Out of the darkness

The Nordic nations gave the world Norse mythology, Henrik Ibsen and Ingmar Bergman. And now they can add Nordic Noir to their list of creative achievements. Andy Fry reports

Dark and edgy dramas such as Wallander, Millennium, The Killing, Borgen and The Bridge have won critical acclaim the world over, and led to a wave of similar style productions from other markets. In the same way Ibsen and Bergman left their mark on those that followed, acclaimed international series including True Detective, The Missing, Les Revenants and Fortitude all have a little Nordic Noir in their DNA.

International interest in Nordic Noir — a term that refers primarily to the region's gritty and atmospheric crime dramas — first emerged in the second half of the last decade. But the roots of the genre stretch back further and are primarily centred on Sweden and Denmark.

In Sweden, there is a long tradition of crime writing — some of which has spilled over into TV, says Berna Levin, COO of leading Nordic Noir producer Yellow Bird. "Swedish audiences have been fascinated by crime stories for a long time, leading to popular long-running TV series like Beck [based on the novels by Maj Sjowall and Per Wahloo]. For our company, the story began in 2003 when Ole Sondberg teamed up with author Henning Mankell to create 90-minute TV films based on his Wallander books."

In 2005/2006, Yellow Bird produced 13 Wallander films for TV4 Sweden, with Germany's ARD Degeto on board as a co-production partner. "The ARD involvement came about because Germans also loved Henning's books," Levin says. "It was very important because it gave us bigger budgets and allowed us to put more quality on the screen. It definitely helped put Wallander on the international map."

The Swedish version of Wallander subsequently saw two more series. Significantly, however, there was also a UK version starring Kenneth Branagh, made in parallel with series two of the Swedish production. "That was another factor which helped alert the international market to what we were doing. When the UK version aired on the BBC, they also took the opportunity to show the original."

Yellow Bird's success with Wallander was followed by adaptations of Stieg Larsson's Millennium (a global publishing phenomenon), Liza Marklund's Annika Bengtzon and
Jo Nesbo’s Headhunters — Nesbo is Norwegian, underlining the company’s desire to work with talent across the region. The company was acquired by Zodiak Media in 2007, which gave it further access to the international market. Explaining the appeal of these series, Levin says: “I think there were several factors. One was the social realism of our stories — central characters could be just as mixed up as real people. Another was the way it showed another side of Sweden. Everyone assumed we were living in a kind of utopia — but we have crime just like everyone else.”

Finally there was the creativity borne out of budgetary constraints: “Working with ARD enabled us to increase quality but we still didn’t have the kind of money needed for complex set pieces or big explosions. So we worked on atmosphere and characters.

These are some of the key elements people now associate with Nordic Noir.”

The Danish story is similar. Danmarks Radio’s head of drama Piv Bernth, a key player in the emergence of Nordic Noir, says: “Our story really began in 1995/1996 when we were trying to develop a show inspired by NYPIR Blues. We came up with 1 Unit 1, which was a well produced show that won an International Emmy.” A few years later another International Emmy came for the thirtysomething drama Nikolai And Julie. “This was significant because I worked on it with Soren Sveistrup and we talked about how we were a bit fed up with procedurals. So we decided to do The Killing, a 20-part series focused on one murder. Sofie Grabol, who we had worked with on Nikolai And Julie, became our lead.”

The Killing has taken DR and Bernth to the forefront of the international drama business. “The show was broadcast in France, Germany and Benelux but the real breakthrough came when it aired on B3C4 in the UK. It won a BAFTA and interest exploded from there, leading to a US remake by cable network AMC.”

After The Killing came Farmen, a political thriller that showcased the Nordic creative community’s ability to work outside the crime genre. Then came The Bridge, arguably the region’s biggest single success to date: “The Bridge is interesting because it was a Danish-Swedish co-production, a development which took Nordic Noir to a new pace.” The original version of The Bridge was sold by ZDF Enterprises to around 130 countries while the format was picked up by Shine International and successfully adapted for the

“The Bridge, which has ‘won critical acclaim the world over’”

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US and UK. The US version, which aired on FX, went worldwide thanks to a deal with Fox International Channels. Back home, “we are working on a third season of The Bridge,” for transmission in 2016,” Berthn says.

Like Levin, Berthn identifies social realism, deep character analysis and distinctive backdrops as key to the genre’s success. But she also stresses the role Nordic public broadcasters have played in supporting creative talent: “We put a lot of trust in writers and the management of DR backed us, even when we were testing ideas that weren’t obvious subject matter for TV drama. We built up a strong relationship with the Danish creative community which backed our mission to find and produce original drama.”

The Danes and Swedes continue to keep the Noir flag flying with series including Arne Dahl (SVT Sweden), Nordskov and Those Who Kill (both TV2 Denmark). The latter is a crime series that sold to 25 territories and was remade in the US by A+E. But Norway has also been making up for lost time in the last couple of years, says Espen Huseby, CEO of distributor Nordic World. “We have seen a run of strong titles from Norway in recent years. I think it is the next Nordic market that will have international success.” Among the groundbreaking titles to have come out of Norway is Lilyhammer, produced by Rubicon TV for NRK and picked up by Netflix. More recently, NRK production Mammon has been making waves. Beta Film sold the completed show to a number of broadcasters including Channel 4 UK and Universal in France, while distributor DRG sold the format into the US, UK and Eastern Europe, where HBO is planning Czech and Polish versions.

Also making waves is Acquitted, a Miso Films production for TV2 Norway that is distributed internationally by FremantleMedia International. Acquitted, which debuted to huge ratings on TV2, tells the story of a businessman who returns to his home town in rural Norway after spending 20 years in Asia. However he has skeletons in his closet, having been acquitted as a young man of murdering his girlfriend.

Cross-border crime drama The Team

There is a concerted effort by public broadcaster YLE and its commercial counterparts to emulate the success of their Nordic neighbours. Noel Hedges, senior vice-president acquisitions at Modern Times Group-owned distributor DRG, believes he has a show that suggests Finland is coming of age as a purveyor of Nordic Noir. “We’ve been doing very well with The Black Widows, a show from Moskito Films for Nelonen which tells the story of three women who murder their husbands and try to start their lives again. The format has been picked up by a number of buyers including CBS in the US. The completed show has also gone to Germany.”

References to Zodiak, ZDFE, Shine International, FMI and DRG are all evidence of interest in the international potential of Nordic drama, both in its original version and as formats. Another interesting recent development in this respect is the news that Warner Bros.-owned Eyeworks has teamed up with SVT and Gotafilm on The Most Forbidden, a drama based on Kerstin Thorvald’s best-selling novel.

Elsewhere, StudioCanal is backing a new company called SAM Productions: “SAM is a writer-based production company named after its three principles: Soren Sveistrup, Adam Price, and Meta Louise Faldager,” says co-founder Price. “Soren is best known as creator and writer of The Killing. I wrote Borgen and Meta has produced a number of films including A Royal Affair and Melancholia.”

According to Price, the goal is to create “high-quality edgy shows using Nordic talent that can appeal to a global audience. By teaming up with StudioCanal we get the support we need to take our ideas international. Currently we have more than 25 projects in development.”

Echoing Berthn, Price says: “A big part of the Danish success story was DR’s willingness to support writers and their ideas. Once they decide to back a project they support it with a full budget and a declaration of creative confidence. I think that’s something StudioCanal understands. They know how to achieve commercial success while allowing the writer/producer to develop their particular vision.”

Another high-profile firm to have muscled in on the market is ITV Studios Global Entertainment (ITVS GE), which picked up the global distribution and format rights to two Swedish shows called Argeby and Jordskott. “Jordskott is a mystery crime story about the disappearance of a child,” says Ruth Clarke, director of acquisitions and co-productions, ITVS GE. “It is currently airing on SVT and getting similar ratings to The Bridge. For me, one of the enduring attractions of Nordic drama, is its strong female characters. But what I like specifically about

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Jordskott is the way it introduces supernatural elements into the mix. It feels like an example of the Nordic Noir genre moving into a new area.

Where next for Nordic Noir is a subject that DR’s Bernt is to contend with on a daily basis. “I know that booms like this don’t last for ever. But we just need to keep focusing on doing good stuff. We showed with Døgen that we could move beyond crime into areas that people told us wouldn’t make good TV. And we have another project coming up in 2016 called Follow The Money, which is set in the world of finance. I’m optimistic because of the quality of writing we are seeing coming up through the Danish TV system.”

One theme coming through at the moment is domestic and family relationships. DR deals with this in The Legacy while SVT’s Thicker Than Water, distributed by ZDFE, focuses on a trio of estranged siblings who have to jointly run a B&B for a year before they can get access to their late mother’s will.

SVT was also the home of Real Humans, a show set in a parallel present where the latest must-have gadget for any busy family is a robotic servant called a Synth. The show has subsequently been remade for Channel 4 in the UK, with US cable network AMC on board as a co-production partner. Humans was produced by Matador, which also made crime drama Tussenbroder for SVT. That title has been picked up for remake in the US, where it will be known as Brothers In Crime.

The Nordic region isn’t well-known for period drama, but in this new era of creative confidence even this genre isn’t out of bounds. DR recently aired 1864, a period piece from Miso Film. Having debuted with 67.5% share on DR, the €23m production was licensed across the Nordic region and to the BBC and ARTE – and there are more sales in the pipeline.

Yellow Bird, meanwhile, is also broadening its subject base. A recent project, Levin says, is Occupied, a political thriller based on an idea by Jo Nesbo. The 10-part series, which is a co-production between TV2 Norway and ARTE, imagines a scenario in which Russia stages a silk-glove invasion of Norway to stabilise global oil output. Produced in English, Norwegian and Russian, it’s a good example of how Nordic producers have developed the confidence to experiment with subject, process and language. But, Levin says: “I don’t think we’ll be straying too far from Nordic Noir. It’s a genre that we know how to do and that travels well. It’s one situation where crime really does pay.”

“The German Connection

GERMAN broadcaster ZDF and its commercial arm ZDF Enterprises have played a key role in the rollout of Nordic Noir. Here Wolfgang Feindt, head of series and international co-productions at ZDF, and Tasa Abel, vice-president, drama, at ZDFE talk to Andy Fry about the nature of the relationship.

Andy Fry: When did ZDF get involved with Nordic Noir and why?

ZDF: We got involved about 10 years ago with the Henning Mankell Collection. We were looking for outstanding European crime projects and we were very impressed by the great storytelling and creative talent we met. A mutual understanding of key creative values and a shared sense of culture were significant too. We got involved as co-producers (ZDF) and distributor (ZDFE) and were involved most of the time quite early in key decisions.

Andy Fry: What is the appeal of Nordic drama?

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Thicker Than Water, a dark family drama that has been a great success for ZDFE

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