

WITH SMART BRANDING, CASTING AND WRITING,
UNIVERSAL CABLE PRODUCTIONS IS TURNING SERIES INTO
GOLD AT USA AND SYFY NETWORKS.

THE GOLDEN TOUCH

BY GINA PICCALO

Optimism isn't abundant when media executives talk shop these days, particularly when the shop is NBC Universal. But the top dogs at that company's new TV studio, Universal Cable Productions, sound downright sunny. Unlike their network and filmmaking cousins, they have a lot to celebrate.

In its first year, Universal Cable Productions, a new division of NBC Universal Cable Entertainment, has generated a slew of hits for the USA network and successfully rebranded

the Syfy channel with shows that garnered their own record-setting ratings. Now — as NBC Universal roils with anticipation over a looming sale to Comcast — UCP executives are talking about expansion, pitching shows to the networks and outside cable channels, launching web series and even a film division.

Much of the credit goes to studio president Bonnie Hammer and her network chiefs who moonlight as coheads of the studio's original programming: USA's Jeff Wachtel and Syfy's Mark Stern. Together, they carefully curate USA and Syfy, often

remaining closely involved through the evolution from script to marketing to international licensing.

This strategy, Hammer says, leaves little room for ego-driven maneuvers. There's very little squabbling over production costs or story arcs. Everyone knows their brand, knows their budget and knows their limits.

"We start from a point of familiarity and clarity," she says. "Some of the basic problems that projects are often riddled with just aren't there from the beginning."

Nowhere is the craving for clarity and good management more evident

PHOTOILLUSTRATION BY TODD REUBLIN

right now than within the tumultuous sphere of General Electric's entertainment companies. In October, GE ousted Universal Pictures cochairmen Marc Shmuger and David Linde after a dreadful summer at the box office. In July, NBC Universal Entertainment cochairman Ben Silverman stepped down, his cochair Marc Graboff was demoted and in their place Jeff Gaspin was installed as chairman of the newly formed NBC Universal Television Entertainment, with oversight of all broadcast and cable networks. (In addition to USA and Syfy, the cable entertainment group includes Bravo, Chiller, Oxygen, Sleuth and Universal HD.)

By comparison, Hammer's UCP is an oasis of calm.

"It's experience and stability," says Tom Nunan, who ran UPN years ago and now produces the Starz Entertainment TV spinoff of the Oscar-winning film *Crash*; he's also a visiting assistant professor in UCLA's School of Film and Television graduate program. "People know what Jeff wants at USA. People know what Mark wants. It makes life a lot better, not just at their networks, but also for the whole Hollywood community. Those are the ancillary benefits to good management over there."

Clearly, Hammer's team is doing something right. UCP has had a spectacularly good first year. The studio's first new original series, *Royal Pains*, had the most-watched first season of any original USA series, averaging a healthy 7.5 million viewers. It also marked the fourth consecutive year that USA had the most-watched new series on cable.

UCP's second new show, the supernatural procedural *Warehouse 13*, is the most successful series in Syfy's seventeen years, with 4 million viewers per episode. *White Collar*, a 20th Century Fox Film Corporation production, debuted on USA in late October to critical lauds and 5.4 million viewers. The season finale of USA's *Burn Notice*, produced by Fox Television Group, was the most-watched scripted episode on cable last summer with 9.1 million viewers.

"From my point of view, it's all about intriguing content, good writing, good casting — figuring out what's in the zeitgeist," Hammer says.

The top-down management approach means that Stern and Wachtel help plot story and character development, an unusually hands-on style for a couple

of studio heads, but one that works for some showrunners.

"This was by far the most streamlined and effective and efficient process I've ever had," says Michael Rauch, an executive producer of *Royal Pains*. "You can trust them about having a sixth sense about what will work."

When the economy tanked, Rauch says, Wachtel wanted to tweak the show's lead character, Hank (Mark Feuerstein), a concierge surgeon who serves the rich in the Hamptons.

"There was a very strong sense that an audience would not want to watch a show about ridiculously wealthy people each week," Rauch says. "So we 'dimensionalized' Hank's character. We're able to see he cares as much about people who can't afford surgery as he does about these people living in thirty-bedroom mansions."

But close attention doesn't work for everyone. In *Plain Sight's* creator David Maples and coexecutive producer Paul Stupin stepped down as executive producers on the series last summer after several changes were made. The dreary personal life of U.S. Marshal Mary Shannon (Mary McCormack) was downplayed to make the show a more upbeat procedural, and characters played by Lesley Ann Warren and Todd Williams were reduced.

Wachtel also retooled the season finale. He told E! Online that the two-part ending Maples had written was "kind of melancholy" and "a little droopy." Maples concluded his vision conflicted with USA's overall tone.

Syfy's Stern was similarly involved on *Warehouse 13*, after having shepherded that project for years. He even reviews script outlines, well before writing begins.

"The management style has been very hands-on," says executive producer Jack Kenny. "That has its pros and cons. But I think it's responsible for the success of the show. He [Stern] believed in it. The network as a whole believed in it. And they sold it like nobody's business."

Indeed, Universal Cable Productions doesn't skimp on its marketing campaigns. Kenny is still gobsmacked by the publicity his show got earlier this year. "I've never seen a launch like this," he says. "There was studio backing. There was a team effort. We were everywhere... billboards, magazines. At the end of the day, this is a cable channel. It felt like a network launch."

UCP took several steps to build buzz

for *Caprica*, the highly anticipated prequel to Syfy's cult hit *Battlestar Galactica*, which wrapped in March after four seasons. It released the two-hour *Caprica* pilot on DVD nine months before the series premiere, set for January 2010. This past fall, the network started screening *Caprica* at film festivals in San Diego, Austin and Woodstock. And to spark interest in its upcoming TV movie *Battlestar Galactica: The Plan*, Syfy released the film on DVD earlier this year, well ahead of its expected 2010 airing.

"One of the secrets to USA's and Syfy's success," says Syfy's Stern, "is that we have a very clear sense of who we are and who we are trying to reach."

Not surprisingly, Hammer is a big believer in "brand filters," creating neat paradigms for each network and then programming accordingly. USA is "blue skies" — both literally and figuratively. Hammer sums it up: characters are "humanly flawed" but not "negatively dysfunctional." Stories are set in scenic locales like Miami, the Hamptons and New Mexico and offer "fun" and "upbeat escapism."

In *White Collar*, Neal Caffrey (Matt Bomer) is a handsome escaped con man working for the Feds and looking to win back his true love. In *Royal Pains*, Hank is a disgraced but lovable surgeon trying to salvage his reputation. In *Burn Notice*, Michael Westen (Jeffrey Donovan) is a blacklisted spy hoping to redeem himself in South Beach. In *Psych*, Shawn Spencer (James Roday) is a trained detective pretending to be psychic in Santa Barbara. All are shows that go down easy and repeat well.

"USA is starting to become known for slightly more youthful, quirkier, character-driven, procedural dramas that don't require a lot of work as a viewer," says UCLA's Nunan. "They're easy to digest, typically stand-alone procedurals that blend well with their biggest staple, the huge *Law & Order* franchise."

Then there's the newly rebranded Syfy, formerly the Sci Fi Channel, which Hammer describes as "more wondrous" and "more human." The network's long-gestating shift included "Imagine Greater," a slogan that Hammer and her team say helped broaden its appeal. And, they say, it more accurately reflects Syfy program-

ming — more *Indiana Jones* meets *X-Files* meets *Moonlighting* (as Hammer described *Warehouse 13*) than *Twilight Zone* meets *Star Trek*.

"Most people, when they thought of science fiction, it was space operas," Hammer says. "It was about the future. But that's not what the channel is really about."

Fans and critics puzzled over the change as an expensive experiment that would drive away hard-core sci-fi fans. "It makes no sense," cried blogger Nikki Finke on *DeadlineHollywoodDaily.com*, "in this climate of economic crisis and budget cuts and staff layoffs that NBC Universal would waste money like this." After all, Syfy already was consistently gaining subscriber households and advertising revenues.

A UCP spokeswoman declined to divulge the cost, but the campaign certainly wasn't cheap. It included a breathtaking two-minute film by London's 4Creative that was overflowing with visual effects, from 3-D graffiti and a T-Rex to M.C. Escher's *Relativity* lithograph come to life.

Executives say the rebranding helped the network draw larger and younger audiences. In addition to the success of *Warehouse 13*, ratings are up for the third season of the network's dramatic comedy *Eureka*, about a town of genius inventors, and its popular paranormal unscripted series *Ghost Hunters* is prepping a sixth season and a college edition.

"There was a certain obvious trepidation to it," says Syfy's Stern. "It's paid off in a major way. We've been able to use the adjustment to own and brand our name but also invite people in who might have been put off by our previous name."

Like most other cable networks, Syfy and USA already stream some of their most popular shows online. The studio has also begun posting games and webisodes tied to its original series that target young viewers, like *Psych: The Teen Years* and *Little Monk*. Next, Hammer is considering a Syfy late-night show, an animated series and some single-camera comedies. Also in the works is a Syfy film label that would produce small theatrical releases and movies that would go directly to DVD.

"The challenge now is to find out how to monetize those eyeballs, regardless of how they watch," Hammer says. "Again, it's all in the writing, the casting. A good show is still a good show." ☐

THE HIT LIST



WHITE COLLAR USA

The hottest new show on USA, produced by 20th Century Fox Film Corporation, stars newcomer Matt Bomer as a charming con artist working for the FBI. Critics love it and a \$10 million marketing campaign made for a healthy premiere in October. Tim DeKay costars as the former nemesis-turned-partner.



ROYAL PAINS USA

The first UCP-produced hit series is a witty procedural starring Mark Feuerstein as a hotshot New York surgeon who gets stuck in the Hamptons making house calls. Paulo Costanzo is his ne'er-do-well brother and Reshma Shetty is his nurse.



WAREHOUSE 13 Syfy

In the network's most successful show, two Secret Service agents — an intuitive jock (Eddie McClintock) and analytical beauty (Joanne Kelly) — are charged with finding and retrieving the supernatural artifacts that belong in the mysterious warehouse.



BURN NOTICE USA

Action-packed — and packing plenty of humor — this series, produced by Fox Television Group, is cable's number-one show. Jeffrey Donovan plays a blacklisted spy on the run in Miami who tries to help a few people along the way. Gabrielle Anwar is his lovely ex-girlfriend and Bruce Campbell plays his best friend.

PSYCH USA

In one of the more inventive plotlines on TV, James Roday is a trained detective so talented



he has to pass himself off as a psychic to be believed. Corbin Bernsen is his disapproving dad and Dué Hill is his unwitting accomplice.



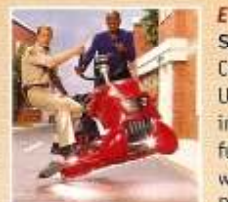
MONK USA

This series, now in its eighth and final season, started USA's winning streak and helped redefine the network as the "Characters Welcome" channel. Multi-E Emmy winner Tony Shalhoub stars as an obsessive-compulsive detective.



CAPRICA Syfy

The much-anticipated prequel to *Battlestar Galactica* premieres in January. The network is billing it as "TV's first sci-fi family saga." It stars Eric Stoltz, Esai Morales and Paula Malcomson.



EUREKA Syfy

Colin Ferguson, as a U.S. marshal, stumbles into an Oregon town full of genius inventors working for the Justice Department and reluctantly takes over as sheriff. One of the network's most reliable hits, the fourth season airs next spring.



IN PLAIN SIGHT USA

Mary McCormack stars as a U.S. marshal assigned to the federal witness protection program in New Mexico and plagued by her own crazy family. Fred Weller plays her partner. —G.P.