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TELEVISION

NETWORK PUTS THE MELODRAMA IN MIAMI

Spanish-language network Univisión announced plans for a studio in Miami to produce telenovelas, reality shows and variety programs to lessen its reliance on a Mexican company.

BY GLENN GARVIN

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After years of importing heaving bosoms and quivering pecs from Latin America, Spanish-language television giant Univision has found another source: Miami. The company is opening a studio in Miami to start producing its own telenovelas.

Univisión Studios will produce not only the soap operas that are the staple of Spanish-language TV, but reality shows, variety programs, Americanstyle dramas and even short shows tailored for cellphones and the Internet, said network boss César Conde, who announced the move Monday.

“This is a big step forward, not just for Univisión but for the Spanish-language TV industry as a whole,” Conde said. “It’s big for Spanish-language writers and producers and actors and actresses.”

Univisión’s competitors, however, scoffed at the idea that the network is breaking new ground. “They’re acting like they just heard of original content,” said Don Browne, president of Miami-based rival Telemundo, which has been producing novelas in Miami since 2003. “They came to the party kind of late.”

Univisión already produces about 60 percent of its shows at network facilities in Miami and Los Angeles. But the novelas that make up threequarters of its prime-time schedule are all imported — mostly from Mexico’s Televisa, Univisión’s longtime programming supplier.

But the relationship between Univisión and Televisa in recent years has been pockmarked by fierce legal wrangling, and their deal expires in 2017. Analysts said Univisión’s new studio is an attempt to start weaning itself from foreign production.

“They had to do something now,” said Julio Rumbaut, a Miami media consultant. “MGM wasn’t built in a day. . . . The strategy was inevitable, but the results remain to be seen. Televisa has been doing this for years and years and years, and they produce programming cheaply and effectively. It’s going to take some time for Univisión to learn to do that — if they can.”

FLOPS LIKELY

Producing its own prime-time shows will also require Univisión to roll the dice more than it usually has. The novelas the network buys overseas have usually been proven hits in Mexico and other countries. Starting them from scratch will inevitably lead to some flops.

“This is a business where you have to fail on your way to success,” said Telemundo’s Browne. “There were certainly times when we did.” But, he added, the rewards can be substantial. A hit show can turn into a cash cow, bringing in money from sales to foreign markets and new digital media.

Conde acknowledged that Univisión’s studio faces some obstacles.

“When one enters any new business, it entails some calculated risk,” he said. But Univisión has acted as co-producer on some of its novelas, he said, gaining valuable experience — and as the No. 1 Spanish-language network, with an average of 3.5 million viewers a night, knows something about how to spot a hit show.

“Univisión has been producing across many genres and has done it incredibly successfully, from both a ratings perspective and an economic perspective,” he said. “We’ve weathered this current economic storm in a much better manner than any other media company in the industry.”

The new studio likely will be run out of existing Univisión facilities in South Florida, and Conde declined to say how its shows might differ from the network's current programming, or even when the first one might hit the air.

SLIMMED DOWN

But he said some of them may start out as slimmed-down series produced for the Internet (Univisión last month signed a deal to place shows on YouTube) or cellphones.

"That's a new model we're trying to pioneer," Conde said. "Why wouldn't we use this very efficient model: testing a show in a low-cost mass medium, seeing if it works there, and if it does, doing in on a bigger scale?"

It will be headed by Luis Fernández, recently the boss at Spain's RTVE network and before that a producer of Spanish-language shows in the United States. In 2005, Fernández produced *Al Filo de la Ley* (At the Edge of the Law), a show he compares to the 1990s American hit *L.A. Law*.

The show was Univisión's first U.S.-style drama: Unlike the daily novelas, *Al Filo de la Ley* aired once a week and was set up to run as long as the ratings held up, rather than coming to a fixed conclusion at the end of six months. Fernández hinted the new studio may produce more such shows. "Univisión has to be involved all genres, not just novelas," he said.