Fred Burcksen
ZDF Enterprises

By Anna Carugati

ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE) distributes scripted, factual and children’s programming from ZDF, one of the world’s preeminent public broadcasters. To boost its catalog, ZDFE also acquires content and has been investing in production companies. Through the years, ZDFE has participated in international co-productions in several genres. Knowing how to work with partners is essential for Fred Burcksen, the president and CEO of ZDFE, given the high cost of producing quality content that is so in demand today.

WS: ZDFE recently acquired Off the Fence (OTF) and invested in Nadcon Film. What was the strategy behind those investments?
BURCKSEN: With the acquisition of Off the Fence, we wanted to increase our sales power and global presence within the unscripted industry. OTF is a very effective and boutique-style production entity. It fits very well within our portfolio of production companies. Nadcon is a one-person production, Peter Nadermann. He had been with us, then left our group (in 2012 to launch Nadcon), and we thought it was time for him to return. Peter has talent. He is well connected within the creative industry and has a nose for finding special content and for seeing trends in the drama genre. Peter was the one who discovered series like The Killing and The Bridge (Bron/Broen). Together with ZDF, we invested in both series and made them into

to work with partners. You can’t afford to do things by yourself. You need to work with partners to get special series done, which is first and foremost a positive thing, and second, people are willing to look at original ideas no matter where they come from. It could be a Scandinavian series, a Spanish series or a Canadian series. A project should be original and developed and executed by the creative team without too much influence by the co-production partners.

WS: Would you give some examples of recent co-financed projects?
BURCKSEN: In live-action kids’ series, we are doing the third season of The Worst Witch. It’s a CBBC project that could only be financed with the help of ZDFE and Netflix. This is a very original concept that all partners have accepted just as the creative team that built the property envisioned it. And secondly, it could only be financed with the help of all these partners, so you needed the two networks, CBBC and ZDF, and Netflix as a global platform. Another example is a Canadian series by Pixcom Productions called Victor Lessard. It’s based on a famous novel by Maybe they were not the initiators of the program, but they were the first to step in and take global rights. An example is one of our production companies, Bavaria Fiction, which developed a series on Sigmund Freud. Netflix picked it up on a global scale and ZDF took the second window in Germany.

WS: What advantages does ZDFE derive from its affiliation with ZDF?
BURCKSEN: We are very proud to be a 100-percent subsidiary. ZDF is a creative powerhouse; so many talented editorial people work there. It’s a very courageous network. Again, it was Peter Nadermann’s finding, but ZDF was the first broadcaster to decide to air season one of The Killing—one story over 20 episodes. For a linear network, that was very courageous. It’s in ZDF’s DNA; they like to be first movers. Finally, if we work shoulder to shoulder and bring their money to the table and add some of our money, we can be a factor when it comes to co-producing or acquiring quality international content. We try to work with them, find synergies and be effective together.
will bring more opportunities for independent distributors.

**WS:** Is there a willingness to share rights?

**MUTIMER:** I'm seeing a willingness to share rights, yes. Again, no two properties are the same, but we often windows through OTT and public-service and commercial broadcasters around the world. We also work with regional OTT services. Movistar in Spain will launch Hierro at MIPTV, and that is a great series with a rich, strong cast, including Candela Peña, who worked with Pedro Almodóvar. We work a lot with Viaplay. We're launching Wisting with Carrie-Anne Moss. That is a great drama we have, thanks to a streaming service that commissioned it.

**WS:** What new formats will you be launching at MIPTV?

**MUTIMER:** We're excited about Catch! from Banijay Group's Brainpool for SAT.1 in Germany. It's an explosive new entertainment format, in which four teams of four players compete against each other in games inspired by variations on the timeless game of catch—ranging from the classic (cross the line, obstacle race), to the funny (blind catch) and downright scary (vertical catch). The fast-paced rounds see all the teams take on the parts of chasers and evaders. Each team is led by a celebrity captain, and team members are top athletes and parkour specialists. We believe this has great potential for broadcasters, as it can be scaled up or down depending on the clients' needs.

**WS:** How have you been reimagining and launching some of your legacy formats like Temptation Island and Survivor?

**MUTIMER:** Survivor is an example of a format that's been around 20 years and has been consistently on the air. We love it, we know it and the whole nub of Survivor is how people form societies together. And because it takes place in such extreme circumstances, it feels quite elevated. That is something that constantly engages viewers, especially now as we watch what's going on in our world. Survivor is one of the best formats ever. It's in its 38th season in the U.S. this year. Incredible. Julia Dick, consultant executive producer at Castaway Television Productions, knows that format inside and out. She helps make sure it is a success wherever it goes. We are discussing a new version in Russia at the moment. She is talking to the production team there and knows what the potential risks are—if you do it this way it might be a bit boring, you have to do it that way. We've got the expertise and knowledge that give broadcasters real support to make sure the show is a success.

Temptation Island is interesting. It's a huge hit that is still on air in places like the Netherlands, Italy and Belgium and has come back to the U.S. this year. Whereas once it was a honey trap for people, now the angle is more couples who feel they are at a crossroads in their relationship and want to test [whether or not they are] with the right partner. It's become a social experiment but still fun and exciting, and the casting is incredible.

**WS:** Careful what you wish for!

**MUTIMER:** Yes, and absolutely fascinating to watch. Shipwrecked is another format that is coming back in the U.K. It was on Channel 4 in the 2000s and it [launched in January] on E4. One of the things that makes these formats relevant and feel slightly different and fresh is that the production teams working on them are a whole new generation and see things through a slightly different lens. Social media wasn't around then but is now and is a key part of the proposition. We've got producers just focusing on social media for Shipwrecked. And the cast is much more diverse than the cast was 20 years ago. So the show does feel fresh and of today.

**WS:** Do streaming services prefer scripted or do they also look for unscripted?

**MUTIMER:** We sell both. Scripted is more high-profile content. But Netflix and Amazon are commissioning more unscripted than previously. They will look at unscripted ideas and have acquired some from us. Yes, they buy both, but they do think of scripted first. But it's cyclical as well. We talk about these great shows that are coming back that people can binge on. After I watched the first two episodes of Temptation Island, I couldn't wait to see the third! Had it been on a streaming service, it would be a weekend lost on Temptation Island!