Local heroes, global stars

Creative collaborations are being forged across cultures and continents, as the world’s producers and broadcasters struggle to keep pace with the ongoing demand for awe-inspiring drama. Marlene Edmunds reports

Traditional broadcasters are developing local ideas with international traction as never before. Deep-pocketed subscription VOD (SVOD) players are throwing billions at original drama content. At the same time, drama players across the globe, from producers to distributors, are working together to overcome regional, national and global challenges.

Taka Hayakawa, director of worldwide production and business development for Fuji TV/Fuji Media Holdings, points to the unprecedented level of collaboration in drama among producers in China, South Korea and Japan. From a national security perspective, the governments may not always be “super happy”, Hayakawa says, but “audiences do not care about the nationality of content. Consumers just look for quality.”

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Taka Hayakawa

Across the media landscape, broadcasters aiming to give local ideas more traction are collaborating with international producers, distributors, investors and SVOD platforms to bring high-end drama to the marketplace. No broadcaster is more adept at giving local drama international appeal than Denmark’s DR, the tiny pubcaster that has been responsible for launching international successes including The Killing and The Bridge. What’s the secret?

“It’s been said many times before and it is still true — the more local, the more global,” says Piv Bernth, DR’s head of drama. “Don’t try to do what the others do. Do it your own way and think, and think again. You have to tell stories about something you know, and something that occupies your mind and heart.”

After 10 years, DR is moving away from its
focus on gritty Nordic noir to explore other sub-genres. “This means that DR will not do crime just for the sake of it,” Bernt says. “We’ll do the best and most interesting stories, whatever genre they are.”

The public broadcaster debuted its latest drama, Ride Upon The Storm from SAM Productions, on September 24. SAM was founded by Soren Sveistrup (The Killing), Adam Price (Borgen) and Meta Louise Foldager Sorensen (A Royal Affair), in partnership with StudioCanal. DR is currently shooting the mini-series Liberty, co-producing season four of The Bridge, and is in development on the third season of Follow The Money.

StudioCanal, part of the Canal+ Group, is a firm believer in “the more local, the more global” approach. “We partner with strong, locally based companies in Europe because we firmly believe in their ability to choose and develop stories that will have both local and international appeal,” says Francois Guyonnet, executive managing director, TV, for StudioCanal.

Through its stable of majority- or minority-owned companies, StudioCanal has helped produce more than 46 hours of drama so far this year. Currently on the front burner for Canal+ is Zabou Breitman’s Paris Etc, a series about the lives of five women in the City of Light; Safe, a second partnership with best-selling author Harlan Coben with Red Production Company; and The Child In Time, a 90-minute one-off TV film starring Benedict Cumberbatch, produced by Cumberbatch’s company SunnyMarch TV and Pinewood Television for BBC One.

Banijay is also in the business of giving local productions an international passport and now has scripted productions in 12 of the 16 territories in which it operates. “Each broadcaster or platform wants its own channel-defining series, which gives the industry a chance to use what works as well as push new boundaries,” says Takis Candilis, Banijay Group’s head of scripted. “The goal in each territory is to work closely with writers and directors to support their vision and creativity,” he adds. “We produce for both SVOD and linear.”

Banijay’s current crop includes season two of Versailles for Canal+ and Occupied for Viasat, ARTE and TV 2 Norway, among others. Banijay just added two new UK scripted companies to its fold: BlackLight Television headed up by Phil Trethewan (Being Human; Ellen) and Ben Bickerton (Ellen); and Fearless Minds, a joint venture with Jolyon Symonds.

The latest project from one of the Nordic territory’s most successful production companies, Yellow Bird — distributed internationally by Banijay — is the second series of political thriller Occupied. Season one of the drama, which depicts a Russian invasion of Norway aided and abetted by the European Union and the US, not only ended on a cliff-hanger, but was condemned by Russia, who objected to be painted as an aggressor. However, executive producer Marianne Gray says the protests came in before the show had actually aired: “The series presented a balanced view, from personal perspectives, of what it might be like to live in our society if it were occupied.”
Season two aired on Nordic SVOD platform Viaplay at the end of September, and will debut on ARTE France and TV 2 Norway next year.

Gray says the second season of Occupied is "relevant in many ways to what’s happening today." She adds: "It’s about the breakdown of modern democracy and trust. It’s about the problems generated by situations like Brexit, in which someone has to take the lead and yet, because it could be political suicide, no one really wants to do it."

Gaumont, the oldest film company in the world, is also a believer in the global appeal of local drama. Christophe Riande, vice-CEO of Gaumont Television, says his company’s strategy is to expand into territories and reinforce its ability to produce local shows in local languages.

Gaumont launched into the US five years ago with the mission of doing just that. One of the first French companies to cross the Atlantic, it now has a string of successes behind it, including Narcos, the third season of which has just debuted. Meanwhile, the Paris-based parent company is expanding its focus in Europe.

"The idea is to have a network of companies and producers around the world who are local and produce local content that will travel to other countries," Riande says. "As we have done in the US, we now want to bring Gaumont to the UK and Germany. Audiences are now used to watching shows in the original language and, in fact, German shows are travelling very well right now for the first time internationally."

Despite plenty of action internationally, local broadcasters including RAI, the BBC and ZDF continue to be the prime movers in high-end drama, blending local sensibility with international savvy. After an astounding first season in which the ratings were at an all-time high for Medici: Masters Of Florence, RAI’s drama arm Lux Vide and Frank Spotnitz’s Big Light Productions have begun filming the second season and is already planning the third.

The series is created by Spotnitz (X-Files/ Man In The High Castle) and Nicholas Meyer (Star Trek), with Daniel Sharman (Fear The Walking Dead) cast as a young Lorenzo the Magnificent and Sean Bean as his nemesis Jacopo Pazzo. The first four episodes of the $28m, eight-part series is being directed by Jon Cassar (24), with Italian director Jan Michelini (Ben Hur) helming the last four. "Cassar and Michelini have forged a close working relationship, which has made our collaboration even more exciting," Spotnitz says.

The second season focuses on Lorenzo the Magnificent, who Spotnitz sees as the most important of the Medici because he used his power and influence to foster the revolutionary art that led to the high Renaissance and artists including Michelangelo, Botticelli and Leonardo Da Vinci. As with season one, the second series

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Drama

will be released on RAI first, followed by Netflix in the US, the UK, Canada, India and Taiwan, as well as on SFR Play in several territories, and Moviestar+ in Spain. BBC Worldwide has also been way ahead of the game when it comes to developing content with broadcast partners outside the UK, with projects including Death In Paradise, a British/French series shot in Guadelupe; and The Refugees, co-produced with Atresmedia in Spain. Liam Keelan, director of scripted content for BBC Worldwide, says drama continues to be a key area of focus. “Every market is different, but we feel we have such a strong talent base in the production community that it would be mad not to exploit this further,” he adds.

Keelan’s job includes overseeing investment into, among other properties, McMafia from Cuba Pictures, Abi Morgan’s The Split via Sister Pictures and Good Omens from BBC Studios. He was also involved in helping set up the funding process for Top Of The Lake: China Girl, the second instalment of Jane Campion’s Emmy-nominated crime-mystery series starring Elisabeth Moss (Mad Men). “As with the first series, the starting point for financing was BBC Two in the UK, and BBC First and Foxtel in Australia,” Keelan says. “BBC Worldwide handled the international sales of the series, worked with Chris Rice of WME and See-Saw’s Hakan Kousetta to negotiate the deals with SundanceTV and Hulu in the US, and provided production financing throughout.”

Norwegian public broadcaster NRK was one of the first to give local hits international traction through the SVOD platforms. Netflix took pre-sales on Lilyhammer as early as October 2011 and, for the second season, NRK’s international drama commissioner, Tone Ronning, brought Netflix in as a co-producer. Since then, Nobel has been picked up by Netflix, Heavy Water (Saboteurs) by both Netflix and Channel 4 in the UK, The Half Brother by SF Anytime and Valkyrien by Walter Presents in the UK.

Nobel, the story of a returning soldier and family man who becomes embroiled in political intrigue, was a hit in Norway. “Our audience really embraced the series, even though it was demanding. The ratings were 50%-60%, or around one million, in a territory of five million people,” Ronning says.

While NRK titles are by definition high-end, Ronning points out that, all too often, international partners “wait until the show is finally produced before they dare to invest”. She adds: “For us, of course, it is much better if they become involved at an earlier stage, where we can take advantage of the bigger overall budget”. Currently in production at NRK is State Of Happiness, an eight-episode drama series scripted by Nobel screenwriter Metta Bolstad and produced by Maipo Film (Miss Julie).

If any broadcaster has been responsible for testing the waters outside of its home territory, it is German public broadcaster ZDF and its commercial arm ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE). The broadcaster began co-producing with the Nordic territories decades ago and, in recent years, has also brought its expertise to territories across the rest of Europe. It is now testing the US waters with Genesis, a sci-fi thriller currently in development with US-based Belladonna Productions.

Robert Franke, a producer on the Genesis project and vice-president of drama at ZDFE, says the story idea was brought to the publisher by Narina Jabari, a Canadian scientist turned screenwriter. “In turn, we needed to find a production company in the US and, since we had previously worked with Rene Bastian’s Belladonna Productions, the fit seemed right,” he adds.
Drama

Franke says the drama about a university student who submits to genetic experimental research and becomes the first trans-human is “a cool story that is socially relevant.” He adds: “We are at a crossroads in human development that is reflected by some of the questions and challenges about gender and, simply, what is next in human development.” ZDFE has the world rights to Genesis.

With a track record that includes Borgia and Midnight Sun, Lagardère’s Atlantique Productions has become something of an expert in bringing international and multilingual co-productions to market. Among its latest projects is Eden, a co-production with Lupa Film and Port Au Prince Productions for ARTE France, ARTE Deutschland, SWR and ARD, set to begin shooting in early 2018 and to air in early 2019. Hiero, a French/Spanish co-production with Alfonso Blanco (Portocabo) for Movistar+ and ARTE France, will also begin shooting early in 2018.

Atlantique’s focus is on the international market and its aim is to drive series conceived at an early stage with international partners and international talent. Jimmy Desmarais, co-managing director of Atlantique, is also a strong advocate of the European Producers Club, a brainstorming collective of some of the biggest producers in Europe. Among its members, Desmarais says, “there is the strong belief that intercultural dialogue is key to organic storytelling beyond borders”.

“Intercultural dialogue is key to organic storytelling beyond borders”
Jimmy Desmarais

Back in the US, IDW Entertainment, which launched four years ago as part of IDW, an award-winning publisher of comic books, graphic novels and trade paperbacks, has had a string of successes with projects including Wynonna Earp and Dirk Gently, both now in their second seasons. Next up is Locke & Key, based on a hit comic property that has been translated into 12 languages. The project has best-selling author Joe Hill attached, with Carlton Cuse as showrunner. Says IDW Entertainment president David Ozer: “We felt Hulu was the best partner. The huge success of The Handmaid’s Tale shows they are really getting aggressive on their programming and know how to market their shows.” The pilot of Locke & Key is scheduled to go into production this year.

IDW Entertainment has also created a partnership with author Jonathan Kellerman for the Alex Delaware franchise. “It’s never been exploited before, because Kellerman didn’t want to work within the Hollywood system,” Ozer says. “We have the rights to the whole book series and are in the early stages of development.”

Another independent studio, MarVista Entertainment, has signalled to the industry that it plans to continue to produce new and original high-end drama series with a new live-action King Kong series. Earlier this year, MarVista premiered Rebel, produced for BET, with John Singleton serving as an executive producer. For King Kong, the company has partnered with IM Global to develop, co-produce and co-finance the series based on De Vito ArtWorks’ Skull Island property and Merian C. Cooper’s King Kong, King Kong Skull Island. MarVista CEO Fernando Szwed says: “We are currently in the early stages of development, but we are looking to produce a contemporary update of the classic tale with a female-led multi-cultural cast. Jonathan Penner and Stacy Title will write and executive produce.”

Keshet International (KI) is also among the content-creation and delivery players helping to bring local ideas to the global marketplace. KI recently focused its efforts on Latin America with the launch of a new production company Keshet MX in Mexico City. The aim is to build on existing development and production deals by adding new partnerships with broadcasters, networks and talent in the territory, according to Kelly Wright, KI’s vice-president of distribution and new business. Among companies with whom KI is working is giant Mexico-based Televisa. Easy Money, the second in a deal for four scripted formats, premiered on Mexico’s Las Estrellas in August.

Wright calls Keshet MX “a marriage of both worlds — local sensibilities, local cultural
"It's a marriage of local sensibilities, local cultural understanding and local relationships, paired with global content, global thinking and global opportunities". KI has partners across Latin America, among them Telemundo, Televisa/Univision, Telefe, Globo and Mega. "They are all outstanding, dominant players in their markets and Keshet is the equivalent in Israel," Wright says. "We share ideas and strategies, what has worked and what hasn't, and we formulate plans for how to mutually combat 'free-TV fatigue', both from the viewers' perspective and from the content programmers' perspective."

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