CO-PRODUCTION

It’s all about teamwork

There was a time when co-production in Europe was more a political concept than something based on financial good sense or even creativity. But as Marlene Edmunds reports, that’s all changed.

Drama co-production, driven by some of the oldest and some of the newest media players in the world, is increasingly becoming a major force both creatively and financially. With series like Borgia selling easily around the globe — and being picked up by Netflix, the world’s largest on-demand internet streaming service — there’s no question drama co-production has come a long way from its Euro-pudding days.

The internet, and the universality of the lives we live, are changing the narration, production and marketing of drama co-productions, particularly in Europe and North America. Take Jo, one of the latest co-productions from Lagardere Entertainment’s Atlantique Productions produced for TF1 in association with Red Arrow International. It boasts Jean Reno in his first TV role for four decades and a superb line-up of talent — but the superstar isn’t just Reno, it’s Paris. Created by Rene Balcer, Franck Ollivier and Malina Detcheva, Jo is the first English-language series to be shot entirely on location in the French capital.

“In Jo, Paris and its key locations give it both universal as well as local and regional appeal,” says Olivier Rene Veillon, CEO of Ile de France Film Commission. He adds that when it was in development, the idea was that the project had to have a strong international impact and location could be one of the elements that created that impact. “So the locations in Paris are not acciden-
It was a ground-breaking situation for us, to begin working on a third season without the second one having been aired.

Olivier Bibas

It's no big surprise that the US is increasingly a must-have partner for Euro players and working with America is a significant part of the overall strategy of Lagardere and Atlantique to increase production values through talent and financing. "We are able to do both working with the US," Bibas says. "Tom Fontana is an example of the kind of talent we can tap into. Someone like Jean Reno draws serious interest from the US as well." At the same time, he adds, European elements very much influence the productions. Borgia is about European history and Jo is a contemporary Paris police procedural.

The French took some time to climb aboard the international drama co-production train but they are now not only on board but changing the very dynamics of the landscape.

In September of 2011 the 118-year old Gaumont launched Gaumont International Television (GIT) in Los Angeles. The aim, says Christophe Riande, vice-CEO of Gaumont, was to create a TV studio that is more "nimble, global and creative." He adds: "Considering the number of projects on board, the talent and the partners we are involved with, I'd say we've succeeded."

Barbarella is the latest co-production to come out of the GIT stables. And with British writing team Neal Purvis and Robert Wade, whose credit list includes five of the James Bond series — including the biggest-ever, Skyfall — Danish-born Nicolas Winding Refn directing, American Martha De Laurentiis executive producing, and Canal+ on board as a co-producer, it is truly an international one.

"In the short period of time since GIT has been in existen-
Netflix generates drama of its own but time will tell how much is about co-production. Netflix has $300m earmarked for original content over the next few years but no announced strategy for co-production. It has, however, come aboard as a co-producer for the unlikely hit series Lilyhammer. The internet streaming service last month [March 14] announced it would stream all 12 episodes of the third season of The Killing, three months after the AMC finale. The US co-production remake of the wildly successful Danish series Forbrydelsen (The Crime) had been cancelled by AMC, then brought back for a third season by AMC and Fox Television Studios. Netflix’s move was considered integral to its return.

In the meantime, we’re working for major broadcasters in the US as well as Netflix. I think I can say that we have not only been nimble and global but also creative,” Riandee says. “Co-production today is a complex matter in that one needs to marry the interests of the producers and the broadcaster. In the case of Barbarella, Canal+ was very interested in the project.”

He says that at GIT there is no predefined scheme or strategy in terms of where talent should come from. It’s the project and the partners that determines the direction it will go. Horror-thriller series Hemlock Grove, for example, in high-profile at MIPTV this year, relies heavily on American talent — but is nonetheless a significant project for the company. “It was important to show the market that GIT could produce and deliver a US show,” Riandee says.

Back in LA, Katie O’Connell, CEO of GIT, says drama co-production is an “absolute priority for us”. GIT currently partners with, among others, Sony International Channel’s AXN, NBC and Canal+. Having such partners early on in the process, she adds, “helps ensure we are creating series that will have a global footprint from the get-go”.

Netflix’s involvement in Hemlock Grove is also a sign of the times. “Each series has its own rhythm and we work to find the perfect home for each narrative,” she says, adding that Hemlock Grove, which is based on the series co-creator Brian McGreevy’s novel “really lent itself to the Netflix format. Each episode, like each chapter in a good book, propels you into the next episode. What I love about Netflix is allowing the viewer to decide the pace at which they watch a series and serialised dramas lend themselves to this format.”

And as consumers exercise those preferences there will be a need for new production strategies. “Sending a message that multiple seasons of a series will be produced is very encouraging to viewers,” says O’Connell, adding: “Viewership of series has as much to do with the audience feeling the commitment as it does the quality of the series. The quick failure rate of series has created an environment of sceptical viewers who may not commit until they know that a full season has been produced.”

Germany’s Beta Film always has a pack of co-productions on the front burner that involve multiple European partners. Eric Welbers, managing director of Beta Film, says international players are now creating new co-production models. “In the older model, the co-production partners sit around at a table and have input into the creative side,” he says. However, newer projects like Alexander, co-produced by Beta Film, Gruppe 5 and ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE) the commercial arm of German public broadcaster ZDF, can’t really work that way. “A co-production between horizontally scripted events like Alexander requires something different.”

Alexander is being seen as a ground-breaking project for a number of reasons. To begin with, it is the first
FEATURE

Isolda Dyachenko as Lucrezia Borgia in Borgia

time that Beta Film, Gruppe 5 and ZDFE have come together on such a large production. “The project had been on the table for some time now but within the context of a mini-series,” Welbers says. “However, the [full-length] TV series allows us the time to develop the characters a bit more.”

Welbers says that today European channels are more comfortable with the modern multi-national co-production model and feel less inclined to get involved creatively where they are not required to be. “We bring them the projects that they might not be able to do themselves,” he says, adding that it was Canal+ that wanted to bring Tom Fontana on board for Borgia, but not in order then to tell him how to write the script. “The basis for this new kind of production is that you agree on a showrunner and the channels say ‘wow, if you have that guy, we trust you to carry on’.”

The Adventures Of Captain Alatriste, which begins shooting in June or July of this year with Spanish commercial broadcaster Telecinco on board the project, is the first series Beta Film has co-produced with Spain. Welber says Telecinco is an active co-producer with creative input and The Adventures Of Captain Alatriste is a good example of a European channel requiring an event series that it can’t afford to do alone. “You can see this in every country in Europe, every channel is trying to do something that is an event, something they will be remembered for. And our job is to help them bring the money so that they can do it.”
ZDFE was among the earliest investors in Scandinavian co-productions, including The Millennium Trilogy, The Killing and The Bridge. Tasja Abel, vice-president, ZDFE Drama, says ZDFE looks for programmes that stand out and “Scandinavian productions set new standards, in storytelling, quality and innovative approach”. Most of the ZDFE co-productions with Scandinavia have been crime series, which Abel says works particularly well in the German market and internationally. ZDFE is now at work in collaboration with commissioning partner ZDF on The Bridge II, a continuation of the successful crossover original crime-thriller co-production The Bridge, co-produced with Filmframe and Nimbus Film for public broadcasters SVT in Sweden and DR in Denmark. Delivery is set for October 2013.

“The drama co-production world has changed and become very open and collaborative on the creative side,” Abel says. “Projects like The Bridge are an example of a creative situation in which the need for co-production is innate in the concept.”

The changes on the European co-production landscape are welcome to companies like Scandinavia’s Nice Drama, part of the Nordic territories Nice Entertainment Group. As potential for growth in the local Nordic environment is limited due to the size of the market, alliances with larger and dedicated production groups such as Lagardere are becoming essential for Nice Drama’s ambitions, says Patrick Nebout, executive producer of international projects for nice Drama.

Nice Drama inked a co-development deal in mid-March that has Lagardere co-funding the development of a number of TV-series, and holding first option for co-production and international distribution. Among projects covered by the deal and currently in development is the eight-episode series Valhalla, a co-production tapping France’s Viking history at the time when Normandy was invaded by the Vikings at the end of the ninth century. The TV series will be filmed in English with international talent on board from the US, UK and Scandinavia.

Lagardere and Nice Drama are also working on the development of a thriller series, Midnight Sun, a co-production for Canal+ and SVT.

Lagardere, especially, is an ideal partner for the kind of co-productions his company is looking to develop. Nebout says, adding: “Lagardere, of all the companies in Europe, comes the closest to the real studio model. They work on both in-house projects and with independent producers and third parties on the development of new properties.”