

# TV cashes in without cameras



Live events based on successful programmes are a big hit.

**Kate Bulkley** looks at what it takes to migrate a show from studio to stage


**A**s the digital revolution continues to play havoc with traditional business models in the entertainment industry, the live event goes from strength to strength. No wonder then that an ever-increasing number of TV programmes are being re-formatted and turned into live shows in theatres, exhibitions or giant arenas.

*Strictly Come Dancing*, *Bad Girls*, *Walking with Dinosaurs*, *Bob the Builder*, *CBeebies*, *The Price Is Right* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* are just some of the TV brands that have found new life in exhibition halls and on tour across the towns and cities of the UK and beyond.

Some of these TV shows are also going live in the US, Australia and in other countries. *Bob the Builder's* live arena tour in Portugal was so successful that there are now discussions with Portuguese broadcasters about giving *Bob* more TV exposure.

"Live events are normally the last thing to go into a market, but in this case it was the reverse," says Teri Ruffley, general manager for live events at HIT Entertainment, the owner of *Bob the Builder*. "We are finding that parents are making the decision that they want to provide kids with an experience that isn't TV or online. They want to take the kids into a physical, actual experience."

The success of live events has been such that several companies, including the BBC, FremantleMedia and HIT Entertainment, have big ambitions to expand this part of their activities. The public's interest in live events based on TV properties has come as a surprise to many in the TV business.

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John Smith, BBC Worldwide

FremantleMedia's wake-up call came in 2002 when it staged a live *The Price Is Right* show in Las Vegas as a tribute to the host, Bob Barker, celebrating his 30th anniversary with the gameshow.

"Ten thousand people showed up for 2,000 tickets," recalls Keith Hindle, executive vice-president of licensing in the Americas for FremantleMedia Enterprises. "We realised then that there was a bigger appetite here."

A touring *The Price Is Right* show was set up. Since 2006 the live version of the show has been a permanent fixture at Ballys in Las Vegas, generating some 500,000 ticket sales at \$50 a head.

"There are no TV cameras in the live show but people are still screaming and still 'coming on down'," adds Hindle. "Anything that has strong audience participation works because in a live event the audience is the show."

## When did you last queue to watch TV?

Live shows are not cheap to stage. They can cost upwards of £1m depending on the tour's length, the complexity of the staging and the talent. Clearly, touring *CBeebies* is cheaper than *Strictly Come Dancing* due to talent costs alone – actors in suits are cheaper than booking Len, Arlene and Craig for a live tour.

But the rewards can be considerable: the first UK tour of *Strictly Come Dancing* saw such high demand for tickets the BBC added 10 more dates to the 30-date UK tour before it opened.

Explains Craig Stanley, BBC Worldwide's general manager





**We started as a TV company, we now see ourselves as a content company... content that would work on any platform** Keith Hindle, FremantleMedia



FremantleMedia



FremantleMedia

Big on the boards (clockwise from opposite page): *Strictly Come Dancing*; *The Price Is Right* set and wheel; and *Bob the Builder*

of live entertainment and events: "It works financially, creatively and editorially because it takes the TV programme and adds something extra in the live show."

BBC Worldwide set up a live events department six years ago. In the past four years it has sold 2.9 million tickets for a total of 1,000 shows in 300 venues worldwide. This year the live events department will for the first time contribute more than £1m profit to Worldwide's coffers. *Strictly Come Dancing* has already proved its worth in the US, while a show based on *Walking with Dinosaurs* is touring successfully following a hit outing in Australia.

"I can see opportunities in live events across our entire portfolio of brands," predicts John Smith, CEO of BBC Worldwide. "There is the possibility to do this around the world. I see big, big growth in live."

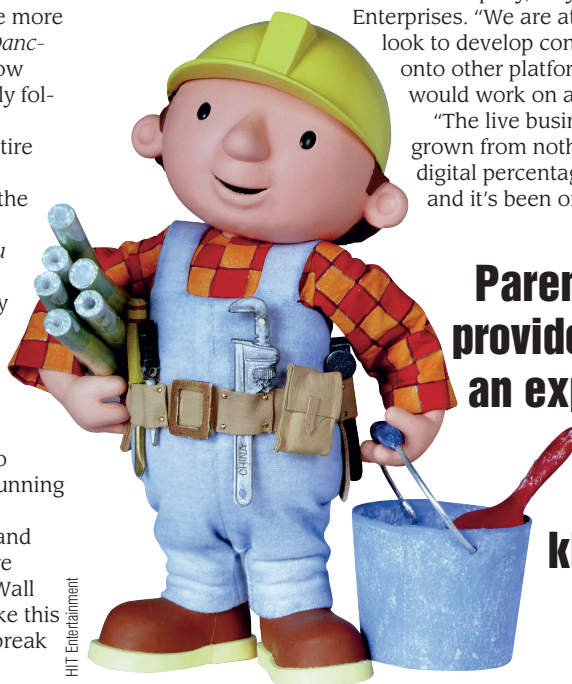
Wall to Wall licensed its hit BBC1 show, *Who Do You Think You Are?* to event producer Brand Events for an exhibition at Olympia last year encompassing ancestry and family history exhibits.

For Wall to Wall the venture had the advantage of requiring no upfront investment other than the cost of a live show featuring interviews with some of the stars from the TV show.

Twelve thousand tickets were sold and revenue also came in from sponsorship and fees from companies running booths in the exhibition hall.

"We are extremely interested in building the brand and building the community around genealogy," says Claire Hungate, director of commercial and legal affairs for Wall to Wall. "But the business model around live events like this is you don't make money in year one. Hopefully, you break even in year two and make money in year three."

HIT Entertainment



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Teri Ruffley, HIT

The second annual *Who Do You Think You Are?* exhibition and live show opens in May, when it will move to Olympia's bigger Grand Hall, containing more space for exhibitors.

But success with a live TV spin-off is not guaranteed. One cardinal rule in making a TV show work as a live event is getting the timing right.

This is particularly important when the programme features newly minted "stars" that may become old hat by the time a live version can be staged.

Says BBC Worldwide's Stanley: "The only show I have lost money on in the six years I have been here is the live version of *Fame Academy*. We left it two to three months in between the TV programme and the live tour and that was too long."

### For live shows the venue can be critical

Shed Media licensed the *Bad Girls* TV brand for *Bad Girls: the Musical*, which flopped in London's West End. However, a two-week trial run at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds sold out.

Shed Media CEO Eileen Gallagher thinks that the musical spin-off might work as a UK tour.

"This was something that we did not put any money into because that is best left to people who know about live theatre," she says. "I think other live events such as exhibitions are brand-building and profitable and not as risky as a musical... I think for us the effort should still be on making good TV shows and selling them to broadcasters. The rest is an add-on."

Shed found out the hard way that launching a show in London's West End is a high-risk business. But shows such as *Joseph and His Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *Grease* and *The Sound of Music*, whose lead stars were chosen by the public in reality shows, have proved highly popular and introduced new audiences to theatre.

There are other ways of exploiting hit TV shows that are still in their infancy. Staging shows for a corporate audience is a new twist (FremantleMedia is developing a corporate version of *Family Feud* that could pitch a sales department against a company's marketing department) while *Idol Camp*, a summer performing arts camp for kids based on the *Idol* franchise, was a big draw when it launched last year in the US.

"While we started as a TV company, we now see ourselves as a content company," says Hindle of FremantleMedia Enterprises.

"We are at a stage now where we don't just look to develop concepts for TV and extend them onto other platforms. We think about content that would work on any platform."

"The live business in the US for Fremantle has grown from nothing five years ago to a double-digit percentage of our brand extension income and it's been one of our fastest growth areas." ■