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MGM TV expands globally

'Stargate' franchise morphs into film

By ELIZABETH GUIDER

CANNES -- The Lion is back on the Croisette for this week's Mip TV, this time to roar about its international channels biz and its stalwart "Stargate" TV franchise, the longest-running sci-fi skein in history.

And back home, MGM's newly revived home entertainment unit is trumpeting an ambitious slate of project extensions, based on properties already in the Lion's den.

At a press lunch Tuesday in Cannes, the studio's international networks prexy Bruce Tuchman put the accent on the company's "rapid expansion" of channels, both in terms of geographical reach and subscriber growth.

Since Mipcom last October, "we've made tremendous progress," he said.

Company has set up a joint-venture channel in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania with Liberty Global, and with partner ITI in Poland for an HD channel.

Launches in India, Russia and Korea also are on the upswing with subs.

The MGM channel brand has not yet cracked the difficult but potentially lucrative U.K., French and Italian markets. The studio is not willing to pay for carriage in those difficult territories, but believes its moves to convert many of its movies to high-def will eventually help it get a foothold in those territories.

Because the company has such a huge library (4,000 movie titles; 10,000 series hours) Tuchman also is licensing product on the expanded channels rival studios like Fox and NBC U are launching abroad.

Exec would not pinpoint the percentage of the Lion's overall revenues that come from the global channel biz, but he did confirm the division was "profitable and growing."



MGM's 'Stargate' is TV's longest-running sci-fi series.

On the TV programming front, MGM worldwide distribution prexy Jim Packer said the "Stargate" franchise is being reinvigorated by the upcoming release of two related movies, "Stargate Continuum" and "Stargate: Ark of Truth," as well as the healthy start to the 10th season of the original "Stargate: SGI" series on Sci Fi recently. "The Ark of Truth" began lensing April 15; "Continuum," which will feature epic ice camp scenes shot on location in the Arctic, will resume filming on May 15. Richard Dean Anderson will be reprising his role as Gen. Jack O'Neill in the movie.

"We're in a great situation with 'Stargate,'" Packer said, adding that both "SGI" and "Atlantis" (now in its fourth season) were getting renewed easily abroad for higher prices.

A third TV series, tentatively called "Stargate: Universe," also is in the works, though no details were available.

It being MGM, it was impossible not to hear about James Bond, especially the effect the success of "Casino Royale" has had on the foreign TV buyers of movies. (The pic has grossed \$550 million in worldwide theatrical.)

"I don't have one foreign territory that hasn't come back to see the Bond catalog, and in some cases to rethink their whole approach to broadcasting the earlier films," Packer said.

And then comes "The Hobbit." The "LOTR"-inspired spinoff movie is still in an early (and legally cantankerous stage) but MGM chief operating officer Rick Sands said the split on who does what with it ancillary-wise is being worked out with co-partner New Line. Almost certainly, MGM will be the international TV distrib, and will likely have certain foreign territories in theatrical, as well.

As for how to exploit the new media platforms that keep on proliferating both at home and overseas, Sands is hardnosed: "In my book, it's all about getting paid for quality content. Beyond all the blah, blah, blah about these new platforms, they're just a new pipe."

Back in Los Angeles Tuesday, MGM unveiled a number of home entertainment projects, focusing on proven hits with young consumers. The plans were spelled out by the VP of the new division, Jason Weiss.

"By leveraging film and television franchises, which have already proved to be popular with specific targeted demo groups, we're able to both replenish our library while also maximizing revenues from our existing film and television programming," Weiss said.

MGM has plans to release a dozen such projects per year.

Targeting young adult males, MGM will develop a new installment of the corrupt-cop thriller "Dark Blue," written by John Herzfeld. The studio also will develop "Audrey Rose," a remake of the 1977 suspense film to be penned by Andrea Meyer.

The studio also will tackle genre fare based on original screenplays, including "Pet," a horror-thriller written by Jeremy Slater and the actioner "Angelmaker," written by Alexander Vesha.

Aiming at young women, the studio will extend its girl empowerment franchises: "Legally Blondes," written by Chad and Dara Creasey, stars British twins Camilla and Rebecca Rosso as cousins of the Elle Woods character. The studio will also release the figure skater-themed "Cutting Edge 3," written by Susan Jansen, whose credits include "Lizzie McGuire."

Focusing on young adults, MGM will develop a version of the dark comedy based on the Showtime series "Dead Like Me" to be written by Steven Godchaux and directed by Stephen Herek. Currently casting, MGM will start production shortly on "Captive," a thriller written and directed by Amanda Gusack.

These straight-to-video projects will presumably be available to Packer's international TV division for distribution to foreign TV outlets.

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