SPECIAL REPORT

HIGH

BBC Worldwide’s
Da Vinci’s Demons.
The international business of drama is booming amid a new era of creative collaboration across borders.

By Mansha Daswani

If you need proof that the international drama business has opened up in ways that few could have anticipated even just a couple of years ago, take a look at the schedules of the major U.S. broadcast networks. Almost all have, for the 2014-15 season, at least one drama based on an imported idea. In the mix there’s FOX’s Gracepoint (adapted from the U.K.’s Broadchurch) and Red Band Society (Spain’s Polseres vermelles), NBC’s The Mysteries of Laura (Los Misterios de Laura, also from Spain), ABC’s Secrets & Lies (from an Australian drama of the same name) and The CW’s Jane the Virgin (the Venezuelan novela Juana la virgen). And that’s just on the broadcast-network side. U.S. pay-TV networks, among them BBC America and SundanceTV, and OTT platforms such as Netflix and Hulu, have gone a step further, creating a strong and expanding market for imported drama.

"[U.S.] audiences are now certainly more comfortable and open to shows with European content, especially after the success of Lilyhammer on Netflix, or Downton Abbey on PBS," observes Rola Bauer, the president of Tandem. "More and more European elements are finding their way into U.S. productions, and U.S. productions are being set in Europe."

Bauer’s company is one of numerous European-based producers and distributors engaged in striking innovative partnerships to bring high-quality drama to the screen. And many are finding fruitful partnerships in North America.

"There are twice as many platforms buying drama now as there were seven years ago," says Nadine Nohr, the CEO of Shine International. "Particularly in the States, there’s a lot of demand, a lot of competition, and a need to stand out."

STARZ IN THEIR EYES

At premium channel Starz, British co-productions have been an integral element of its original programming strategy. One of the network’s biggest hits this year was the second season of Da Vinci’s Demons, a co-production with BBC Worldwide. It has signed up for a third season, and recently partnered with all3media international and the BBC on the upcoming crime thriller The Missing. "We have a budget to manage," says Carmi Zlotnik, the managing director of Starz. "We’ve got a few projects that are a little bit more expensive, so finding co-productions that suit our network are key to managing the budget in a sensible way. On things like The Missing, which is a co-production, we don’t have to pay the lion’s share of the budget because the BBC is already financing that."

In this new golden age of drama, "co-production" no longer has the Euro-pudding connotation of years past. But it’s been hard work getting to this stage, with many lessons learned along the way.
Sky Vision is the international distributor of the new Arctic mystery drama *Fortitude*, which was commissioned by Sky Atlantic in the U.K. and has Pivot as its U.S. co-production partner.

"Gone are the days when the third policeman from the left needed to be German and the fourth needed to be an Italian," quips Jane Millichip, the managing director of Sky Vision, which brought Pivot on as a U.S. co-pro partner for Sky Atlantic’s *Fortitude*.

**TALKING IT OUT**

For Liam Keelan, the director of scripted content at BBC Worldwide, a good co-pro relationship can only emerge out of open, healthy dialogue. "There’s a lot of conversation that needs to be had in the run-up to these things to make sure everyone is happy with the way the production is going to go," says Keelan. Ultimately, he continues, "It’s about the editorial vision. If we get the story right, if people have bought into the vision of what that story should be, that’s half the battle won, the rest of it falls into place. Obviously there are huge discussions about financing and the structure of the deals, but first and foremost, it’s about the idea."

"You have to start with a writer who has a really clear voice and a really clear idea of what they want the production to be," agrees Caroline Torrance, the head of international scripted at Zodiak Rights. "If you have too many voices in the mix, if you try to have too many partners, if you try to shape it, you just end up with something that doesn’t work for anybody. It really works when you’ve got a good, clear idea that people buy in to."

Tandem’s Bauer echoes that sentiment, noting that co-productions can go wrong when the partners "have divergent viewpoints on the target group or the content. This was often the problem with shows being labeled ‘Euro puddings’—they were trying to incorporate everything to satisfy everyone without the various elements being organic to the content."

Sky Vision’s Millichip adds: "I don’t think there’s a magic wand you can wave at a co-production. It requires a great deal of diplomacy, as well as passion and early engagement and clarity of communication. The important thing is not to bury or gloss over any concerns. Those need to be aired early and quickly, so you’re both aware of the direction of the piece."

Given the importance of planning ahead and having a shared editorial vision, distributors are getting involved in drama series very early on in the process. "If significant international deficit funding is required, it’s really important to engage the distribution partner early," says Millichip. "Not only is it important to secure a high-value license fee for that co-pro or presale, you [also] need to bring in a creatively sympathetic partner. The more you know from the beginning and have a sense of the creative taste and tone of the piece, the easier that’s going to be."

Irina Ignatiev, the managing director of global scripted distribution at Red Arrow International, says that early involvement has been central to the company’s strategy for expanding its drama output. "We have to invest at an early stage to secure talent and story-driven projects that can sell worldwide," she says. "From a commercial point of view, this early involvement is also necessary to get more than just the sales commission. Investing into IP, optioning book rights—this is all part of our growth plan."

As Louise Pedersen, the managing director of all3media international, notes, early involvement translates into a "little bit more of a seat at the table creatively" as the production is coming together. "The areas we might get involved in include casting and scripts, if there’s something that won’t resonate with international audiences. We’re generally giving feedback on what we think our international buyers want."

**TEAM SPIRIT**

Ruth Clarke, the senior VP of acquisitions and co-productions at ITV Studios Global Entertainment (ITVS GE), says she and her team will frequently work with production partners on developing ideas. "We’ll provide market intelligence and feedback around how to steer the slate. But when it comes to the shows, they absolutely drive [the creative], with our support when they need it. That generally is in finding partners to co-produce with, or ways to fund the budgets, or looking at international distribution partnerships."

Given the increasingly complex management of rights, early investments are essential. "There is an evolving business model which is about very carefully choreographing the rollout of a drama across multiple markets, multiple versions, holdbacks and rights windows," observes Shine’s Nolz, whose team is selling *The Bridge* and *The Tunnel*—two versions of *Borgen*—as well as *Broadchurch* and its American adaptation, *Gracepoint*. "The way we sell and the way we maximize value has changed and is
A SEA OF STORIES

Indeed, the array of new dramas set to be launched this MIPCOM by some of Europe’s top distributors runs the gamut from crime thrillers to sci-fi to romance, some period, some contemporary, some in English, many not.

“It all begins with the story,” says Tandem’s Bauer when asked what kinds of properties she’s pursuing. “The narrative, the pacing, the writing—it has to have a global appeal that can transcend boundaries. The story and themes must speak to a broad audience and cannot be too narrow or provincial in nature.”

Alexander Coridass, the president and CEO of ZDF Enterprises, has several criteria he looks for when determining what kinds of projects to invest in. “A good script, a story with a certain degree of uniqueness and innovation, a creative team that works, partners working closely together and the team’s clear yet flexible vision of a common goal,” he says.

ZDF Enterprises has emerged as a significant provider of European drama in recent years, led by its early investment in the Scandinavian drama trend with The Killing. It will be bringing season three of Bron to MIPCOM, and launching the pan-European crime show The Team, which was “written and directed by Scandinavian talent, and has a cast of outstanding European actors,” Coridass says. A co-production of ZDF, ORF, SRF, DR, SVT and ARTE, The Team “benefits from Europe’s huge cultural diversity.”

ZDF Enterprises has also invested in content from other parts of Europe, co-producing the crime drama The Fall, which is returning for a second season on BBC Two this year.

Also in Germany, Tele München Group (TMG) has been a prolific producer of drama for years, with a current portfolio that includes the miniseries Richard the Lionheart and Valentine’s Kiss. It is also a frequent collaborator in international drama co-productions.

“We are looking to partner with reliable producers who believe wholeheartedly in a project,” says Herbert L. Kloiber, TMG’s managing director. “We are usually looking for only one partner per project, usually from a significant market. Our partners share risk and bring credibility and access to talent.”

Kloiber continues, “It is essential that a project address a clear audience, which requires the right balance of story, cast, look and feel. It can’t be all things to all people. Since we are engaged very early on in a project, we bet on great talent, top showrunners and partners who have a proven track record. And we are willing to take risks.”

To be sure, everyone is on the lookout for great talent, and the competition has never been fiercer.

TALENT SEEKERS

“Everyone is chasing top-level talent, which makes them more expensive,” says Stuart Baxter, the president of Entertainment One (eOne) Television International, which is stepping up its drama activities in Europe. “If you want to be a significant player, you have to partner with the strongest talent and the best projects. We’d rather focus on a select number of big, high-quality projects rather than an abundance of smaller, mediocre projects with players that really aren’t going to move the needle dramatically for us.”

Co-productions are not a new arena for eOne, which has engaged in several between the U.S. and Canada, among them the upcoming The Book of Negroes. The company is also taking another approach to beefing up its drama slate, developing relationships with El Rey Network and AMC Networks in the U.S., and it has a first-look deal with producer Eleven Film in the U.K.

“We’re very strong in Canadian co-productions and continue to build and foster relationships through our L.A.-based office,” says Baxter. “We’re focusing on getting stronger in international co-productions by targeting Europe. eOne has some very strong film ventures in Europe, including in Spain, Benelux and the U.K. We’ll probably put TV operations first where the film businesses are, and then establish TV businesses elsewhere.”

Many of Europe’s major content houses are already well established with companies across the continent. Their distribution arms can then benefit from the output being created across the group. However, Europe’s top distributors are also

Tele München is well known for its European drama output, with a slate that includes the Rosamunde Pilcher miniseries Valentine’s Kiss.
eagerly pursuing relationships with third-party producers.

"There are so many different types of broadcasters now," says Zodiac's Tomance. "Free-to-air, cable, SVOD—everybody is looking for something different. The best thing you can do is have a real spread of different types of productions."

"Our aim is to find the best drama, wherever it's from," says ITVS GE's Clarke. "Globalization has really opened doors to finding the strongest stories, wherever they might be. In the U.K., we work with the ITV Studios companies. We help with the development, financing and international sales for the shows that they make. We also work with third parties, where we might be looking at an overhead deal or an equity stake."

Clarke cites as an example ITVS GE's partnership with Mammoth Screen, which is making the new BBC One and Masterpiece drama Poldark. She's also particularly excited about a recently formed relationship with 42, a U.K.-based production and management company. "They have a strong management roster of actors, writers and directors. We're already finding that there are several exciting projects coming up that involve their talent. One of the key trends we're seeing at the moment is film talent coming to television. 42 and some of the other companies we work with, like Warp Films and Ruby Film and Television, are really well placed to capture that."

She is also eager to see ITV Studios' U.S. arm—which is working on the new NBC drama Aquarius and HISTORY's Texas Rising—collaborate with British talent.

CROSSING BORDERS
Fusing European and American sensibilities has been an important strategy at Tandem, which is majority owned by French film giant STUDIOCANAL. In addition to pursuing opportunities with sister companies RED and SAM, Tandem has begun partnering with independents, among them American showrunner Frank Spotnitz.

Red Arrow is also looking to bring the best of the U.S. and Europe together in 100 Code. With an American showrunner, Bobby Morasco, and stars Dominic Monaghan and Michael Nyqvist, the show explores the partnership between a New York City cop and a Swedish detective in investigating a series of murders in Stockholm.

There can be a bit of a learning curve when American showrunners begin working on productions in Europe, given the differences in style, schedules and episode counts. Starr's Zlotnik points out that the American screenwriter and director David S. Goyer, when venturing to the U.K. to make Da Vinci's Demons, wanted to teach local crews some elements of U.S. TV production methods, "but he's also flexible enough to learn. You're going to build a lot of resentment if you come into a foreign country and expect everybody to work and behave in the same way that you do. The approaches that are successful are from people with the cultural sensitivity to work with the local crew and see how much they're willing to change their process, but not try to replace it. They come up with a happy medium."

Da Vinci's Demons, which also counts FOX International Channels as a global partner, hails from Adjacent Productions, one of the ventures owned by BBC Worldwide. Much of BBC Worldwide's drama output, however, consists of BBC U.K. commissions, among them the upcoming Wolf Hall, based on the Hilary Mantel novels, and War and Peace, which has The Weinstein Company as a co-pro partner.

"First and foremost, our provider is the BBC and we're immensely grateful for that," says Keelan. "We get a pipeline of amazing content. But I would be lying if I said that's enough for us, because we know that globally there's now a huge demand for quality drama. We are a part of the BBC—it is really important to us to reach that quality threshold, so anything we get involved with has to feel as if it's fresh and innovative. We genuinely feel like a global media producer, so we're open to any kind of idea as long as it reaches that quality level."

As part of that new direction, BBC Worldwide is working with Atresmedia in Spain on a high-concept sci-fi series called The Refugees, which does not have a U.K. broadcaster attached.

ZDF Enterprises first expanded out of home-grown drama with partnerships with international producers. Now, the company has set up an in-house division, G5 fiction, "to develop our own dramas from scratch," Cordass says. “Investments during the development phase are as important as ever," he adds, "and we currently have three concrete first-look deals with high-caliber partners in the pipeline."

IN THE NETWORK
For many of the biggest international drama distributors today, being part of conglomerates that own ventures around the world has been a significant advantage. Shine International, for example, boasts a catalogue that includes shows from Kudos (Broadchurch) and Lovely Day (Grantchester) in the U.K., Norway's Rubicon (The Third Eye), Shine America (Gracepoint) and Shine Australia (Catching Milat). The distributor is also partnering with companies outside of its own

ZDF Enterprises is involved in drama co-productions across Europe, among them the crime thriller The Fall starring Gillian Anderson.

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network, inking a three-year deal with Ecossie Films, "a significant scripted producer with a fantastic and proven track record," Nohr says. "It's all about the company you keep," Nohr says on building Shine International's drama portfolio. "We want the shows and the producers to feel comfortable alongside the other content in our catalogue. And we can't be prescriptive and say, 'We've got something about X, now we need something about Y.' Each show stands on its own merit."

Pedersen says that all3media international is also ramping up its drama catalogue through partnerships with independents. "The all3media group of producers are fantastic and we are in an incredibly privileged position to have a relationship with them, and it's a relationship that we value very highly," Pedersen notes. "But we're always looking to grow the business and supplement the fantastic shows we get from them."

At Zodiac, part of Torrance's remit is fostering continued collaboration among the group's companies. For example, Yellow Bird and GTV are already working on Occupied, a thriller from Jo Nesbo, and Torrance is exploring similar pacts across the Zodiac Media network.

Doyle at FremantleMedia is also helping to bring together projects across the company's production outlets. In addition, she's pursuing select partnerships with established writers and creators.

"The old way of doing it was a distributor would do an output deal with a producer," Doyle says. "The problem with that is it's a scattergun approach. If a producer comes to you with their development slate, their main market is domestic. It may be that five things on that slate are never going to travel. Do output deals deliver those big standout projects? I'm not totally convinced they do. They deliver you a relationship with a producer or a set of talent. But I think it's an expensive way of doing it. So, I'm more interested in sitting down with talent directly, asking them what stories they want to tell and then between us creating and collaborating on a project that we know the international market is looking for."

SPLIT ENDS
As the drama business has globalization, traditional ideas about episode counts have been thrown out the window. The Americans are doing more European-style, shorter-run seasons. The Europeans are doing more U.S. cable-style, 13-episode seasons. And everything in between is being deemed acceptable, as long as it suits the story.

BBC Worldwide's Keelan references the megalith Sherlock as an example of a show where the small episode number has not been an impediment to international success. "We've only had nine episodes! It's absolutely huge for us. Not just in what it brings back in terms of revenue, but in the reputational dividend it gives to the BBC."

"The so-called 'limited series,' which we used to call 'miniseries,' are back in full bloom," notes TMG's Kloiber, "providing a wonderful canvas for in-depth storytelling."

Red Arrow's Ignatiev has found that many free TV broadcasters in continental Europe "are looking for crime procedurals because the U.S. studios are no longer producing them—with a few exceptions. There is definitely a trend in event programming, as it gives broadcasters extra exposure in the market. Of course, long-running series provide programming security. Ideally, broadcasters have a mix of both."

While returnable crime procedurals remain at the top of the wish lists of many broadcasters, the trend in the market appears to be much more serialized storytelling.

"Seasonal character arcs, including story points that track themselves over the course of a season, have become accepted and even appreciated by audiences," says Tandem's Bauer. "It's up to those of us creating the programs to find the right mix between vertical and horizontal storytelling, so that one can miss a couple of episodes and still get back into the story, or so a broadcaster can rerun the show with a different episodic order."

CHASING THE MONEY
As the demand for drama booms, another key trend to watch is the development of TV production incentives worldwide. Indian Summers, from all3media, for example, is using locations in Malaysia—which introduced a production rebate this year—to recreate colonial India. The U.K. is also attracting increased interest with its new scheme for high-end drama production.

"There are countries like the U.K. where the established production centers are completely over-booked," notes Starr's Zlotnik. "Now, we're breaking into the secondary and tertiary markets, which is what we're doing in Swansea [with Da Vinci's Demons], and trying to develop an industry where one hasn't existed."

Ultimately, while the old rules no longer apply in this brave new world of drama, there is one constant. As FremantleMedia's Doyle says, "If a great story is worth telling, it does actually travel all around the world."