

# VARIETY

## Emmy Features

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### Telepics boosted by tentpole proliferation

#### Road to the Emmys 2012: Movies & Miniseries

By [Josh Chetwynd](#)



Patricia Clarkson with Jeanne Tripplehorn, and Julianne Moore are mostly known for their film roles, but segued to TV for 'Five' and 'Game Change,' a trend among other movie-centric thespis.



TV movies, once thought to be going the way of the dinosaur, are making a comeback.

Over the past year, the format, which had endured contraction for more than a decade, had audiences watching and networks eagerly diving into the business.

From a ratings standpoint, telepics are delivering. Lifetime's "Drew Peterson: Untouchable," the Rob Lowe starrer about a cop's fall from grace, captured 5.8 million viewers in its January debut and was the largest audience for a basic cable TV movie in nearly two years.

HBO's "Game Change," which described the 2008 Republican run for the White House, garnered 2.1 million viewers in its premiere, making it the biggest TV movie audience for the pay cabler in eight years.

Other networks have taken notice. BET, CMT, TNT and others have made commitments to airing TV movies in the near future.

A key cause for growth has been the current level of talent willing to embrace these types of projects. Indeed, thespians mostly known for their theatrical film projects have been eager to work in the telepic format.

Examples include Julianne Moore and Woody Harrelson for "Game Change," as well as Nicole Kidman and Clive Owen for HBO's "Hemingway & Gellhorn." Behind the camera, David Mamet is directing HBO's Phil Spector project, while Lifetime's breast cancer-themed "Five," had several film-centric femmes on board, including Paula Wagner as producer, Demi Moore as director and co-star Patricia Clarkson.

The reason, execs say, is film studios' increasing emphasis on sequels and big-budget actioners has led to cutbacks in character-driven movies. With fewer opportunities in the feature world for interesting projects, many have been left searching elsewhere for that type of work.

"Hollywood is not making the type of movies actors and filmmakers like to do," says Rob Sharenow, Lifetime's exec VP of programming. "As a result big talent is coming back to TV movies."

Len Amato, president of HBO Films, concurs.

"HBO is able to provide a compelling alternative to the types of stories the studios, for the most part, are currently interested in making as theatrical features," he says. "Because films are viewed in so many different ways today and will be more so in the future, the dividing line between the various distribution platforms is shrinking."

The increase in star power also means these films often have longer, and more lucrative, lives after their initial run. While the DVD market may not be the outlet it once was, selling rights overseas for these films is much easier when there are broadly recognized actors fronting the project, according to Deana Myers, who covers TV as a senior analyst at SNL Kagan.

For some, there is also enough scheduling time to rationalize producing a large slate of these projects. For 2012-13, Lifetime is set to air 30 original movies and 26 on the Lifetime Movie Network.

Plus, telepics can always serve as trial balloons for potential series. The Hallmark Channel recently greenlit "Cedar Cove," a two-hour film based on a Debbie Macomber novel starring Andie MacDowell, to serve as a backdoor pilot. Lifetime's series "The Client List" with Jennifer Love Hewitt also started as a TV movie.

Still, there's a limit to this mini-boom in telepics. For instance, the broadcast networks are unlikely to ever substantially invest in this business again, Myers says.

"Cable has that ability to repeat TV movies multiple times, something broadcast networks just aren't going to do," she says. "Cable also has far more leeway with such elements as subject matter and language, which can help lure big-name talent."

Even when broadcast networks have had recent success with TV movies, they've seemed cautious with the format. For example, CBS is no longer expected to continue its successful series of "Jesse Stone" telepics, which starred Tom Selleck, because of the films' older-skewing demo. Another issue is TV movies must compete with the upside of giving material more than one feature-length block of time.

With a mini-series or a short-length series there are economies of scale you don't get with the TV movie, according to PBS' head of programming John Wilson, who has had so much success with short-length series like "Downton Abbey." Multiple episodes, he says, "work better from a promotional point of view and I think it often works better for the work itself. There is that common sense aspect: if the audience likes the product, more of it is better."