Telling tales of the unexpected

WHAT'S EVERYBODY INTERESTED IN? ANCIENT CIVILISATIONS? DINOSAURS? RUNNING WITH WOLVES? THE TRICK WITH FACTUAL CO-PRODUCTIONS, WRITES ANDY FRY, IS TO FOCUS ON SUBJECTS THAT ARE AS ENTHRALLING TO THE PEOPLE OF NANKING AS THEY ARE TO FOLKS IN NANTUCKET

INTERNATIONAL co-productions are a great way for broadcasters to maximise the quality they put on the screen, particularly in this era of tight budgets. But the need to find subjects that appeal to audiences in more than one territory inevitably militates in favour of certain subjects. So it is not a massive surprise to see National Geographic Television (NGT) touting a landmark six-part series about ancient Greece ahead of MIPTV. "Subjects like this resonate with international audiences," says Maryanne Culpepper, NGT's senior vice-president of editorial development. "You know from the outset you are dealing with an era that will attract channel buyers." But surely we have seen it all before?

Notwithstanding NGT's undoubted expertise, what is there left to say about the Greeks? "We only undertake series like these if we think there will be interesting revelations or a new editorial angle," Culpepper says. "And the fact is that new
archaeology is transforming our understanding of Greek civilisation. We have new insights into Delphi, Crete, Sparta, lost underwater cities and subjects like human sacrifices.”

A crucial part of the process was to hook up with Greek broadcaster Skai — not a name you usually come across on the co-pro circuit. “Skai has brought us great access,” Culpepper adds. “The combination of our production expertise and fact-checking with their local knowledge promises to make this a breakthrough factual production.”

ZDF is also focusing on ancient history in the run-up to MIPTV, according to ZDF director of coproductions and development Kristina Hollstein. “We are working on a four-part series about ancient Egypt with ARTE and History, which explores how they ran a peaceful civilisation for such a long period of around 3,000 years.”

Produced by Cologne-based Gruppe 5, the series — Planet Egypt — will combine CGI, dramatic reconstruction and scientific analysis to move forward our understanding of Egypt. “Gruppe 5 is an expert in this field and it has researched the subject for a year in Egypt,” Hollstein adds. “We really believe it will be a fascinating insight into the era. Not only will the series look at the rule of the godlike Pharaohs, but it will also explore the everyday life of Egyptians in the fields and in the workshops, as well as their sport, military service and family life.”

ZDF has a long-term alliance with History US on factual co-productions. This relationship, Hollstein says, is invaluable: “Sometimes you need new partners, because they can bring local knowledge or original insights to a production. But co-pro is so complex that it takes a lot of the risk out if you have a trusted partner you have worked with before.”

Outside history, subjects like science and natural history seem best suited to co-pro. BBC Worldwide and Discovery, for example, are moving ahead with their latest epic Life, which is classified as a BBC/Discovery/Skai/Open University co-production in association with RTI and ARTE.

Then there is March Of The Dinosaurs (1 x 87 mins), which is backed by Canada’s History Television, National Geographic US, Super RTL and France 5. On board as distributor (excluding the UK) is FremantleMedia Enterprises (FME).

Another top player in the wildlife co-pro arena is the Netherlands-based producer/distributor Off the Fence, which is working on Running With Wolves, a co-production with Wild Images, for Smithsonian Networks, Animal Planet International, NDR Germany and ORF Austria. Explaining the film, Off the Fence CEO Ellen Windemuth says: “It’s about an Austrian field researcher called Gudrun Pfleuger and her extraordinary relationship with wolves.”

A former Olympic skier, Pfleuger develops a lethal form of brain cancer, from which she motivates herself to recover by dreaming of running once again with wolves.
Amazingly, Windemuth says, “Gudrun not only managed to cure her stage-four tumour, but she also got pregnant in the course of production, making this a natural-history film with a strong human story attached”. Windemuth says the production was not an easy feat due to Gudrun’s health and the fact that her emotions needed to be captured in two languages: “ORF and NDR were very interested in Gudrun, so we had to make sure we double-shot her most expressive moments in both English and German. That required the director to put Gudrun through an emotional process once in each language. Fortunately, the commissioning editors had an extraordinary consensus on how they felt the material should best be put together. For us, it was a pleasure to craft a film that will appeal to viewers in the US, Germany, Austria and internationally.”

The US, the UK and mainland Europe provide the bulk of the world’s factual co-pro partners. But there are key players outside these regions, one being the Japanese public broadcaster NHK. After a lean time in the middle of the decade, NHK came back with a vengeance in 2008, signing off a co-pro with Nat Geo called Megaquake and unveiling a proposal for a ground-breaking six-part series about evolution. Called Weird Edens, the $1.6m-per-hour co-production had New Zealand’s NHNZ attached from the start. The decision to flag up Weird Edens at MIPCOM 2008 was unusual for NHK. The broadcaster introduced the concept at a much earlier stage of development than usual, reflecting the growing trend for partners to want early involvement in projects. Fortunately, this strategy paid off: by MIPCOM 2009, NHK was able to unveil the Science Channel, Animal Planet and France 5 as new partners. Weird Edens has now entered production — and promises to be a real spectacular.

NHK has long been a bulwark of Asian factual co-production. Recently, however, it has had regional support from Singapore’s Media Development Authority (MDA), a government-backed initiative to transform the Asian city-state into a global media hub.

One new co-pro project to benefit from MDA support is Monumental Challenge, a 6 x 60 mins HD co-pro between Oak3 Films of Singapore, MediaLab and History in the UK, and China Intercontinental Communication Centre. The series looks at restoration work on iconic locations such as Shanghai’s Bund, the Sydney Opera House, the Eiffel Tower, St Paul’s Cathedral and the Taj Mahal. As such, it is another classic example of the kind of international show that interests many buyers. MDA has also provided an important bridge between East and West in a number of co-pro scenarios. Current examples include Lonely Planet: Roads Less Travelled. Co-produced by Lonely Planet Television and Singapore’s Beach House Pictures, the HD series follows Lonely Planet writers and photographers as they road-test exciting new possibilities for travellers. The series is distributed by BBC Worldwide and broadcast on National Geographic Adventure Channel.

Also debuting at MIPTV is Sun Tzu: War On Business, a 13-part reality series that follows dot.com millionaire James Sun as he helps to turn businesses around using the principles of the Art Of War, an ancient Chinese text. The series is co-produced by The Right Angle Media and China Multimedia Networks, distributed by BBC Worldwide and will premiere across Asia on Channel NewsAsia International during the first half of 2010.

Less typical of the co-pro model is Sons Of Cuba, an intimate-access film that looks at the legendary Havana Boxing Academy. This is one of those labour-of-love projects that would probably not have seen the light of day if it had not been for the commitment of young film-maker Andrew Lang, who made the documentary for Windfall Films. Initially a 45-minute film for PBS, the strength of the story persuaded a number of partners to fund a feature-length version. With WNET, ITVS, ARTE, Screen South and World Circuit Records supporting the film (which has also been acquired by Italian theatrical distributor Fandango), Sons Of Cuba is a classic example of how an unlikely project can be brought to life by a co-production partnership.