Humor, Heart & Humanity

THE THREE PILLARS OF 3PAS STUDIOS' CONTENT HAVE RESULTED IN SUCCESS IN ENDEAVORS THAT BOTH INCLUDE AND TRANSCEND THE COMPANY'S SPANISH-LANGUAGE ORIGINS.

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In an era of rapid change, uncertainty, and anxiety about staying afloat, it can seem that the only way for a producer to navigate the industry is by diversifying their involvement as much as possible. It's one thing to throw proverbial spaghetti at the wall. It's another to have it not only stick, but stick meaningfully.

Across a variety of formats for television and film, plus a forthcoming entrée into podcasting, 3Pas Studios—whose name is a play on *tripas*, the Spanish word for "guts"—has been successfully prolific, led by producing partners Eugenio Derbez and Ben Odell.

The comedy series *Acapulco* and dramedy feature *Radical* exemplify the quality of projects coming out of 3Pas Studios. Watching *Acapulco* feels like a warm hug, an embrace of perfectly timed jokes and tugs on the heartstrings by a talented cast, all shot in Mexico and delivered with tip-top production value. The series has been renewed for a fourth season on Apple TV+.

"That's a goal that's really hard to achieve in the U.S. for a Latino series," says Derbez. "We always work for the general market, but I'm proud to be doing a series that shows Mexico differently, not full of narcos and violence."

"It's so gratifying to see audiences embrace *Acapulco* for its generosity of spirit, humor, warmth and emotion," says Morgan Wandell, head of international development for Apple TV+. "3Pas, along with Eugenio and the entire cast and crew, have created a show that resonates deeply with audiences everywhere, but especially within the communities it celebrates."

Radical is an intimate feature based on the true story of an impassioned educator who unlocked the potential of impoverished elementary school students in a Mexican border town ravaged by corruption and violence. Although *Radical* won the top audience prize at the 2023 Sundance Festival, 3Pas expected it to remain within the art-house realm with a respectable but limited box office. Instead, it became one of the highest-grossing indies of 2023 in the U.S., earning more than $8 million between its November release and the end of the year, and the highest-grossing drama ever in Mexico.

"Teacher movies are a subgenre in the U.S. We export optimism, but it's not something we see in the rest of the world," says Odell. "*Radical* is realistic and bittersweet, but it shows that there's possibility. The premiere in Mexico was the closest thing to a religious experience that I've ever had in a movie theater. People were crying so profoundly from the bottom of their souls. It hit them in a way because nobody had ever had this conversation with them. That idea that we can bring things to audiences they haven't seen before is really exciting."

Sky-high standards for creativity and quality have been requirements for every project 3Pas has undertaken since the company was launched in 2014. It's a testament to the founders' grit that they've not only succeeded in a range of formats, but have done so within a highly coveted Latino/Spanish-language market that a slew of industry powerhouses have been trying to predict and capitalize on for decades with dubious results.

PERSISTENCE AND PAYOFF

The heartwarming 2013 film *Instructions Not Included* became the proof of concept for the 3Pas business model. Back then, Spanish-language content wasn't considered worth much by investors even while the industry was pulling its hair out trying to capitalize on 60 million Spanish speakers in the U.S. and a population of 65 million who identified as Hispanic or Latino. Staggeringly, this population was estimated to account for nearly 30% of the theatrical audience in the U.S.

Derbez—who was serving as the writer, director and star of *Instructions*—was determined to make his film for no less than $5.5 million. But the average Spanish-language film was being made for less than half that amount.

"Most attempts to reach the Latino market were about immigrants crossing the border—the kinds of movies I feel we (Latinos) don't want to watch. We know that story so well. It's painful and boring," Derbez explains. "If you look at the box office in Mexico, Hollywood films are always beating Mexican films because we want to see big productions from Hollywood. So I wanted to do something big."

It took Derbez 12 years to get what he wanted.

"Eugenio felt that if he didn't give the audience the best version of this idea, they were being shortchanged," Odell says. "That was the driving impetus of our company. Let's give them what they really deserve. Let's do things that are quality."

In 2013, Odell—who had an impressive track record of film and TV success while living and working in Colombia—was an executive at Pantelion, a partnership between Lionsgate and Mexican media giant Televisa. Pantelion signed on to distribute *Instructions* theatrically with fingers crossed that it was the magic bullet everyone had been seeking.

Derbez and Odell had first worked together on the 2006 indie *Sangre de Mi Sangre*, which Odell produced and Derbez starred in. It won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance and was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award, marking the first of a string of accolades the 3Pas partners have racked up since then.

Awards are important, but revenue is critical to stay alive in this industry. When *Instructions Not Included* opened in 348 theaters in 2013, it was the highest-grossing U.S. debut ever for a Spanish-language film. Pantelion doubled the number of theaters the second weekend. In just one month, *Instructions* had surpassed *Pan's Labyrinth* to become the highest-grossing Spanish-language film of all time in the U.S., and the fourth highest-grossing foreign film of all time. The numbers in Mexico were even more impressive.

Clearly, the market was hungry, and Derbez's film had hit the spot.

"It was because you could see a Latino who is a nice guy," Derbez says. "I'm not playing a narco or a drug dealer or a gang member. It has a little bit of English, a little bit of Spanish. It feels big. It feels different. It's a comedy."

Members of the 3Pas Studios team at the premiere of *They Came at Night*. Photo by Carlos Eric Lopez.

With full faith in that formula, Odell and Derbez decided to plant their stake, and 3Pas was born.

It would be negligent not to acknowledge how much Derbez's star power has contributed to 3Pas's success. The decades he has spent as one of Mexico's most beloved on-screen presences was a rock-solid foundation upon which to build a company—except for the fact that, at 52, Derbez had uprooted his life in Mexico to follow his lifelong dream of breaking into Hollywood. And he wanted to do so in English, not Spanish. This was not what Odell had in mind.

"I said, 'Wait a second, you made a $5 million Spanish-language movie that made $100 million at the box office. There's clearly a demand for it. Maybe we should do a couple more of those first, and then we'll figure out what else we want to do."

But Derbez wasn't about doing things for the money. He wanted the challenge. "I was scared out of my mind, but whenever something produces fear in me, I take it as a sign that I should move toward it, not away from it," says Derbez.

The next step was figuring out how to get the sizable audience that turned out for *Instructions Not Included* to show up for 3Pas's English-language movies. "It took us a lot of time to figure out a path," Odell admits.

But figure it out they did, with features including a remake of the '80s comedy *Overboard*, *How to Be a Latin Lover*, *The Valet*, and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, all of which garnered critical acclaim or significant audiences; sometimes both.

Former head of MGM Jonathan Glickman worked with Derbez and Odell on 2018's *Overboard*.

"When Eugenio walked into our office at MGM, people went crazy, from the highest-level executive to the person at the reception desk. He was so nice to everybody. That was the moment I realized, my god, this guy's much bigger than I thought," Glickman recalls.

Actor Daniel Raymont, Eugenio Derbez, Ben Odell, acting coach Paola Madrigal and Javier Williams on the set of *They Came at Night*.

Charm is one thing, but business is the name of the game. Much of the industry is built upon making bets and hoping at least a few will pay off. For Glickman, it was a sound business decision beyond the magnetism of an actor. Derbez had proved his value with *Instructions Not Included*, and his comedic persona felt like a natural fit for the adaptation of *Overboard*.

"Anytime you take on a beloved title there are some risks. But 3Pas had their own take on it with the gender flip and developed a great script," Glickman recalls. "It felt like there was an underserved audience that we could reach while we could also get mainstream success based on the popularity of the title."

Glickman, who had not yet worked with Odell, had his trepidations. "Usually when you're making a movie and an actor has a producing partner they want to be involved, you're like, OK, they're only going to really care about whatever the actor needs. But Ben and Eugenio were the exact opposite. Ben found the writers and was incredibly vigilant in making sure the script was not only great but could be made affordably. Eugenio was very involved in big-picture decisions like casting, while Ben handled nuts-and-bolts, day-to-day producing. They were incredible."

Perhaps the best endorsement of the soundness of 3Pas's business acumen is their ability to sustain relationships. "I would work with them again in a second—tomorrow, yesterday, as soon as possible," Glickman says.

The list of 3Pas's credits proves the company has not given up on Spanish-language content. Despite Derbez's initial goal of making English-language films, compelling developments in the local language market demonstrated by the success of Netflix's *Club de Cuervos* made it smart for the company to invest in Spanish-language TV.

The partners decided to chance a Spanish-language, Mexico-based remake of a Japanese reality show by Amazon. *Documental* locks 10 comedians in a room battling to make the others laugh—without laughing themselves—to win a cash prize. It was outrageous, ribald, arguably offensive and not at all in line with what Spanish-speaking audiences throughout Latin America were likely to get behind.

Derbez opened his comedic toolbox and got to work reengineering the format for the audience he knew so intimately. "I was sure it was going to fail. I was regretting it every single second," Derbez recalls. "But I figured we'd promote it as an experiment and let people know it might be bad."

Season one of *LOL: Laugh Out Loud Mexico* was successful enough to justify continuation. After its second season, Amazon began bringing producers from other countries to 3Pas's set in Mexico to learn how they might be able to seed the series in other territories successfully.

"With Eugenio at the helm and 3Pas creatively producing alongside us, we made an undeniable hit," said Javiera Balmaceda, head of originals for Latin America, Canada & Australia at Amazon Studios. "And look how far we've come, about to launch our seventh season this December. The format's success in Mexico resulted in more than 20 local adaptations and became Prime Video's most successful franchise."

She adds, "The fact that 3Pas can expertly deliver different content types makes for an incredibly fruitful partnership as they help us meet goals across unscripted, dramatic series and film."

Eugenio Derbez and Ben Odell

LEARNING CURVE

All this isn't to say that the road hasn't been bumpy. Even though Derbez had expertise not just as an actor but also a writer, director and producer in Mexico, he found that knowledge didn't necessarily carry over in his new home.

"Producing in Mexico is completely different from producing in the U.S. It's a learning curve 24/7. I will go to a meeting with Ben to sell a show and they start dropping names and I don't know what they're talking about," Derbez admits.

And despite the success of *Instructions Not Included*, Hollywood wasn't banging down the door for more from the team, perceiving it as a one-time fluke by an entertainment industry newbie. "It was like, no, Eugenio's been doing this for 25 years successfully! But we had to go back and prove it all over again," Odell recalls.

Furthermore, the partners have fought an uphill battle to get the company appreciated as more than just a vanity shingle—to prove it had value to offer beyond a popular face.

"We spend a lot of time on every single project that we do because we're trying to educate people that anything produced by 3Pas is going to be as good as a project that I'm starring in," says Derbez. Buyers are now trusting that Derbez, Odell and their team of seasoned execs have invaluable knowledge to bring to the table for what they refer to as non-Eugenio projects.

"I used to be the most proud of the things that Eugenio and I worked on. Now I'm proud of the things we're barely touching that get made because we have these executives who are so smart and competent," Odell says.

MAKING THE MOST OF THE MARKET

The Latino Donor Collaborative's 2024 Latinos in Media report found that the entertainment industry could generate an additional $12 billion to $18 billion per year if it properly engaged the Latino demographic by increasing representation in TV and film both behind and in front of the camera.

"3Pas speaks to the fastest-growing audience in the United States," says Nick Lafferty, a scripted global TV agent at CAA. "They understand that the Latino audience is a four-quadrant, multigenerational audience. That fact has been hard for a lot of other companies to gauge."

3Pas conducted its own market survey to learn more about what it was doing well and what it might be missing. More than 2,000 Latino-identifying film and TV viewers in the U.S. replied with input about the content they consume.

"The results proved that an audience we all talk about as one is spread across many different platforms," says Odell. "So how do you get them all together? A middle-class family trying to get their kids through school and everything else isn't necessarily going to sign up for another streaming platform. One of the reasons that theatrical is still so important to us is because that is one place where you can get all of them to show up."

"I'm not going to say that we know all the Latinos, because there are many type of Latinos. We're trying to tell the market how *we* see Latinos," Derbez explains. "The problem is that the industry is trying to reach Latinos as if it's just one block, and we're not. It matters if you're a Latino who was born in the U.S. or a Latino from Mexico, Ecuador or El Salvador."

Odell adds, "When I hear somebody say, 'That's a Latino show,' I say, 'Latinos *are* the mainstream. You can't have a hit if you're not getting Latinos to show up for your TV or movie.'"

All of this is not to say that the projects 3Pas puts out into the world succeed only within that vaguely unified Latino audience. *Radical* has racked up awards from festivals and critics around the world and is resonating in countries without a sizable Latino audience. *Acapulco* is a big hit in Italy. *How to Be a Latin Lover* was remade in France.

"I think that limitations to our content are often simply the limitations of how things are distributed. But when our content can get to other audiences, we're always surprised by the reception," Odell says.

Crossing boundaries is fundamental to 3Pas's production approach as well as distribution. Consultants from the U.S. are often brought in to advise the company's Spanish-language content, such as when *Simpsons* writer Bob Kushell helped supervise 3Pas's animated series *Circo Gomez.* On the new limited series *They Came at Night,* 3Pas enlisted writers/EPs Bob Fisher (*Wedding Crashers, We're the Millers*) and Rob Greenberg (*Frasier, How I Met Your Mother*).

"We're bringing our relationships in the U.S. into Latin America to help lift the quality of the content. At the same time, we're looking for opportunities to bring U.S. Latino talent into the mainstream, Latin American talent into the U.S., or IP from Latin America into the U.S.," Odell explains.

It was Fisher who first tipped off Derbez and Odell about the real-life history behind *They Came at Night*, which tells the story of the cast and crew who made a Spanish-language version of *Dracula* for Universal in 1931.

As the sun went down and shooting wrapped each day on Bela Lugosi's English-language version, the Spanish-language production would take over, using the same sets and costumes but with only a fraction of the budget, especially when it came to compensating personnel. It may be considered the start of Hollywood's attempt at penetrating the U.S. Latino market with mixed results.

Upon learning about this historical tidbit, Derbez and Odell couldn't have been more excited to depict it onscreen. "It's a great metaphor for the chutzpah of immigrants and their ability to do more with less," Odell says. "We had to make it because we wanted to see it, and were never going to see it if we didn't do it ourselves. That's ultimately where we start from in terms of making decisions. The financials hopefully take care of themselves as you move through."

THE 360 OF 3PAS

3Pas sums up everything it does with three characteristics: humor, heart and humanity.

"We always say you need two of the three, plus quality, for us to make anything. So that really leaves you open to any genre—scripted, unscripted, anything," says Odell.

Projects in the hopper now include the Amazon Prime limited series *El Juicio*, in which Derbez has his first lead role in a TV drama; season four of *Acapulco* for Apple TV+; the animated comedy series *Circo Gomez*; a not-yet-titled feature thriller with the enormously popular Kate del Castillo in the lead, helmed by lauded director Sebastián Borenzstein; and the company's first podcast, *Transformate*, with another in prep.

3Pas juggles all of this skillfully with the following divisions:

ENGLISH-LANGUAGE TELEVISION

Sonia Gambaro joined 3Pas in 2020 as SVP of English-language TV. This is where *Acapulco* sits, produced through the company's first-look deal with Lionsgate TV covering English- and Spanish-language series. 3Pas also has a first-look deal with ABC Signature for English-language TV projects.

Gambaro was previously a literary manager at Equitable Management and her own company, Pollinate Entertainment, where she set up and sold projects to Netflix, Hulu, Freeform, Ellation, SonyTV, MWM and EndemolShine, and brokered worldwide branding campaigns.

SPANISH-LANGUAGE SERIES

International Emmy-nominated SVP Javier Williams arrived at 3Pas in 2019 to lead this division, lending more than 29 years of experience as an executive producer with Televisa, where he oversaw coproductions with Disney, Sony and Nickelodeon.

Amazon Prime's *LOL* is beneath this umbrella, as is *They Came at Night* on ViX+, TelevisaUnivision's Spanish-language premium subscription streaming service. The comedy was ViX+'s top-performing series for weeks after it debuted.

3Pas struck a first-look deal with TelevisaUnivision in 2021 covering original scripted and unscripted Spanish-language content. When the deal was announced, Pierluigi Gazzolo, president and chief transformation officer at Univision, said,

"This partnership is a testament to how we are doubling down on our commitment to building the best and largest Spanish-language streaming service in the world—one that will be the home to top-level creative Spanish-language talent."

Additional projects within this division include spinoffs of *De Viaje con los Derbez* and *LOL*.

INTERNATIONAL COPRODUCTIONS AND SPANISH-LANGUAGE FEATURES

In 2023, Leo Zimbrón was brought in as SVP of Spanish-language features and international coproductions. Zimbron had produced 2015's groundbreaking *Club de Cuervos*, the first original Netflix series in Spanish, which ran for four successful seasons.

In 2022, Zimbrón—who also brings valuable experience from time at EndemolShine Boomdog and Warner Bros—was named head of local original movies for Latin America at Amazon Studios, where he generated a slate of 40 projects before moving to 3Pas.

KIDS AND COMEDY

In 2021 Jordan Rubio stepped up as VP of Comedy/Kids & Family, Film & TV at 3Pas, working in both English- and Spanish-language TV and film. This division has housed successes like the 2018 comedy feature *Overboard* and 2017's *How to Be a Latin Lover* with Lionsgate/Pantelion.

Prior to joining 3Pas, Rubio contributed to the development, sales and production of features and TV series at Amazon, NewLine, HBOMax, Pantaya, Apple and Netflix.

PODCASTING

In May 2023, 3Pas ventured into podcasting via a multiyear, overall exclusive audio deal with Audible to produce scripted and unscripted audio content in both English and Spanish. Cristy Marrero came on board that year to steer 3Pas's brand-new division.

With over 20 years of experience in digital and social media-first content, Marrero had successfully launched and grown online and multiplatform brands such as The Americano, Floricua, and HOLA! USA. She also led the Hispanic Media division at Dotdash Meredith (formerly known as Meredith Corporation).

"We know that working with a production company like 3Pas results in content that provides our listeners glimpses into all kinds of communities while remaining universally relevant," says Manny Miravete, senior director of original content at Audible. The possibilities ahead for the partnership range from true crime to well-being.

"The thing about podcasting is that it's so quick. You can come up with an idea and get it out there quickly in a way that you can't even with unscripted (TV). We're storytellers at our core, so we don't discriminate against platforms or genres," Odell says.

"We decided to start doing podcasts because we found an idea that sounded very different and exciting," says Derbez. "I feel that's the only way to succeed—when you do things that are different and that resonate with your soul and your heart, not with your pockets."

"A film like 3Pas's *How to Be a Latin Lover* upends stereotypes about Latin men through its exploration of what it means to age," says Miravete. "We knew this type of heartfelt, funny and whip-smart storytelling would fit in well with content we believe can serve as a powerful agent of change—educating, challenging, inspiring and bringing us closer together."

Given all that 3Pas was already expending its energy on, the expansion into podcasting needed to be both financially responsible as well as creatively fulfilling.

"We see it as another way to tell stories and generate IP that can then become something else," Odell explains.

This feeds into the portfolio approach that is a fundamental of 3Pas's business model, one that spreads across film (narrative and doc), scripted and unscripted TV, and animation.

The company works within two different markets focusing on two languages with different sets of buyers. Each format and market have different cycles; when activity in one is down, 3Pas has the expertise and capacity to ramp up in another, and the consistent flow of content results in consistent cash flow.

PLUS, PRODUCTION SERVICES

Also beneath the 3Pas banner is its Mexico City-based production services company Visceral, launched in 2019 and overseen by Javier Williams alongside Director of Production Pablo Calasso, who has in-depth experience developing scripted and unscripted series throughout Latin America.

Visceral leverages its combination of local and international expertise to get the best pricing for the highest-quality services in the region. 3Pas is developing a good deal of English-language content that can be shot in Latin America, where the company can take advantage of its know-how there to produce inexpensively.

"3Pas can shoot a project in Mexico for $2 million and it's going to look like it was shot for $7 million," says Nick Lafferty of CAA. "Their scrappiness is going to serve them well in an era where budgets continue to come down and companies look to right-size making shows versus spending infinite money hoping to make it to profitability."

Lafferty adds, "Producers need to understand that the responsible ones who can shoot stuff for less money are going to be the ones that end up winning." ■