German TV makes historic move

New investment in drama by local channels and a willingness to greenlight risky, edgy projects is resulting in a new wave of German drama, much of it with historical themes, reports Michael Pickard.

As one of the first international backers of Scandinavian crime drama, ZDF Enterprises, can also claim to helping spark some of the global television industry’s biggest ever acquisitions rushes.

The German distributor’s catalogue boasts series including The Killing, The Bridge and Anne Boleyn that have become household names around the world.

A decade on, ZDFE and other local producers and distributors are now behind a range of eye-catching drama series that are playing out amid a new domestic broadcasting landscape, one that is driven by the emergence of dramatic heavyweights TV channels.

Most notably, acclaimed miniseries Generation War proved to be ground-breaking for German television when it drew record ratings to ZDFE’s parent, public service ZDF, in 2015, and was sold to dozens of broadcasters around the world, including BBC Two in the UK. The drama, produced by Teamwork and ZDF in association with Beta Film and ZDFE, later won the International Emmy award for best TV mini-series/movie in 2014.

Alexander Cordts, CEO of ZDFE, says: “We feel there is a hype and interest for German drama has been globally successful for the past three decades. What’s new and where we haven’t had that international attention before is with edgy six- or eight-hour mini-series.”

“ZDFE was deeply involved in the very start of Scandinavian noir. Ten or 12 years ago, we were the first to realise something was growing there and have been coproducers and distributors right from the start. Now shows like Bicho are getting international attention.”

Bicho is a ZDFE-distributed 4x60mins crime thriller from Real Film Berlin. The distributor is also on-board as European crime drama The Team, produced by Network Movie. Both were commissioned by ZDF.

Eric Welbers, managing director of Beta Film, says: “Germany was one of the first European countries to export its programmes, but mostly to the dubbing countries, like France and Italy. For TV movies and crime, German drama has always been very hot.

“Now the landscape in Germany is changing and channels are becoming more open to new formats and genres, and new players like Sky and TNT are getting involved in drama. Public networks are also becoming more experimental.”

Nico Holthoff, CEO of UFA Fiction and a producer on Generation War, believes there’s a lot of pressure on terrestrial channels from emerging players such as HBO, Sky, Amazon and Netflix. “They have to react,” he says. “Nobody can stand still and say they don’t like fiction. They have to produce and now there are new possibilities for TV series. I am meeting with Netflix and Sky, and I think they will both put money into the business in Germany. That’s quite a game-changer.”

Beta Film’s behind Line of Separation, which Welbers describes as a “sort of sequel” to Generation War. The distributor is also shopping a new US$10 million TV movie called Starfighter, which follows a widow’s fight to discover the truth behind the death of her pilot husband in one of Germany’s new fleet of Starfighter planes in the 1960s. It is produced by Zeitsprung Pictures for RTL.

“Now, creating impact is more important than ever because there are more channels, because there’s more competition, in terms of outlets,” Welbers explains. “There’s Sky, Netflix, TNT, Fox. All of these want to get involved in high-volume drama.

“Channels will take more risks, because if you don’t create a big audience, you can create a bigger impact, that’s important.”
Germany has traditionally been associated with crime procedurals and made-for-TV movies, but Sarah Doele, director of global drama at FremantleMedia, says there are now opportunities for new types of scripted stories. "The Germans have a massive passion for crime storytelling, which is fantastic, so I think that will still be the heartland of German high-end drama, but there are openings now for different stories to be told, especially historical fiction."

One of these is Deutschland 83, which follows a 24-year-old East German man who is sent to the West as an undercover spy for the Stasi security service. Created by Anna Winger and Joerg Winger, it is currently in production. Doele and Hoffmann for RTL in Germany, FremantleMedia International distributes the series.

Broadcasters are getting much more radical with storylines," adds UFA's Hoffmann. "It's really going away from the old-fashioned TV cop-show-style of ten or 15 years ago, and away from melodramatic storytelling. There's a much wider range of possibilities."

UFA Fiction is also developing a series with writer Annette Hess called Berlin: Kurfürstendamm. The story follows five women in the 1950s and addresses subjects including female emancipation and sexual liberation. "It's about sexual issues in those days, a suppressed and oppressed time," Hoffmann says. "That's a story that could not have been told ten years ago. There's a big appetite for much fresher, much more radical content at the moment."

There is also an appetite for radical financing arrangements. Germany's regional funding structure has long supported coproduction, but Sky and pan-European AVS are circling territory by collaborating on Ralph-Fox Berlin, an adaptation of Volker Kutscher's 1920s-era crime novels, under showrunner Tom Tykwer. Beta Film is handling international sales. ZDF/WS's Cordtay says Babylon Berlin will help build new production alliances in Germany. "It is not yet clear if there will be more projects between public and commercial broadcasters. Everybody, at least in Germany, is waiting to see how this experiment works, but in general, I'm sure there will be some innovative collaborations and ZDFE is extremely flexible as far as partnerships are concerned."

But what impact are Germany's broadening horizons at home having on the markets beyond its borders? When US cable network Sundance acquired Deutschland 83, the official announcement trumpeted it as "the first ever German-language drama to be aired on a major US network."

Doele describes the impact of Sundance's acquisition as "seismic," and says the effects of the deal will reverberate not just in Germany but across Europe. "It's not just about Deutschland 83 or German drama; it's about European drama," she says. "It's good for all of us in the business. Sundance are coproducers and very involved in giving notes and storylining for seasons two and three, Deutschland 86 and Deutschland 87, when the Berlin Wall falls."

Sony Pictures Television Germany has two scripted series currently on air, a crime procedural called Heldt, which is going into its fourth season on ZDF, and dramedy Der Lehrer (The Teacher), also moving into its fourth season but for RTL.

"If you look at German shows, it's historical dramas that are travelling very well," says managing-director Anja Quennell. "Germany is an interesting country history-wise, due to the Second World War and the time afterwards until reunification. You have lots of possibilities to tell stories based on that."

Global Screen's head of TV sales, Wilhelm Fritz, says the distributor's catalogue reflects the strong tradition of crime series on German television, though many new series are now disrupting that dominance.

These include 1x102mins Holocaust drama Naked Among Wolves, 2x90mins love story A Dangerous Fortune, 2x90mins biopic Sergeant Will Stevin, about a controversial hero who helped to establish Sergeant National Park, and another historical series, After the Fall, also 2x90mins.

"Some of Germany's most prolific producers, like UFA Fiction, Fremantle, Zepterle Films and Bavaria Film have developed highly interesting TV movies and series, which can compete in the international market more and more," says Fritz.

"We have established a great relationship with US-based channel MHz Networks, which will air the award-winning family drama Wirteinsere, set in 1980s East Berlin, with English subtitles."

Meanwhile, Hoffmann's UFA is exploring Germany's fondness for Scandinavian drama by forging links with fellow FremantleMedia-owned producer Alino Films.

The two firms are developing a series called Nordic Zero Crime, set in the city in 1960 at the end of the Second World War, with a writers' room being set up between Berlin and Malmö's base in Copenhagen.

In the future, he says borders across Europe will be further broken down to the point where dramas can no longer be attributed to one territory. "Since Generation War won the International Emmy, people from the UK and US are starting to contact us for the first time," Hofmann says. "We're not running to them. The whole thing is mixing up, it's really getting more international and there are more coproductions."

SPT's Quennell is looking forward to more scripted series on German pay TV networks, and an increasing number of time slots being filled with drama.

"Second tier broadcasters like Vox, RTL2, and Kabel Eins have existed on US series, but now they're starting to think about a way to get more scripted on their networks and they're starting pitching and developing, so there's more coming up," she says.

For Cordtay, this is "only the beginning.

"This year and during the next few years, we will see a lot of innovative and successful German drama, especially limited series," he says.

"Germany's definitely on a roll, there's a real confidence in their storytelling," adds FremantleMedia's Doele. "They've got lots of stories they want to tell."

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