A talent for teamwork

If there is one advantage that the Nordic television industry has over the rest of the world, it is a talent for teamwork. And nowhere is that better demonstrated than in the business of co-production, writes Marlene Edmunds.

The Nordic countries have been involved in co-production of one form or another for more than half a century. "We have learned how to work together, how to listen to each other and how to respect each other's opinions," says Stefan Baron, executive producer for Nice Drama and head of international co-productions for the nice entertainment group.

Nice Drama is now in production with the second season of Thicker Than Water, whose co-producers include public broadcasters SVT Sweden and YLE Finland, and Filmpool Nord. "While the idea originally came from Nice Drama, it was developed together with SVT and YLE," Baron adds. SVT is the main financial backer, with distributor ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE) also on board with financing.

"Even before the first season of Thicker Than Water had aired on SVT in early 2014, the pubcaster had already kicked off the process that would put a second season into play," Baron says. He adds that the series has already sold to 10 territories, with ARTE premiering it in France in early April. A remake deal for the US is also in negotiation.

So what's the attraction? "It's a universal theme that explores issues of identity and guilt between siblings who are attempting to heal old wounds as they try to run a hotel they inherited from their mother," Baron says. Also on the Nice Drama development slate is Midnight Sun, a co-production with France's Atlantique Productions, with The Bridge team writers Mats Marland.
If we can’t find an international co-producer that will stick to the stories we want to tell, we fund projects out of our own pocket.

Tone Ronning
To truly share the vision and handle the everyday challenges, trust is the key — and trust is usually built over several projects.

"Never let go of the project creatively," is the advice from Benna Levin, Yellow Bird’s chief creative officer and the producer of all of the company’s English-language projects. This, she says, is the most important thing she has learned in her years of working internationally. Yellow Bird was launched in 2003 when Danish producer Ole Sondberg and best-selling Swedish author Henning Mankell collaborated on the TV series based on the latter’s Wallander character. The adaptation of Stieg Larsson’s The Millennium Trilogy, Jo Nesbo’s Headhunters, Liza Marklund’s Annika Bengtzon series and the UK version of Wallander starring Kenneth Branagh followed.

“One needs to stay passionately and actively involved in projects and be physically ‘in place’ in order to get them off the ground,” Levin says. She is currently responsible for the US Millennium remake; Headhunters; The Swede; the Will Trent series; Devil’s Sanctuary; and Infidels, among others. She is also involved in the development of all Scandinavian and non-English-language Yellow Bird projects.

“One also needs to respect and stay true to the original material and trust one’s creative instincts,” Levin says. She adds that, when working with US partners, “as a Scandinavian/European, one brings experiences and a point of view to the project that is unique and different. That experience and point of view is not only needed and respected but also sought after by most US partners.”

With international companies now on the hunt for Nordic talent, the territory’s enormous success has also led to one of its biggest challenges: “finding those captivating characters and universal themes and stories that will break down all barriers — geographic, cultural, linguistic — and travel across borders,” Levin says. “We used to be able to find them in our books and novels but now, with all eyes on Scandinavian talent and authors, especially within the crime genre, we’re finding it difficult to hold on to our storytellers.”

Ultra Sport Kids (working title) is a good example of how companies in the Nordic territories work together both creatively and financially. The project, involving Norway’s Sant & Usant, Sweden’s Story and Denmark’s Final Cut For Real is a series of six high-end documentary films about children from across the globe engaged in intensive training for sports including sumo wrestling, fencing and ballet. Directors on the project include Denmark’s Simon Lereng Wilmont.
Sweden's Hanna Heilborn, Poland's Ania Winiarska, Norway's Erlend Mo and Russia's Victor Kossakovsky.

"It all started with a documentary film I was trying to sell titled Chikara: The Sumo Wrestler’s Son by Lereng Wilmont," says Monica Hellstrom, Final Cut For Real producer. “It was a great story about the struggle of the son of a former sumo-wrestling champion to keep up with the expectations around him. We felt so strongly that this was a universal theme — children trying to cope with parental and other pressures — that we decided to make this a high-end documentary series. Sport is the engine driving it, but it is also about the deeper subjects of parental pressure, shaping identity and friendships — all issues related to growing up.”

Final Cut For Real then invited Story and Sant & Usant to join them on Ultra Sport Kids. “Both are companies with very talented directors attached and a great track record for high-end documentaries,” Hellstrom says.

“The way the series was put together strengthens the network between creatives across borders and creates new partnerships that we believe will stay in place.”

Mille Dinesen as Rita Madsen, in Rita

RITA GOES OTT

DIGITAL players are clearly eager to get into the Nordic creative stream. The third season of the award-winning TV series Rita, a co-production between TV2 in Denmark and SF Film Production, picked up financial backing from online streaming service Netflix in a deal that means all three seasons of the beloved, but off-beat, school teacher Rita will be seen by Netflix users across Europe, Canada, the US, Australia, and New Zealand.

“Netflix wanted Rita so they got in touch with SF Film Production,” says Katrine Vogelsang, head of fiction at TV2. “The third season had already been developed but we needed more financing.” She adds: “It took some time to find a way to make the publicly-funded European system work together with Netflix but we did it.”

Rita is also additionally funded by the Copenhagen Film Fund and the Danish Film Institute’s Public Service Pool.