2017 is likely to be remembered as a defining year for German drama at home as well as abroad. Sky Germany, ARD and Beta Film’s €40m ($US49.8m) historical drama coproduction Babylon Berlin certainly stole the headlines, but the country chalked up a number of other significant drama firsts.

Of particular note was Netflix’s first German commission, Dark, a 10-episode crime drama from Endemol Shine Germany-backed prodco Wiedemann & Berg. It launched in December and has been ordered in 2016, and has already been extended into a second season.

“The world is opening up to things coming from Europe and especially from Germany,” says Beta Film MD Moritz von Krueeder, citing the company’s backing for Babylon Berlin, and other “big-budget, high-concept projects of German origin, produced for the German market but with international potential. This is changing and developing for us in a very positive way.”

However, he adds that big budgets alone won’t cut it in a fragmented landscape with extensive consumer choice. “The most important is the creative element, in Babylon Berlin’s case brought to us by three directors, one of them Tom Tykwer. A big name on the show helped us to bring this project forward and sell it internationally.”

At the other end of the scale is Beta’s new drama, Wishlist, a high-quality, low-budget drama that von Krueeder says “could be just as interesting to the international market.” The shortform series from indie prodco Outside the Club was made for younger-skewing channel Funk, which is backed by Germany’s two pubcasters, ARD and ZDF, and also ran on YouTube. It follows a group of friends linked up through an app called Wishlist, which starts as a game but turns dangerous. A second season launched in December.

“The interesting thing behind it for Beta, which is only distributing it in this case, is to connect different worlds,” von Krueeder says, pointing out that the show is produced for non-linear digital distribution on phones and the likes of YouTube, outside traditional TV. “The quality is high enough to connect these worlds, and that’s very interesting.”

Von Krueeder believes such developments challenge the accepted view among German producers that “it’s impossible to produce quality on such low budgets,” and will polarize budgets, squeezing out “mid-range” production.

“Good content will be found no matter whether it’s on the pay platform, a streaming device or a small network.”

Phillip Steffens, RTL

German drama has made waves over recent years, but the local industry’s ambitions stretch beyond the likes of Deutschland 83 and Babylon Berlin. Gün Akyuz reports.

Beta is also responsible for bringing a number of younger-skewing drama formats to Germany, such as Red Band Society, which airs on RTL Group-owned Vox, and NRK hit Shame (Shame), which Beta Film adapted for Funk. “There’s a huge demand for these kinds of stories,” von Krueeder claims. Also in the works is six-part beer festival-focused miniseries Oktoberfest, “a big drama series with international potential,” while Catalan drama Merito, about a high-school philosophy teacher, is Beta’s latest scripted format pick-up. Von Krueeder says he wants to “be open to co-finance and co-create European drama, and step into Spanish, Italian and Scandinavian shows and make them a little bit bigger than if they’d been produced for the local market and also bring them to a different market.”

While RTL’s German drama Deutschland 83 made international headlines in 2015, the series underwhelmed domestic audiences. Its sequel, Deutschland 86, coproduced by SundanceTV, will premiere on Amazon Prime in Germany. However, the network “reinvented the sitcom” in Germany last year, according to head of fiction Phillip Steffens.

The sitcom initiative, which began around three years ago, yielded Magda Macht das Schon! (Magda Does It) last January to great acclaim while returning comedy drama Der Lehrer (The Teacher), from Sony Pictures Germany, has also been a ratings grabber. According to Steffens, a desire for laughter is a big trend among viewers of mainstream networks like RTL.

This January, RTL launched a second local fiction evening on Tuesdays in primetime, providing

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Banijay boosts German presence
Banijay Group has set up a production company in Germany shortly after announcing its acquisition of a majority stake in Cologne-based prodco Brainpool.

Banijay Productions Germany (BPG) will be led by industry veteran Arno Schneppenheim, the founder of Endemol Shine-owned German production company Florida TV.

It comes after Banijay became the leading shareholder in Brainpool by purchasing the shares held by Stefan Raab. The firm took a 50% stake in the company in 2003. Banijay’s new stake in Brainpool was not disclosed. As a result of the deal, producer and entertainer Raab will become the main shareholder of his prodco Raab TV, which will remain under the roof of Brainpool in the long term, Banijay said.

Peter Langenberg, chief operating officer of Banijay Group, told C21 that BPG will focus more on non-scripted entertainment formats, while Brainpool will continue to specialise in talent-driven comedy.

The two will operate out of separate locations in Cologne, Langenberg added. Brainpool is behind shows such as Total Ladykraher and Beat Your Host.
a new outlet for the six scripted series Steffens commissioned in 2017. These include 10-part dramedy Sankt Maik, which premiered in the new slot in late January and is from UFA Fiction.

"In such a competitive market as we have now, it's really about excellence. Good content will be found no matter whether it's on the pay platform, a streaming device or a small network," Steffens says, highlighting the success of Red Band Society on RTL’s smaller sibling Vox. "Our success right now is because there's a uniqueness to all our programmes and they stand out."

Meanwhile, TNT Germany can claim a number of firsts when it comes to local drama in the country's pay TV market. "2017 was the first year when there was more than just us on the pay side," says Hannes Heyelmann, senior VP and MD of TNT Central and Eastern Europe. "We had already started with pay TV productions in 2012, and now Netflix on the SVoD side and Sky are producing for the market."

Last year saw TNT chalk up a notable success with mob crime drama 4 Blocks, which made local headlines and secured a significant distribution deal with Amazon. Heyelmann cites the six-part as an example of a local, contemporary drama with international legs. Indeed, the exec says shows must be either hyperlocal or very international from the start to succeed.

"You shouldn't try to do both. We decided to be hyperlocal, but it's a compelling story and also produced to a very high, almost cinematic feel, which is a trend we're seeing in a lot of productions." The drama returns for a seven-episode second season this fall on TNT Series.

TNT Germany is also preparing its first original series for its second channel, TNT Comedy. Dark comedy-drama Arthur's Law, from Beta-owned prodco Good Friends, is its biggest budget production so far.

The project further underscores Heyelmann's goal to double TNT's local scripted output over the next few years to superevolve and grow its subscriber base. "It is definitely more valuable to have 100,000 hardcore fans than 300,000 casual viewers, particularly for a pay TV offering," he says.

When it comes to international coproductions - and particularly Scandinavian series - ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE) is arguably Germany's biggest player. But Robert Franke, the company's VP of drama, says: "The bottom line is we see a growing demand for German content on the international market."

Fragmentation, he adds, has meant "it doesn't really matter where you're from; as long as the idea is original enough, you will find an output eventually. It's just a question of how big an audience you're able to reach with your content."

A key development for ZDFE is its attempt at "cracking the US" with projects such as high-concept drama The Incorruptibles. The show, from writing duo Chris and Jason Thornton and established producer Sidney Sherman (Lonely Hearts) of Rosa Productions, has ZDFE onboard as a co-production and co-development partner and distributor.

"Our approach is not to set up shop and spend a lot of overheads with a vanity office in LA," says Franke. "It's more about finding talented producers and writers with unique ideas and trying to come up with the best project, and this is what we did in this specific case."

Echoing von Kruedener's view that productions will either be big or small, squeezing out everything in the middle, Franke says: "The golden age of television is a symptom of fragmentation. It's so fragmented now that you won't be able to reach these mass audiences anymore with the type of money you spent in the past. That means you have to come up with unique ideas at the lower end that have the potential to travel, if that's formats or to reach specific target audiences."

In this space, one ZDFE-backed project following the same model of development but targeting a different audience is One Bad Apple. A partnership with UK prodco Tuvalu Entertainment and written by father and daughter team Gavon and Rebecca Scott, the show is being developed as a returning supernatural drama.

"My vision is that we have to be able to work in all those different markets and produce stuff which can work on a local scale but which also has the potential to cross the world," says Franke. "The challenge for distributors, he notes, is "how to find these 100,000 dedicated fans and make a business out of it. For us, it is even more important to own the product we are selling and that's the reason we are doing things like The Incorruptibles."

News from C21Media.net

ARD and Beta Film's historical drama copro Babylon Berlin (top) and UFA Fiction's Sankt Maik

Hannes Heyelmann

Moritz von Kruedener

ARD to dramatise Oktoberfest history

German broadcasters ARD and Bayerischer Rundfunk are set to launch a drama exploring the violent beginnings of what became the world's biggest beer festival of its kind. Oktoberfest (aka Oktoberfest: Blood & Beer) centres on the brutal competition between powerful local restaurant and brewery-owning clans and an ambitious out-towner seeking to erect the first large beer tent for thousands of guests at Munich's annual Volksfest in 1895.

Produced by Cologne-based Zeitsprung Pictures and Violet Pictures in Munich for Bayerischer Rundfunk and ARD Degeto, the series follows a brewer from Nuremberg trying to break the dominance of more traditional and entrenched rivals to achieve his goal, even if it means resorting to murder. Oktoberfest is backed by local funders FFF Bayern, which allocated €900,000 ($1.1m) for the show — the largest sum for a single project in its most recent funding round, and Film- und Medienstiftung NRW, with €600,000. Florian Schwarz is directing the series from a screenplay by Ronnie Schalk, Christian Limmer, Christian Lex, Stefan Betz and Alexis Wittgenstein.