Stars*, a reworking for the ABC network of the BBC series *Strictly Come Dancing*.

But, since Mr Telegdy's departure to NBC Universal, the focus of what has been renamed BBC Worldwide Productions has changed.

Ms Tranter says: "Paul didn't run a production company... he ran a sales and reformatting agency.

"I started a production company around what Paul had already built."

Ms Tranter rose to prominence at the BBC working on drama series, including *Casualty*, and literary adaptations, such as *David Copperfield*, and had one of the corporation's biggest hits when she commissioned Russell T. Davies' reworking of *Doctor Who* in 2005.

When she left for Los Angeles in 2009 she was responsible for all the corporation's fiction output – some 500 hours of television annually.

Since coming to the US she has maintained her close relationship with Mr Davies and brought Julie Gardner, his production partner, to bolster production efforts in Los Angeles.

When BBC spending is under relentless scrutiny, she is keen to stress that BBC Worldwide Productions is financially self-sufficient.

"Every cup that we drink from is cleared and paid for by what we do here."

Profits generated by the division are ploughed back into the BBC.

She is dismissive of speculation that BBC Worldwide could be privatised. "I don't think that will happen. There's been talk of it and it would be a very good instant cash raiser for the BBC if it needed it. But BBC Worldwide is also a consistent cash raiser year on year."

Given the commercial mission of BBC Worldwide Productions – and the BBC’s public service remit – she is also wary of trumpeting achievements too loudly.

“I sometimes sense that if we get too successful we would be an embarrassment to the BBC.”

But with the premiere of *Torchwood: Miracle Day*, her first US co-production, weeks from airing on the Starz channel, she has decided to break her silence. “It’s been the most complicated co-production in the history of the world,” she sighs.

She has high hopes for the series and it has served as a template for her other scripted plans.

She accepts it will take time to become a force in US TV but plans to stick to a British way of doing things.

“The point of us being here is to expand the global reach of the BBC in a quiet kind of way,” she said.

“We’re global ambassadors of the BBC brand for everything we do ... everything we has to be made to exhibit and uphold the BBC’s values.”

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