

Film Makers Shaping Their Visions to Fit TV

By BILL CARTER

ABC, pursuing what it is calling event series, has signed Oliver Stone, the movie director, to create and produce a special six-hour television series.

Robert A. Iger, the president of ABC Entertainment, announced the deal with Mr. Stone last week but did not describe any details of the project. He said Mr. Stone would be the executive producer of the series and heavily involved in the writing. Mr. Stone created and directed the controversial movie "J. F. K.," along with "The Doors," "Born on the Fourth of July" and "Platoon."

Mr. Iger said the project was in an advanced stage of development, but did not specify when the series would be broadcast.

Mr. Iger defined an event series as a short-term series that comes to a definitive end and has broad impact because it is created by producers and writers who normally do not work in television.

A Matter of Timing

Another difference between event series and the more traditional television mini-series lies in scheduling. Mini-series are usually scheduled on consecutive nights in the same week. But Mr. Iger said event series would run one night a week over several weeks.

"We could use a series like the one Oliver is doing to start off a season, for example," Mr. Iger said. "Or we could use it some other time when we want to grab some extra attention."

The true antecedent of this idea, Mr. Iger said, was a production that helped create the mini-series as a staple of network programming:

"Rich Man, Poor Man," a 6-part, 12-hour adaptation of an Irwin Shaw novel that ran on ABC in 1976. That mini-series did not run in a single week but once a week over six weeks in February and March of that year.

The pattern of scheduling mini-series changed the next year when ABC placed "Roots," its ground-breaking mini-series, entirely within one week in January 1977. ABC's chief programmer at the time, Fred Silverman, scheduled "Roots" that way partly to avoid wrecking seven straight weeks if it turned out that the audience rejected the risky project.

The opposite happened. "Roots" became the highest rated program in television history. That success led network programmers to conclude that a mini-series would have maximum impact if played on consecutive nights.

Mr. Iger now says that spreading a story out over a number of weeks makes equal sense.

Describing an Appeal

ABC has held discussions with several other prominent movie directors, Mr. Iger said. "This is a way for them to get ideas made that they can't do as a theatrical movie," he said. "Oliver Stone can see his idea spread out over six hours. He wouldn't be able to do that as a movie."

The idea is also attractive to movie figures like Mr. Stone, Mr. Iger said, because they know the project can be brought to a conclusion. Another attraction is that film makers can include real suspense about the fate of their main characters, while in regular weekly television series there is never any doubt that the protagonist will survive any threatening situation, Mr. Iger said.

Two other prominent film makers, George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, have projects with ABC. Mr. Lucas's is a regular series, "The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles," which will begin on March 4. Mr. Spielberg is planning a television movie called "Class of '61," about graduates of the West Point class of 1861 who fought the Civil War. But that project may be extended into a longer series.

On Friday, ABC also announced that it had signed the novelist Judith Krantz to write and produce a mini-series sequel to her novel "Scruples," which was a successful mini-series for CBS in 1980. ABC said Ms. Krantz would also write and produce two event series for future use on ABC.

Such projects are also being sought, Mr. Iger said, because there is an increasing amount of money available from foreign broadcasters, especially for American television projects that are produced by famous film makers. Mr. Lucas's series, for example, has already guaranteed that it will make a profit because of its successful sales to foreign broadcasters.

2/10/92 - NY Times