Commercial inspiration, creative perspiration

WITH THE RISE OF THE THEATRICAL DOC AND NEW-MEDIA PLATFORMS, DOCUMENTARY PRODUCERS ARE FACING STIFF COMPETITION FOR CO-PRODUCTION DOLLARS. RACHEL MURRELL LOOKS AT THE STRATEGIES THEY ARE DEVISING TO FINANCE THEIR PRODUCTS.
EVERYONE thought the market for high-end docs, especially about architecture, had gone,” says Nick Catiff, joint managing director of Lion Television. “That made our one-off special about Daniel Libeskind seem like a risk. But Libeskind is the most interesting and controversial architect of our time — he designed the new World Trade Center in New York. He’s also very charismatic and very loveable: a bit like Woody Allen on speed. Had it been about a drier personality, I doubt we’d have made it.”

Series like Texas SWAT (13 x 30 mins), which looks at the macho, adrenalin-fuelled world of the Texas armed police, show Lion taking risks of a different type.

“Filming without breaking the law is getting harder and harder,” Catiff says. “But the Texas SWAT guys are armed to the teeth, brighter, more articulate and — spookily — better-looking than your average cop. So if you get it right, you know you’ll be able to sell in every territory in the world.”

Predicting market trends is also part of Catiff’s job. “Two years ago we restructured to focus closely on formats,” he says. “Looking ahead, we are expecting the UK to move towards more ad-funded programming. The challenge with those shows is getting them on the big channels — unless you go the other way and take

“Filming without breaking the law is getting harder and harder”

Grizzly Man (Discovery/Lions Gate Entertainment)
them to smaller territories. Either way, the holy grail is to create a big brand that pops up all over the world.” Another trend that is popping up all over the world is the theatrical doc. But even though two of them — Grizzly Man and Leonard Cohen: I’m Your Man — have come from Lions Gate Entertainment, Kevin Beggs, the company’s president of programming and production, counsels against assuming theatrical release.

“Our model is extremely disciplined,” he says. “We never project a theatrical release and only green-light based on television and video estimates. We feel that we have had two startlingly original films in Grizzly Man and Leonard Cohen, which happily our theatrical colleagues embraced. But we know that not all will achieve that distribution pattern, so we are prepared to release strictly on TV and video.”

Discovery is handling the TV rights for Grizzly Man, which premiered on Discovery in February. Lions Gate Entertainment is handling the DVD rights and theatrical release.

Fred Burcksen, vice-president of distribution and investments at ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE) does not look for theatrical opportunities. But he thinks big all the same — and he calls the result “superdocs”.

“Audiences are becoming more demanding, international competition is steadily rising and there are many attractive docs on the market,” Burcksen says. “That means only the very big projects tend to be co-produced, especially in the key English-speaking markets. These are the ‘superdocs’ — popular high-end specials on topics of global relevance with first-class CGI and re-enactments, which have been shown to withstand the challenges of the tough international co-production market. This is how we differentiate ourselves from other players: by coming up with the right ideas, backed up by first-class research.”

A recent example is The Longest Night, a two-hour “what-if” docu-drama about the likely impact of a giant asteroid hitting the Earth. The first episode focuses on the devastating effects of the impact, while the second considers how, after a long “nuclear winter”, the surviving humans might rebuild their lives. The €2m project is produced by Cologne-based Gruppe 5 for ZDF in co-production with Discovery US, France 3 and Australia’s SBS-TV.

Project 2056, meanwhile, is a three-part series based on cutting-edge technological research into how the human body, city life and global interaction will look like 50 years from now. Gruppe 5 is producing the €4m mini-series for ZDF, in co-production with Discovery US, ARTE and SBS-TV.

“We looked for partners for these projects in the US, the UK, France, Italy and Australia,” Burcksen says.

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"Schedulers never use the word ‘documentary’ to the advertising community"

Meanwhile, Ellen Windemuth, managing director of Amsterdam-based Off the Fence, is wrestling with the economics of HD. "High definition is now the accepted format for quality non-fiction films," she says. "I'm relieved that the market's need for HD product is allowing more globally appealing films to be produced." But there's a downside: "The budgets available for HD production are incredibly low compared with the quality and innovation that have to be achieved. Distribution revenues, too, are lower than I think they should be, on account of low acquisition prices. This makes our job harder. And even though the internet and home entertainment-related revenues are growing, they are doing so more slowly than we'd hoped." This doesn't mean you give up, however. "We can definitely overcome these challenges," Windemuth says. "But only through a higher volume of production and acquisition, including long-running series. We will continue to specialise in the non-fiction areas we know and like, expand our talent base and become ever more hands-on in the production and development process."

Ann Julienne, head of acquisitions and international co-productions at France 5, has broadened her brief. In the past, she has avoided docu-drama but, after a recent happy experience as a partner on the BBC's Surviving Disaster, she is now less averse to the genre. "I don't generally like docu-fiction," she says. "And I never thought I'd co-produce one. But Surviving Disaster is a very good show, made by the producers of The Seven Wonders Of The Industrialised World. As co-productions go, on the whole it's been a very good experience."

For conventional docs, though, it's business as usual for the France 5 executive: "I want big event one-offs, blue-chip wildlife and strong series — of any length, from three to 13 episodes — about peoples, places and cultures."

Julienne believes that independents are adapting to the harsh economic climate. "It's hard for a lot of independents to make a living," she says. "But I have a sense that many have evolved a better way of working, which involves collaborating with like-minded independents in other territories. Marco Visalberghi of DocLab is a good example. He's a major Italian player, but he's very good at working with other producers. Maurice Ribiére at La Compagnie des Taxi-Brousse does it, too. Both work together often, which is a really good idea. British indies do it a lot, too... I think others should try it."

The BBC's big blue-chip docs always claim a sizeable chunk of the world's co-production budgets. It falls to Isabelle Helle, BBC Worldwide's head of German-speaking territories, to bring in the German broadcasters. "With a big history doc like Hannibal: Rome's Worst Nightmare, every channel is interested," Helle says. "Germany is very competitive, but we look for the right partners for the project — not necessarily the one who offers the most cash. With Hannibal, that was ProSieben, where Thomas von Hennet, head of documentaries, shared our vision."

According to Helle, the BBC encourages more editorial participation in its co-productions than it used to: "Our co-pro partners have as much input as possible, and that benefits the project. We circulate scripts, do weekly updates on the phone, arrange set visits and so on. But you always have to have a lead partner and, in the case of Hannibal, it's the BBC."

Helle is juggling no less than 24 co-productions at present, including some reverse co-pros pitched separately — by NDR, ZDF and ORF. "We are hoping to sustain this level," she adds. "And so long as we deliver on our clients' expectations and they get the audience share they want, we will."

Georgina Eyre is head of co-productions and formats at TVIP, which was established in 2004 by Eyre and ex-BBC Worldwide money-man, Jonathan Drake. TVIP raises finance for its clients, most of whom are UK independents.

TVIP worked with Impossible Pictures on Prehistoric Park, a $10m ITV project made with M6, ProSieben, Animal Planet, ITV and FremantleMedia. Other clients include Monkey Kingdom, Halo Films and Image Impact.

"We are taking three projects to MIPTV," Eyre says. "One Legion is an in-depth look at life inside the highly secretive French Foreign Legion. It is directed and produced by Elisabeth Nord of Noraaliz, who obtained unprecedented access to the legion after her brother applied to join it in 2000."

Surviving Disaster (BBC Worldwide)
TVIP's second project is Dino Live (13 x 60 mins), a $20m series from Impossible Pictures. The doc, which Eyre bills as "the most ambitious factual project of the decade", mixes live TV with the world of dinosaurs to offer viewers "a unique experience only bettered if they actually went back in time". TVIP is also looking for money for another Impossible Pictures project, entitled Great Escapes (10 x 60 mins). "This is a set of true stories about bids for freedom and is truly international in scope," Eyre says. TVIP likes to have a UK or US broadcaster in place before it takes on a project. "We find it easier to finance significant budgets," Eyre says. "When you are dealing with low or mid-range budgets, it's often more difficult to make that gap. However, the point is that it takes as much time to do a big project as it does a smaller one — but if a project is ambitious and has significant creative talent attached, it is seen as a must-have by international broadcasters."

Marketing is also critical. Paul Heaney, managing director of Cineflix International Distribution, uses words like "populist", "irrelevant" and "informative" to describe his programmes — but rarely the word "documentary". "Schedulers never use that word to the advertising community," he says. "Ten years back, you'd have said Faking It and Wife Swap were docs. But the entertainment element means that now you can call them something else."

Specialising in factual entertainment and history, Cineflix tackles subjects like fascism, psychics and dead celebs. Stupid Science (20 x 30 mins), a new series being made for National Geographic Channel International, is already attracting international interest. "It's popular science as if seen through the eyes of Bart Simpson," Heaney says. "And it's what broadcasters tell us they want — a science series with an international perspective, broad demographic appeal and no presenter."

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**THE STORYVILLE STORY**

NICK FRASER, series editor of Storyville, says there is no "typical" way to work with the BBC's international documentary strand. "The interaction, budgets and editorial input vary depending on whether we are buying, co-producing or pre-buying the film," he says. "Although European broadcasters are wedded to big budgets, some of the best docs don't need them. HD cameras have come down in price from £40,000 to £2,000."

Fraser is not someone who enjoys being pitched at MIPTV: "I prefer people to e-mail me ahead of time with a brief description, and preferably something they've shot. I'm not keen on 20-page essays."

Fraser is optimistic about the future of docs. "Many international broadcasters are very committed to them," he says. "The US scene is uneven but, in Europe, ARTE is very effective. And there are more outlets than there were in the past."

But he is realistic about the recent boom in theatrical releases: "The success of films like March Of The Penguins, Super-Size Me and others is exciting. But not many docs make it to the big screen each year."

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FROM QUAKES TO CRUSADES

ZDF ENTERPRISES (ZDFE) is seeking finance for 1755: The Lisbon Disaster (1 x 52 mins), which looks at Europe's first well-documented mega-disaster – a huge earthquake, followed by a tsunami and a fire – using today's disaster prevention and post-catastrophe analysis. ZDFE's slate also includes two China specials: The Forbidden City (2 x 52 mins) and The Great Wall (2 x 60 mins). Recent history is not neglected: The Wehrmacht (5 x 50 mins) is an in-depth look at one of the key military organisations of the Second World War. And then there are investigations: Nephrite's Odyssey (1 x 50 mins) tracks the journey of an ancient artefact from Egypt across war-torn Europe to its final destination, while The Ten Plagues (5 x 45 mins or 3 x 52 mins) assesses what may have been the ecological causes of the Old Testament plagues. ZDFE is also seeking pre-sales for history docs The Children's Crusade (1 x 45 mins), Black September (1 x 90 mins), Verdun (1 x 90 mins) and Goering (3 x 52 mins). And in the natural history area, El Gordo (1 x 52 mins) looks at the nature of dogs, while Mission Treetop (1 x 52 mins) follows the daredevil scientist, Joerg Salzer, as he explores Guyana's tree canopy on a self-constructed flying device.