

## Paramount's Bruce Gordon: programing the world

Talk to Bruce Gordon, president of Paramount Television International, about the state of television programing sales in the international marketplace and he gives the impression that little has changed since he first got into the business 32 years ago.

While conceding that delivery technologies such as satellites and cable have altered the international television landscape, Gordon says that making sales in the 120 territories Paramount covers—with their divergent tastes, governmental regulations and other indigenous conditions—still comes down to a special sort of tenacity. Although he eschews the title of "dean" of international sales, it has often been conferred upon him by the foreign trade press and his peers both for his tenure on the international scene and his knowledge of the field. The native Australian prefers to think of himself as one who, growing up with TV in the Far East, rose through the ranks naturally.

His description of his early days in an Australian sales job make it sound something of a programing outback: "I sold for Desilu out of a little back office with one secretary. You had to be what we call in Australia a bush lawyer, a bush accountant. You weren't only a salesman."

As a "bush lawyer," he drafted contracts before contracts for programing sales were common, and later represented Paramount on the board of Australia's Channel 9 network (then owned by the Australian media mogul Sir Frank Packer). Gordon has seen television grow around the world and has been with it each step of the way.

Important to that journey, and to his ability to sell programing, has been his perspective as a broadcaster. Along with his contacts at Channel 9—he represented Paramount's interest in that channel while employed by the company in Australia—Gordon himself is on the board of a publicly traded Australian company with interests in a number of stations in Australia, including a majority share in a station in Wollongong (Gordon is prevented from selling programs to that station by a conflict of interest clause in his Paramount contract).

Gordon's introduction to the business of television came in Australia in 1962, as the medium was just beginning to take hold there. At the time Gordon was business director of the Tivoli Circuit of theaters, which provided the region with imported stage shows such as the *Folies-Bergere* from Paris or "West Side Story" from New York, as well as domestic productions.

His rise to the position of business director of the successful chain had represented 10 years of experience in the theatrical business as a public relations man. He had originally broken into the business through contacts made while performing as a magi-



BRUCE GORDON—president, Paramount Television International, Bermuda; b: Feb 9, 1929, Sydney, Australia; advance man, front-of-house manager, advertising director and business manager, Tivoli Circuit [live theater chain], Sydney, Australia, 1952-1962; sales director, Far Eastern territories, Desilu Studios, Sydney, 1962-68; managing director, Paramount Television International, Sydney, 1969-74, Sydney; executive vice president, Paramount Television International, New York, 1974-81; present position since 1981; m. Joan Patricia; children—Andrew, 16.

cian in clubs and in shows for soldiers during World War II. He had gone into magic after graduating from the Australian public education system at the age of 15. University education was beyond his means. Gordon says he does not feel disserved by the lack of higher education. Education, he says, can "box one into things."

In 1962, Desilu Studios offered Gordon the job of running its new offices in Sydney. Gordon says that the choice before him was "a hell of a decision, probably the hardest decision in my life." There were reasons to make the change, however. "David N. Martin [the head of Tivoli] had died, and I didn't think the balance of the company could keep going." While Gordon still "loved the theater business, I could see that it was going to be hurt by television."

At the time, foreign markets such as Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand averaged perhaps one station each, with Australia and Japan the biggest markets. In some cases the stations were under military control. Gordon's first several years in the business were spent getting to know his customers and their tastes.

With the purchase of Desilu by Paramount in 1968, Gordon was given more inventory to sell. He sold it well enough for Paramount to move him to New York as successor to the studio's international head, Manny Reiner, who had died. Gordon headed Paramount's international sales from 1974 to 1985 from New York, when his headquarters was

moved to Bermuda both for easier access to Europe and for economies associated with operating offshore.

Paramount International now operates offices in London, Sydney, Toronto, Los Angeles and Bermuda, with a staff of eight. With the sun rarely setting on his territory, Gordon's business day typically lasts until midnight as he makes calls to time zones around the world.

Gordon's arrival in New York provided the opportunity to broaden Paramount's product offerings. Under Gordon, Paramount's first acquisitions of movies for international distribution included "My Fair Lady" (a 15-year arrangement with CBS) as well as a number of movies of the week and mini-series, and the Stephen J. Cannell Productions, *Riptide* and *Hardcastle & McCormick*. With the growth of satellite coverage of Europe, Paramount offers the Miss Universe pageant internationally, as well as *Entertainment Tonight*.

With programing tastes that run the gamut internationally, trends among buyers are hard to pin down, and pricing across the spectrum of buyers and economies tends to be irregular. One thing that does not change, however, Gordon says, is the demand for blockbuster movies. Gordon also adds that there seems to be a growth now in the purchase of TV comedies abroad. He estimates that Paramount's sales mix is composed of roughly an equal split of comedies and movies. While humor is often inextricably tied to the language and culture of its native country, the physical comedy of a show like *I Love Lucy* transcends boundaries and helps make it an international success. Other comedies sold successfully abroad include *Cheers* and *Happy Days*. "The Fonz is as well-known in Italy as he is here," says Gordon.

The role of international sales in financing the cost of production has grown in importance, Gordon says, from its former place as "fruit on the sideboard" to a critical role in making series profitable, especially considering the abundance of comedies in production these days, and the deficits they are incurring. Gordon declines to give any information on the international division's revenues beyond saying that it makes "at least" 10 times the \$8 million it grossed when he joined the company.

Gordon's knowledge of broadcast stations makes him a strong supporter of local programing, which he tells his customers to make sure is part of their broadcast schedules.

"I don't share a lot of people's views" that television abroad will be dominated by cable and satellites in the future, said Gordon. Although programing from satellites will compete with terrestrial stations, he says, it will not kill many stations off. Gordon cites the historical success of the three American networks and their affiliates in withstanding the intrusions of a variety of other programing sources.