Das Boot

The story of how Sky, Bavaria Fiction and Sonar Entertainment updated Germany’s iconic World War II epic for today’s television audience

Words: Jesse Whittuck

Act 1

February 6 marked what would have been the 100th birthday of Lothar-Günther Buchheim, the eye patch-wearing novelist and art collector who wrote Das Boot, Germany’s most iconic war novel, in 1973, based on his experience as a naval propaganda writer on a U96 submarine during the Second World War II. His story was turned into a Wolfgang Petersen movie in 1981, though he disapproved of the finished product as he was stopped from writing the script.

Critics and viewers alike thought otherwise and it is now considered a classic war movie, and one of the greatest German films of all time. An unreleased cut ran to nearly 300 minutes and was adapted as a miniseries on German television channels and on the BBC in the UK, where it now has a cult following.
Fiction head of international coproductions Moritz Polter behind the steering wheel. The project got underway soon after Christian Franckenstein became CEO of Bavaria Film, which co-owns Bavaria Fiction along with ZDF Enterprises. "He asked what kinds of stories we had stored away in the locker and Das Boot is obviously the most famous one," recalls Polter, who found that fellow executive producers Oliver Fugel and Jan S. Kaiser immediately agreed it was time to return to the great story.

"In today's television world, one can tell serialised stories and create wonderful characters," says Polter. "Therefore, we felt that an update to the series originally made would be right, but not as a sequel or remake, but like a Fargo, which exists in the same world as the movie."

The concept made its way to Marcus Ammon and his commissioning team at Sky Deutschland, which had ambitions to solely commission high-end original programming for the first time.

Ammon, Sky Deutschland's senior VP of film and entertainment, immediately saw the cultural resonance. "The show carries the anti-war message of the book and that's important," he says. "It reminds newer and older viewers that most people are born into that world of war rather than creating it. They suffer more than those who start conflict."

There was also cold, hard business sense to the new Das Boot, which is the first full commission Sky has made. "We started out in original drama with Babylon Berlin, but that was a coproduction with a free TV partner," says Ammon. "Now we need to go further in that direction, as this is how to get new subscribers and this is where the future lies, along with sports."

In order to create that future, Das Boot needed a story, and that narrative had to be original. As Polter says, "It was very clear we could only fail trying to remake a masterpiece."

**Act 2**

Writers Betz and Saint first met in Munich and bonded over beer and schnitzels before getting to work. The concept of the two working together was to have one who has been impacted by the iconography and cultural impact of Das Boot their entire lives, with the other bringing a new perspective from abroad.

They immersed themselves in the scriptwriting process, often meeting Polter on the original U-boat from the movie that Bavaria keeps on its backlot. "We had to come up with a version was in touch with the original, but also expanded out with stories related to a U-boat that were not necessarily all about them," says Saint.

Sky and the producers, whom now also included LA-based Sonar Entertainment, wanted the story to
reflect modern trends, with more female characters, which posed a conundrum as movie is very male-heavy. The answer lay in Buchheim’s Das Boot follow up, Die Festung (The Fortress).

“In the second book we found a very interesting female character called Simone – an enigmatic love interest,” says Betz. This inspired them to create a female character that would appear in scenes shot in La Rochelle, the French coastal city that housed a German submarine naval base during World War II.

The city itself plays a pivotal role in the new, multi-language story, which splits in two (the second follows the German crew on board). Scenes of on-shore resistance to the occupying Nazis filmed in La Rochelle, which also played host to the 240-tonne U612. This was brought in mid-October from Malta during a 105-day shoot, with internal boat shots filmed in Prague.

The vibrant colour palate of the French surroundings and wide, outdoor settings – shot with cinematic lenses – will contrast with the claustrophobia of the sub, which was shot with almost documentary-style feel. “La Rochelle was like our Hitchcock and the boat was more like Paul Greengrass,” says series director Andreas Prochaska. “That approach was for used for both the cinematic and psychological styles.”

Act 3 For Sonar’s executive VP of television series, Jenna Santoianni, Das Boot represents a true coming together of international television companies. “Coproduction can mean financing or a broadcaster putting their logo on a programme, but this was a true copro,” she says.

Sonar had become involved after a meeting with Kaiser and Polter had ended with the Bavaria execs producing “the crown jewel of their catalogue”, after which “things happened very quickly”, says Santoianni. Similarly, for Sky Deutschland, the series is one that its cousin pay TV operations in Italy and the UK will look forwards to playing to their audiences. “It’s a true Sky Europe story,” says Ammon.

Sonar’s distribution arm will be debuting the series in Cannes. “The level of interest has been really great, as we have teased it out – OTT and traditional TV are interested,” says Santoianni. “We plan to announce our US and other major platforms before MIPTV.”

The signs are that buyers will experience an entirely new area of the Das Boot universe, filled with new characters and themes relevant to a 2018 audience. However, Moritz Polter says a familiar player with a rather large frame has the stand-out role. “The boat is the true star of this series”, he says. ☻