Germans as Partners in International Co-Productions

It doesn’t always have to be a classic

Berlin – German producers have generally good experiences with international co-productions. More often than not, complex adaptations of great classics can not be tackled by one channel alone. This is due to tight budgets, caused by the economic crisis. But that isn’t the only reason.

The economic crisis and resulting financial strictures especially for commercial channels and rising costs are further reasons. All that has led to a change of attitude in the past years: “Today, no country in the world can still afford to take on complex TV productions single-handedly,” says Ferdinand Dohna, producer at Eos Entertainment (Munich). But there is a good side to it: “The crisis encourages the receptiveness of channels to international co-productions; they are much more open-minded than before.” The best examples are the USA and Great Britain: “Both used to be scarcely interested in international projects, because their home markets were big enough.” The best evidence of Dohna’s theory is the most famous charioteer in history: The over 22 million US dollars TV remake of William Wyler’s sandal epic “Ben Hur” drew five co-producers into the team: Alchemy Television Group (USA), Akord Film (Germany), Driftim Entertainment (Spain), Zak Productions (Morocco) and Muse Entertainment (Canada). Amongst others, the financial burden is shared by the ProSieben (Germany), CBC (Canada), Antena 3 (Spain) and ABC Networks (USA) channels.

Jens Richter, managing director of SevenOne International, the sales affiliate of ProSiebenSat.1 Media AG, confirms Dohna’s view: “More and more producers are coming to us looking for partners for an international co-production, including an increasing number of American producers. The general desire for closer cooperation to help generate bigger budgets has clearly increased in the last three years.”

Hardly anyone can claim to have more experience in this field than Jan Mojtö, CEO not only of Eos, but also of the distribution company, Beta Film. Already during his time with Leo Kirch, Mojtö had a preference for co-productions; Among the classics in the Beta Film portfolio are the Bible Film Series, but also adaptations of great works by Dumas, like “The Count of Monte Cristo”, or “The Three Musketeers”. Sceptics believe, however, that great historic television series have outlived their popularity. Alexander Coria, managing director of ZDF Enterprises, is nonetheless sure that productions of this scale will continue to be successful. His example: “Napoleon”. The 40 euro million production of a four-part series is one of Kirch Me-
dia's final projects and its airing on ZDF achieved an average market share of 25 per cent of the audience. That was six years ago, though. "When such projects are properly rolled out", says Coridaß, "they can still attract an audience for two or even four parts." This is especially true of classic stuff: "Greek mythology, swords and sandals, or great love stories" still have potential. But contemporary history also yields great stories: "Provided that the plot and its staging are not limited to a purely national focus."

This is where Teamworx enters the stage. Many event productions of this successful company have been exported around half the globe with the help of Eos and Beta Film. "Dresden", for example, was viewed in over seventy countries, "Staufenberg" even in more than eighty. With historical dramas like "Hindenburg" and "Lacoria", Teamworx has produced its first mini-series (English and German). According to Teamworx' managing director, Jürgen Schuster, there has been a "drastic fall in licence fees" for German productions in world distributions. We have to "accept significant discounts on minimum guarantees, although they are a critical factor in our financing schemes", says Schuster. Without additional funding, event productions would quickly hit their limit.

In Schuster's opinion, the financial ceiling for future ninety minute productions will be around six million euros, and for two-part series, nine million euros. "Anything topping these budgets can't be handled by national partners alone, and this will mean a huge additional risk." "Lacoria", for example, which at 13 million euros was the most expensive film in company history, is a co-production of Talkback Thames, London, an affiliated company of Fremantle Media, BBC and Detego, an ARD affiliate. Without international backing, the project, according to Schuster, "could definitely not have been realised"; nearly 60 per cent of the budget was supplied by international partners. According to Schuster, Teamworx' strength lies in its "longstanding experience with international projects, a good network of reliable global distribution partners and contacts to production service companies abroad established over many years" – among them, for instance, Two Oceans Productions in South Africa. The company has co-produced many German films. Through their cooperation with Fremantle Media, Teamworx is part of a global network of production companies, Fremantle International Distribution being an extremely successful partner in the global distribution of international projects.

The same is true for Eos and its sister company Beta Film, one of the largest worldwide fiction distributors outside the USA. Eos producer Dohna also emphasises that the business of international co-production is "first and foremost a networking business": The contacts to channels, producers, directors and actors in Germany and abroad, many of them established over decades, enable us to bundle interests and approach projects jointly." It is also important to "have exact knowledge of international markets, audience mentalities and preferences". In each case it is necessary to balance the specific interests of each channel and production...
Partners from Austria, France and Italy participated in the 25 million euros project „War and Peace“ by Eos.

company involved, in order to ensure that international co-productions don’t become Euro-pudding films and creativity takes precedence over financial aspects.” Also for Eos, the submarine drama “Laconia” is currently the most important project. Recent productions of international acclaim include the movie “John Rabe” (Germany, France, China), the 25-million-euros-series “War and Peace” (Germany, Austria, France, Italy), and the 22-part series “Rome”, produced jointly with HBO and the BBC (budget: 100 million dollars).

But it doesn’t always have to be a classic. With editorial input from ZDF Enterprises, Eos has created several Scandinavian crime series in recent years (“The Protectors”). Their latest co-productions are the movies of two novels by Ken Follett, “Eisfieber” (Whiteout) and “Pfeiler der Macht” (A Dangerous Fortune), the partner company being Palomar (Italy, for RTI/Mediaset). All said, it is still the big stories which develop the greatest pull, as proven by “Moby Dick”, the current 25-million-dollar production by Herbert Kloiber and his Tele

München Group (TMG) with the US-American RHI Entertainment (German channel: RTL); both have recently produced the two-part-series “The Seewolf”. TMG is a sought-after partner for American firms, but it is also known for closing financing gaps in event productions by its parent channel (for instance with “Hepzibah”, a mystery thriller filmed in English). The company was recently also a partner in the production of two Sci-Fi documentary features, “Aftermath” (production company: Cream Productions) and “Comet Impact” (Darlow Smithson). Both were created for the international market and co-produced in close cooperation with ProSieben, and they were very successfully screened on American cable TV. According to SevenOne managing director Richter, the “disaster, mystery, adventure” genre still delivers the stories his company prefers to focus on. If and how the trend towards international co-productions will continue when the crisis subsides will depend, according to Richter, “mainly on the success of these productions, and on the number of viewers”.