ZDF Enterprises was founded in the year 1993 as a 100% private subsidiary of the German pubcaster ZDF, one of the biggest and most renowned television groups in Europe. On behalf of ZDF, the company is responsible for worldwide program distribution, the implementation of international co-productions, license purchasing for quality programs, marketing online rights and the merchandising of strong ZDF program brands.

All the operative divisions ZDF Enterprises, ZDF drama, ZDFE junior and ZDFE unscripted are organized in the way that they search for new projects and programs, conclude co-production deals and acquire program rights and handle the distribution of the respective programs.

In 2012 we reorganized our structure in this manner and it proved this is most efficient’, remarks Fred Burcksen, President and CEO. ‘Genre professionals are in charge of the entire exploitation chain: from the program idea and development to the sale of the finished production, all in one hand. On average, we do around 20 co-productions per year and co-finance another 60’.

One of ZDFE’s unscripted highlights is the 4K/ UHD production The Greatest Race, produced by Lion TV (UK) in cooperation with Smithsonian Networks, Channel 4, Arte, ZDF and ZDF Enterprises. ‘Everybody knows the images of Roman chariot races from Hollywood classics like Ben Hur but hardly anyone knows the real story behind it’, he describes.

In live-action kids’ series, ZDFE is doing the third series of The Worst Witch. It’s a BBC-CBBC project that was financed with the help of ZDF Enterprises and Netflix. ‘It is a very original concept that all partners have approved. The series could have only been financed with all of these partners’, adds Burcksen. Another example is a Canadian drama series by Procom Productions called Victor Lessard: it’s based on a famous novel by Canadian author Martin Michaud that ZDFE picked up and it is going to make into a global success.

The executive highlights: ‘We do not focus on specific territories but are open to partners from all over the world. We are always looking for new inspirations and are open to co-productions in all kind of countries. Entering new cooperation’s is as important as continuing already existing successful cooperations’.

‘We do not have a set way of doing business in any genre. It is all about finding the right mix, the right compromise and the best deal for all partners involved in a project. From the simple acquisition of distribution rights to complex co-production agreements with many partners from all over the world, everything is possible.

We are very flexible when the objective is to enable the creation of a new project or partnership. It is all a matter of common sense and negotiations’.

ZDFE has made two important acquisitions last January: first, it had signed an agreement to acquire 100% of the shares in Off the Fence B.V., a leading non-fiction content company based in the Netherlands, founded in 1994 by Ellen Windemuth that produces and distributes outstanding documentaries and series on a global scale; second, it has Nadeon production company from the legend Peter Nadermann, who has discovered series such as The Killing and The Bridge (aka Bron/ Broen) for ZDF, which invested with ZDFE in both and helped them to global success.

‘He had been with us, then left our group five years ago, and we all thought it was time for us to work closer together again. He is well connected within the creative industry and has a talent for finding special content and for seeing trends in the drama genre. We are confident that we will come up with new ideas and create trends within this new cooperation’, completes.

Regarding the coproduction business in the world, Burcksen states: ‘It is all about financing projects with partners and in certain areas. There is an absolute need to find the right partners in order to get a project off the ground. Recently, there has been a greater acceptance for letting talent do their work. Co-production partners, whether networks or distributors are more willing to let writers and everybody involved in the creative process do their work; they don’t try to exert too much influence. People are willing to look at original ideas no matter where they come from. That is a very positive element’.

Fred Burcksen, President and CEO, ZDF Enterprises