TV DRAMA: It’s been three years since the service launched in the U.K. What adjustments have you made as you’ve expanded the platform internationally and learned more about how your users are engaging with the content?

LUZZOLINO: Some of it is more business and strategic, in the sense of our international launches, and some of it is content- and editorial-driven. The most notable thing for us has been our international growth. It’s been quite brilliant, for a number of reasons. First of all, we’ve established a lovely, happy cycle with broadcasters. Our reputation internationally in the drama space has grown. And the brilliant formula we established with Channel 4 has been a blueprint for many others. So now we’re getting into a position where broadcasters ring us and say, How are you doing 30 million streams a year and can we joint venture together? We identify great shows, we help them shine, we make distributors happy, we make content producers happy and we make broadcasters happy! We realize as much as we love adventure, our role should always really be that of the pure curator. Our concentration and focus should be on watching and picking the best dramas, packaging them and branding them. Every time we can nestle our venture in the home of a broader broadcasting organization that already has relationships with millions of viewers, it’s just better. They do what they do best and we do what we do best.

TV DRAMA: Tell us about the international journey, beginning with the U.S.

LUZZOLINO: When we launched in America we were just direct to consumer [as an SVOD platform]. We have struck a deal with PBS Distribution whereby Walter Presents is now available on the PBS Masterpiece Amazon channel. That is significant because it means that our programming reaches many, many more viewers. As you know, when you launch SVOD direct to consumer, the challenges are money and marketing. How far can you go to make people aware that you even exist? We went quite far on our own with our small pockets, but [working with] PBS has been amazing and instrumental. What we lacked in the U.S. was the muscle, the money and the visibility in more households. PBS provided that through the Masterpiece experience on Amazon, but also through select runs on their regional stations. We recently transmitted a great show called Modus, a Scandi noir, in L.A. on KLC. We’ve identified more titles with them. That
STUDIOCANAL’s Danish drama Ride Upon the Storm has been a breakout success on Walter Presents in the U.K.

means that effectively as more and more walls go up—Brexit and Trump—we’re knocking other ones down! If politics isolate countries, the consumers do the exact opposite. We’re bringing international drama into British and American living rooms! Also in the U.S., we’ve announced our launch on Comcast Xfinity X1, so we’ll be in even more households. There are more launches that we are finalizing now in the U.S.

In Australia, we have an incredibly successful venture with Foxtel. Again we’re replicating the Channel 4 prototype. They have a brilliant channel called Fox Showcase. They give us a fantastic Friday night slot on linear, and then we also live in their VOD environment.

In Italy, we launched with Discovery. Discovery came to us and said they wanted us to live in their AVOD space, Dplay. It’s a combination of AVOD and SVOD, and then some bespoke linear airings on two of their channels, NOVE and Giallo. Italy was interesting and challenging, as it’s a market that dubs programming. It was important to do Italy, not just for scale—it’s still a very small operation—but because we wanted to make a point that we can find a good audience in a country that normally wouldn’t consider watching shows with subtitles. And now my mum and dad can finally understand what I do for a living. [Laughs] We’re starting a slow conquest of Europe!

In April, we are very excited to be launching in Belgium. Walter Presents will be available on-demand, with some linear exposure. We have championed Belgium obsessively. Having done Scandi, having done Spain, having done Germany, we genuinely felt at the end of last year that Belgium had become a real hub of extraordinary creativity. I love the karma that we opened up the world to Belgium in some ways and made it aware of the extraordinary output, and then Belgium opened their arms to us! The Benelux audience is an increasingly sophisticated one. It is known for appreciating multi-language anyway because of their territorial makeup. I have every confidence that we’ll be embraced there. That’s an exciting chapter for us.

In addition, there will be at least two more launches to come later this year. Broadcasters are coming to us, and that’s an important message. Everybody that’s involved in dealing with us is happy. They know we don’t have much money to pay, but we do great stuff with their shows and we promote them. It’s a positive business cycle that has meant global growth of unprecedented scale for a small company of eight people.

TV DRAMA: Do some shows play better in a nonlinear, binge environment than on a week-to-week basis on linear?

IUZZOLINO: Our shows on linear have a good, solid, fairly modest audience—they don’t compete with The Great British Bake Off or huge dramas—but viewers come back again and again. And broadly speaking, what does well on linear does well on digital. However, there are very interesting exceptions. When we launched in the U.K., one of our minor digital-only releases was a vampire show called Heartless. Without any press, any marketing push, it became one of our highest-rated shows. That trajectory was replicated in Italy. The one show that has really popped there is Heartless. Some shows lend themselves to being more streaming phenomena and they tend to be the younger or slightly cuttier series.

TV DRAMA: You mentioned championing Belgium. Are there other emerging hot spots for you?

IUZZOLINO: Denmark kickstarted the phenomenon of Scandi noir with The Killing, The Bridge and Borgen. When we came on the scene, Scandi noir was almost a bit spent, which was why we concentrated on Deutschland 83 and Locked Up and other shows. We thought, we’ve seen the missing girls, it’s all becoming a bit samey and it’s just feeding the beast of market demand with slightly derivative propositions. We still bought the shows and they did well, but we were saying, Is [Denmark] still the place you would look for real originality? But in the second half of last year, they burst on the scene again. We bought three shows and we pitched them to the U.K. market as the renaissance of Danish drama. As Sweden and Norway and the other countries around Central and Northern Europe have heavily cloned the tropes and the language of Scandi noir, the Danes have shrugged them off. The writer of Borgen [Adam Price] created an incredible show called Ride Upon the Storm, which is about a family of priests. It is controversial and fantastic and intense. Lars Mikkelsen won an International Emmy for it recently. Liberty from DR, about Danish expats in the ‘80s trying to exploit the aid system in Tanzania, is a compelling story about how good intentions in human beings go horribly wrong. Greyszone is a Homeland-style thriller co-produced by Denmark, Sweden [and Germany]. It takes the premise of what sounds like a traditional thriller but makes it very intimate. Denmark is back with a vengeance. We’ve gone out of our way to highlight that.

Germany is alive and kicking. Deutschland is coming back for us. There’s a brilliant new show called Bad Banks
about whistleblowers and industrial espionage. And I think Italy is in a fantastic place. HBO invested in the Elena Ferrante series *My Brilliant Friend*, which has been enormously successful all over the world. We acquired Maltese, a Mafia show, last year. Some incredible, high-profile pieces are coming out of Italy, like The Name of the Rose and Gaddafi, which is from the makers of Gomorrah. Italy has learned the game of taking foreign money and putting it to good use to make the shows high-bar in terms of quality. I'm delighted; after many years of being frustrated with the quality of my own country's output, now we can champion their productions!

**TV DRAMA:** And you're sourcing content from outside Europe as well?

**IUZZOLINO:** Absolutely. Latin America is a core territory for us, in all its diversity. Brazil has always been a very strong piece for us, both from HBO and Globo. Argentina too—we're about to buy another show from there. We've gone even further afield. This past October we launched our first Japanese show, a young manga-style horror series called *Crow's Blood*. It was co-produced by Huhu Japan. That was a great success for us and Film4. We had been looking at Japan for a long time. I'm looking at a piece from Africa that is quite exciting. We saw a fantastic show from India that we wanted to bid on, but bigger and mightier forces than us came in and bought it!

**TV DRAMA:** There is so much out there. Has your job become harder, having to sift through all these great series being created across the globe?

**IUZZOLINO:** When we started, we had bought 800 or 900 hours. There was always that slight concern of, is there going to be a feeding frenzy of such proportion that we'd be left without programming to buy because more powerful forces than us came and swept up everything! That hasn't happened. The FAANGs have poured a lot of money into the business. That's amazing. They've been championing their own originals. They're making lots of stuff. They're making lots of producers rich. It's been a great thing for the sector at large. With the big boys concentrating on their originals, and with terrestrial broadcasters competing to make glossy, sexy, good stuff, everyone has become better, so the quality of drama on the market is extraordinary. I used to have to watch 20 titles to find maybe two or three. Now, every five there are a couple I'd like to buy. That means an embarrassment of riches. And we can raise our bar even higher.

There's so much that is good, we can focus on the excellent. It's been wonderful, and long may it continue.

**TV DRAMA:** When we last spoke two years ago you mentioned that your own originals were on the horizon. Where are you on that journey?

**IUZZOLINO:** We had said that would be our phase three. When we last spoke, we were in phase one of our life. Now we're in the second half of phase two. So phase three is coming ever closer! We are further down the line. We are buying more from script. Back then it was one or two projects from script. Now, more often than not, broadcasters or producers come to us and say, you bought three of our shows, take a look at this, which we're starting to make in six months. We read scripts, we chip in very early on. The time will come when we'll be able to contribute more meaningfully. As we scale up internationally, we'll be able to buy multiterritory in a way that we were not able to in the beginning.