BritBox International

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BritBox International hungry for inspiring British drama

By Gon Akyuz 22/01/2025

BritBox International is keen to partner on the next inspiring British drama and tap a range of 'exotic' voices from across the UK's nations and regions to engage its North American audiences.



Robert Schildhouse

For UK commissioners and producers of high-end scripted content seeking solutions to their financial challenges, BBC Studios-owned international SVoD service BritBox is positioning itself as a potential answer.

"We present ourselves as a bit of a solution and we are definitely seen as that in this market," says Robert Schildhouse, president and general manager of BritBox International for North America. "We are 100% dedicated to the UK content marketplace and BritBox is currently the best British content for audiences outside the UK in the markets we operate, principally North America, but we're also in Australia and the four Nordic countries."

Back in March 2024, BBC Studios announced its £255m (US$313m) buyout of ITV's joint venture stake in BritBox International, along with BritBox UK being folded into ITV's streaming service ITVX. Schildhouse, formerly general manager for North America and group editorial manager for BritBox International, took over in his expanded role in April 2024. The restructure also saw BritBox exit South Africa in August 2024.

BritBox currently works "very closely with the UK content market, as well as ITV and parent company BBC," says Schildhouse. In particular, "North America tends to be the first stop when there's a gap and there's a need to fill in the finance plan to find an anchor tenant outside UK broadcaster. Our strong preference is to have a UK broadcaster already set up, or at least in deep conversation when we're brought in."



BritBox has picked up police series Blue Lights

The streamer also gets directly pitched numerous projects in various stages of conversation with the UK content ecosystem, adds the exec.

"We have a very specific audience profile that we're targeting. We are not a full-quadrant service, maybe a bit broader than just the costume drama space that Masterpiece is in, but we're also in that space," he says.

On the back of 2024's success with new British co-commissions like biopic Archie and pickups like police series Blue Lights, BritBox's 2025 scripted originals slate announcements include The Lady, a co-commission with ITV and Left Bank Pictures. Based on true events, the four-part drama written by Debbie O'Malley (Payback, Humans, Harlots), centres on the story of Jane Andrews, a former dresser to Sarah Ferguson, Duchess of York, who lost her job with the Duchess, fell love with a businessman Thomas Cressman, and was then convicted of his murder.

Other dramas with BritBox backing include period drama Outrageous about the Mitford sisters, done in partnership with BBC Studios-owned UKTV. The six-parter written by Sarah Williams, draws from Mary S Lovell's biography The Mitford Girls (titled The Sisters in the US), and is produced by Firebird Pictures. The series is due to launch on BritBox in North America this year.

Further scripted collaborations include Riot Women with the BBC. Created by Sally Wainwright (Unforgiven, Happy Valley, Gentleman Jack, Last Tango in Halifax) the series about an all-female punk band from Yorkshire, is made by Drama Republic.

Agatha Christie murder mystery Towards Zero (Pic: James Pardon)

Another 2025 highlight is Towards Zero, the latest Agatha Christie murder mystery, adapted from the novel by Rachel Bennette, directed by Sam Yates and produced by ITV Studios-owned Mammoth Screen and Agatha Christie Limited for BBC and BritBox International, with Fifth Season attached for global distribution. The three-part event includes Angelica Huston as Lady Tressilian, aunt of freshly divorced tennis star Nevile Strange, played by Oliver Jackson-Cohen.

BritBox is also partnering with other US buyers in North America. Examples include Joan, which first launched on ITV and in the US on The CW in autumn 2024. The six-part series is adapted from the memoir of jewel thief Joan Hannington by Anna Symon and produced by Snowed-In Productions, with A83 International on board for distribution.

Joan "speaks to some of the creativity and how we think about putting shows on our service," says Schildhouse. "We are sharing it in the US with The CW network, which doesn't typically participate in the British television ecosystem, but they made a bet. We saw a limited overlap in audiences and were able to jump in and participate in that." Canada's CBC also picked up rights to the series, airing it on CBC Gem in October 2024.

Another recent dual windowing deal by BBC Studios was the BBC's 2024 crime hit The Jetty, which was also been shared stateside between BritBox and Hulu.

Riot Women from the BBC, created by Sally Wainwright

In December, BritBox International picked up ITV 2024 comedy drama Douglas is Cancelled, a four-parter from Steven Moffat and Hartswood Films about cancel culture, starring Hugh Bonneville. The series will launch on BritBox in North America this March.

"It's a very significant slate of programming where we can come in and help get these shows made," asserts Schildhouse.

"I spend a lot of time with commissioners in the UK. Think about that shared space where [the drama project] accomplishes a goal here, and a lot of the broadcasters are programming to British audiences for very specific reasons. But there's a subset of shows that also play and have real resonance outside the UK, and specifically in the North American market where we're most prevalent. We're trying to find those shows."

Schildhouse continues: "We work very closely with them upstream to identify things that interest both of us, and we've been very successful and identified some projects that have worked very well here."

He cites BBC detective comedy hit Ludwig, which has already been commissioned for a second season. "It's the biggest scripted show in UK in years, but I don't think anybody in the US really knows it exists and we will have that show in the spring."

David Mitchell stars as Ludwig

BritBox's strategy, says Schildhouse, is about "working with the entire ecosystem, from the producers to the studios, distributors, commissioners at the broadcasters to find where we have some common ground and where we can bring great British television to audiences outside of the UK."

The exec is also keen for BritBox to represent a diversity of British voices and British regions across the UK, ranging from **Blue Lights**, set in Northern Ireland, to upcoming comedy drama Death Valley, set in Wales and starring Timothy Spall.

"We know that American audiences see that as the marriage of familiarity but also something quite exotic," Schildhouse says. "Maybe those of you who are British don't necessarily think of yourselves as that exotic, but as Americans, we do. People love a sense of place and in British television often the setting itself is a character in the story. So when you tell a brilliant story, like so many British creators and writers do, and you bring in this sense of place that is so unique and different, that is what tends to resonate so well with our audience.

"We really love uplifting stories," he continues. "The line I say pretty often is, 'We want people to feel better after watching the show than before they watched the show'. That's really a line we've identified, which will work for us and our audiences."

Although other languages are spoken across Britain, non-English-language content is unlikely to make it onto BritBox.

"There are lots of places to find diverse programming across the streaming dial and the way we think about the marketplace is we play a very specific role," Schildhouse says. "We know consumers put their own portfolios together and, if that's something that they're interested in, there are lots of places where you can find them. Squid Game is still the number one streamed show in the history of Netflix. We talk about that, and I have an extensive experience professionally in non-English language programming. But what we do very well, and the products we make for our audience is British television, which has a very specific texture and feel to it and is in the English language."

Historically, BritBox has also backed shows that "aren't necessarily set in the UK but are still British talent and British so the essence of British television oozes from these shows. It doesn't have to exclusively be in the UK, but the English language tends to be the table stakes for us. That's the expectation our audience has for our service," he says.

While many services are mulling their futures in the context of young audiences migrating to the likes of YouTube in increasing numbers, Schildhouse says it's currently not a major concern for BritBox. The streamer uses YouTube to advertise, as well as TikTok and Instagram extensively "to just get the word out and find users where they are," says Schildhouse.

"Even as we seek to age down our audience, and I think everyone's looking to do that in some way, shape or form, we have a little bit of an older demographic than YouTube's core demo. But from a concern about just sheer attention taken away from us, we don't really see YouTube as a threat to our business."

Equally, Schildhouse downplays the attention ramping up around AI-created content. "At BritBox, we love human-told stories, so hopefully that takes the temperature down a little bit. We still believe that's where the best storytelling is going to come from. AI is going to be super useful for us as a tech company for a lot of the back-end processes we have, but from a storytelling perspective and what our consumers watch, I don't see this changing," he says.

Asked what single type of content he'd like for 2025 and beyond, Schildhouse replies: "We're principally in North America and the United States, so my one-word answer is 'inspiring'."

Robert Schildhouse was talking in a panel session on global drama commissioning trends C21's recent Content London event.

PRIORITIES

Which areas of commissioning are your current priority?
British drama. "We really love uplifting stories. The line I say pretty often is, 'We want people to feel better after watching the show than before they watched the show'. That's really a line we've identified, which will work for us and our audiences."

What one type of content would you like for 2025 or beyond?
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What don't you need?
Non-English language shows. "A drama doesn't have to exclusively be in the UK, but the English language tends to be the table stakes for us. That's the expectation our audience has for our service."

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