

LIME PICTURES

The next twist in Lime's tale

While *TOWIE*'s runaway success has proved convincingly that Lime Pictures can create a strong offer alongside *Hollyoaks*, the indie has a lot more up its sleeves. Will Strauss reports

FACT FILE

Sean Marley (far left)
Career
 2005: Managing director, Lime Pictures
 2003: Commercial director, Mersey Television
 1999: Managing director, Radio City
 1996: Programme director, Metro Radio

Carolyn Reynolds (second left)
Career
 2005: Chief executive, Lime Pictures
 1998: Executive producer, *Coronation Street*
 1998: Controller of drama, Yorkshire
 1993: Controller drama serials, Granada
 1990: Producer, *Coronation Street*
Watches *Modern Family*, *Arrested Development*, *Scott & Bailey*

Lee Hardman (second right)
Career
 2011: Director, Digital Fiction Factory
 1997: Head of Conker Media
 1995: Graduate trainee, Mersey Television

Tony Wood (far right)
Career
 2006: Creative director, Lime Pictures
 2003: Producer, *Coronation Street*
 2000: Head of continuing drama, ITV
 1998: Executive producer, BBC drama
 1990: Script editor, ITV Granada
 1988: Production trainee, Mersey Television



For some indies, the shows they make and the stories they tell are merely a reflection of the people that run the company.

For Liverpool-based Lime Pictures, producer of C4's *Hollyoaks* and ITV2 constructed reality show *The Only Way Is Essex* (*TOWIE*), this would make its senior management team loud, brash, bronzed and bolshy.

It's a hideous image and, fortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. Lime Pictures is a very unassuming company; right now it just happens to be basking, if you'll pardon the pun, in the limelight.

TOWIE, fresh from its BAFTA audience award and two Broadcast Digital Awards, has just scooped three National Reality TV Awards. It's being sold around the world, a third series starts production soon and brand licensing deals are in the offing.

Not bad going for a company that was considered to be 'overly reliant' on *Hollyoaks*.

"The success of *Essex* has absolutely transformed our profile," says creative director Tony Wood, who oversees all Lime programming. "It has made people look at us in a completely different light."

With drama-commissioning levels hitting new depths, you

might think that the success of *TOWIE* was all part of a Lime master plan. You'd be wrong.

"Does anybody see the success coming when they get a real hit?" asks chief executive Carolyn Reynolds. "When I look back, a lot of the people I've known that have had major hits have gone, 'blimey!'"

She does, however, recall the point at which she thought the show might work. "I saw a tape which had this guy sitting on a sofa, talking to the camera saying, 'Hi, I'm Mark and I'm a player.' We thought right then, 'This is fascinating.'"

While the success of *TOWIE* has arrived almost overnight, 'reality



TOWIE: BAFTA winner

drama' under Wood has been several years in the making.

What was initially misinterpreted as a factual drive ("what that really meant was that we were making shows without scripts," says Wood) has resulted in Lime forging its own genre and snaring the commission for MTV's *Geordie Shore* and a planned Liverpool-based follow-up, *Mersey Shore*.

"*Essex* has just kind of brought it out into the open," continues Wood. "But without its success, one has to question whether we would have been in the running when MTV looked to do *Geordie Shore*."

But its success hasn't come easy. "*Essex* is enormously complex," says Wood. "It's the most difficult thing I've ever done. The key thing - which is not the case in *Living On The Edge*, or *The Season*, or even *Made In Chelsea* - is that we tell the tale of a community almost in real time."

And it's that unique sense of immediacy that leads Wood to believe there is a lot more to come.

Evolving genre

"*Essex* is an almost-live entertainment show," he continues. "Many of the events are taking place since the last episode was seen on the telly by the people who were in it. So, it's a live reaction to the previous show and that requires a certain level of infrastructure, and it's a really difficult show to write."

"But I think we can do others. I think we can certainly do more of what we have, and I think that as a genre it can be rolled out with a different tone and character. That may be international. It may be more domestic, but I think there is more to come."

Other destinations for *The Only Way Is...* could include Bourne-mouth, a venue that was initially considered because of its planned

artificial surf reef. *Broadcast's* suggestion of Newquay isn't shot down instantly, either.

"We'd be foolish not to explore it further," adds Reynolds. "But we're also being very careful not to over-expose that development. They've all got to feel fresh and different."

One area of great excitement around *TOWIE* is the financial possibilities that its success might offer the indie through brand licensing. Sorting those deals is the responsibility of managing director Sean Marley, who admits he was deliberately coy to start with.

"We didn't rush in on series one," he says. "We wanted to have two series under our belt and be absolutely certain that we knew what that brand stood for."

Marley has now done "seven or eight different types of deals to extend that brand," including T-shirts, books, DVDs and other *TOWIE* merchandising that will be

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Carolyn Reynolds

in the shops by Christmas. It also includes something a bit left-field, although Marley is staying tight-lipped on exactly what.

Lateral branding

"There are a couple of things that we are looking at which are a bit different that build on the experience of *Essex*, rather than just sticking a logo onto a piece of kit and hoping it sells," he says. "I think people will be entertained by what we put out there because it is tongue-in-cheek in the same way that the show is. But it's also things that people in *Essex* would like to be associated with."

While *TOWIE* alone could fill these three pages, Lime's 'other' big show, C4 teen drama *Hollyoaks*, is worthy of discussion. With ratings figures perhaps less stable than they once were, the task for Lime now is to keep the show relevant. And that means changes.

Having "steadied a ship that was pretty low on morale", producer Paul Marquess has been replaced by script editor Gareth Philips.

"Paul just stopped everybody wobbling," says Wood. "What Gareth is doing is part of a longer-term larger-scale look at what television for young people needs. All of the changes are pretty much about the fact that the young audience is very much a moving target. You have to rebrand your product for that audience pretty frequently."

For Wood, the key to this reinvention of *Hollyoaks* - and teen television in general - is breaking down the barriers between the audience and the show.

"We have to move some of the stories and production methods to make the audience active, not passive," he says. "This generation is not happy just sitting and watching. They want to own it. They want to discuss it. They want to replay it. Maybe they even want to re-cut it."

Wood says to expect plenty of initiatives in the coming

LIME PICTURES ON...

...Jimmy McGovern saying TOWIE is "the biggest suicide note in British TV history"

"Maybe we just provided the world with a wake-up call it needed in terms of where television is going. I'm quite proud of that."

Carolyn Reynolds

...BBC drama

"It has been tough for us. We did *Apparitions*, but it did not result in any new work. That has made me both wary and determined. We now have some new projects in development, so I'm hoping great things will happen."

Carolyn Reynolds

...MediaCityUK and BBC North

"I hope MediaCityUK creates a feeling around the BBC in the north that is slightly different than the BBC in London. BBC North has the ability to carve a real niche for itself by looking beyond the first screen."

Sean Marley

...making a children's drama, House of Anubis, (pictured) for a US broadcaster

"I love the fact that there are people sitting in LA who think that we're one of the best producers of children's drama now. That's fantastic."

Carolyn Reynolds

... collaborating with Objective Productions' Andrew O'Connor on C4 comedy drama Fresh Meat

"We kind of got together simply because I didn't have anybody on staff who had that level of expertise. So, I just phoned up my mate really."

Tony Wood





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'The young audience is a moving target. You have to rebrand your product for that audience frequently'

Tony Wood

months including, potentially, "even putting the audience in the show at certain points".

One specific change that is already taking place is an overhaul of the story-lining and writing processes on the show that puts more emphasis on the writers themselves.

Wood says: "We realised that this is a teenage soap opera that is in danger of being stuck in a rut and growing a bit old. Most of us have children who are the age of the audience, so our experience is completely second-hand.

"The answer was to bring in people who have very different experience. The new writing team is much younger and some of them are not even television writers."

PP on the cards

Another big change in the offing for *Hollyoaks* is the introduction of product placement and the potential extra revenue that will bring.

While no deals have been confirmed, Lime and C4 have been talking for two years, done their research, presented to agencies and whittled down the opportunities to six specific categories that fit the demands of the ad market.

"Right now we are in negotiations with a number of parties about one or more of those categories," Marley says, somewhat guardedly, before admitting that the likelihood is that any PP will be 'live' and utilised in the show, like any other prop, rather than inserted digitally in post-production.

"The beauty of digital insertion is that it gives you the opportunity to act even closer to transmission," he says. "However, because we are quite close to transmission in terms of our production and we are all year round, we do not think that we need to rely on that; but we are not worried about it if we do."

TOWIE and *Hollyoaks* may be the high-profile properties at Lime, but other things are brewing.



Hollyoaks: soap has a fresh writing team

BBC daytime drama *The Case* is imminent, C4 is lining up *Fresh Meat*, a comedy collaboration with fellow All3Media indie Objective Productions, for this autumn, multiplatform plans abound (see box) and the company's first US commission, *House Of Anubis*, has been recommissioned by Nickelodeon for a longer, 45 x 30-minutes, second series.

The latter is a children's drama series that is a three-way co-pro based on IP that unfortunately Lime doesn't own. But it promises to be the start of what the company hopes will be significant international success.

"At times, it is hard to have a three-way co-pro-type thing," says Marley. "But it almost does not matter what we went through because the show was a big hit and something that we are really proud of. To get series two was confirmation that we have done it correctly. And it's a hell of a calling card."

Wood adds: "The lessons we learned about creating programming on a British budget to the quality that the Americans expect have been brilliant. The combination of that and *Essex* have opened more doors than anything else."

If *TOWIE*'s success was an accident, the push into children's

and international certainly wasn't, says Reynolds.

"The strategy was this: There's going to be a dip in drama spend and we need to show the world what we're capable of doing because we have some really good writers who want to work with us. The rest is history. It led us to not only push towards children's drama but also teen and comedy. It was a natural fit."

It's indicative of the lengths to which the company is now going to tell its stories. It's also a much better reflection of Lime Pictures than you'll get by analysing Joey Essex or Jacqui McQueen.

PUSHING THE TECHNOLOGICAL ENVELOPE

Thanks to various brand extensions and a multi-layered deal with the now defunct BBC Switch, Lime Pictures has been something of a pioneer in multiplatform innovation.

Its latest digital venture, however, aims to move that work on from prototyping and testing experience to turn original stories into actual multiplatform productions.

This work is the result of a creative partnership between the BBC and Lime's wholly-owned digital production subsidiary Conker Media called The Digital Fiction Factory.

It has secured funding for three years, has full-time staff based

within the BBC at MediaCityUK, and will work on projects that start with TV but play out across social media, games, mobile, online or even live events.

"Before, when we've done digital fiction like [BBC2 drama and online game] *The Well* (pictured), there's been a bit of pioneering," says Conker Media head Lee Hardman. "Now, instead of reversing online and technological innovation into the broadcast element, DFF will make the idea come from the channel. It's about engaging the audience with digital stories from established writing talent."



DFF is working specifically with BBC Children's, BBC3 and BBC Films. Writers signed up include Frank Cottrell Boyce and Malorie Blackman, while a 120-strong Northern network of creatives and digital experts will feed into projects and, possibly, share IP