United Nations of creativity

As the countdown begins to the third MIPTV International Drama Co-production Summit, Marlene Edmunds finds a new energy driving the world’s global co-pro community.

THE THIRD International Drama Co-production Summit, organised and sponsored by United Talent Agency, Canada Media Fund and Telefilm Canada, is aimed at providing networking and brainstorming time and space to those involved at the highest level of the drama co-production industry. ZDF Enterprises, Starz, DR, Atlantique Productions, A&E Networks, Film Finance International, Sundance Channel, TF1 International, BBC Worldwide, Screen Australia, NRK, HBO Europe and ITV Studios Global Entertainment are but a few of those attending the event, many for the third year in a row.

So what has changed in the three years since the Summit was launched? Quite a bit, it appears. Fear of Euro-puddings has long since been left behind. Global drama-makers, distributors and talent, both before and behind the camera, are forging border-breaking pacts as never before. Digital evangelists are moving into co-production. And a small but growing coterie of US show-runners, including Tom Fontana (Borgia), Ed Bernero (Crossing Lines) and Frank Spotnitz (Transporter; The

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X-Files) are choosing to work in Europe and help fashion what is becoming an increasingly international European co-production landscape.

Award-winning producer and writer Spotnitz is now showrunner for the second season of Transporter, an M6/HBO Canada co-production, with production outfits QVF and Atlantique on board. This follows his previous role as showrunner on Hunted, a co-production between Spotnitz’s company Big Light Productions and Kudos Film and Television for the BBC.

Spotnitz opened London-based Big Light Productions several years ago to focus on international co-production. “There is a right and a wrong way to do a co-production,” he says. “And the right way is driven by passion and strong creative vision.” He adds that he is back at the Summit for the second year running because he has found the people there share this view.

Also attending the Summit is Tom Fontana, showrunner for Borgia, a multi-territory co-production in terms of talent, funding and casting. While Borgia just wrapped its third and, at Fontana’s request, final season, he says that he would happily take on another co-production of this complexity and size. “The biggest difficulty has been in waiting each season for the various partners to decide whether to renew the series,” he says.

Fontana adds: “On the plus side — and it is a huge plus side — we’ve created a sort of creative United Nations, bringing the best talents together.”

Everyone involved in Borgia seemed to share a common sense of purpose and mutual respect, Fontana says. “That is not to say there haven’t been disagreements, personality clashes and language misinterpretations,” he adds. “But overall, we always wanted to make the same thing — a quality programme.”

Among the projects on the front burner for Fontana are Billy The Kid, a co-production for Fox between The Levinson/Fontana Company and Halffire-Core Entertainment; and Beta Film’s €33m co-production about Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, one of the more powerful emperors of the Middle Ages.

Once the domain of small, subsidy-dependent territories, co-production today includes some of the biggest players in the world working on such commercially viable passion projects as The Honourable Woman and War And Peace. Driving the Leo Tolstoy adaptation, set to air in late 2015/early 2016, are The Weinstein Company, BBC Worldwide (BBCWW) and Lookout Point, with scribe Andrew Davies (Pride And Prejudice; Sense And Sensibility) attached.

War And Peace came together over lunch. Lookout Point, BBCWW and Davies all wanted to finance a major classic adaptation. “We went out for a creative working lunch and this evolved some time later,” says Simon Vaughan, chief executive of Lookout Point (Ripper Street; Titanic).

“Then we got a phone call completely out of the blue one day from Harvey Weinstein saying he wanted in on the project. As it turns out, he is a major enthusiast of War And Peace and knows the work intimately.”

The 8 x 44 mins or 6 x 60 mins production is expected to cost upwards of $25m. Vaughan says it has major global potential, adding: “I’ve never been involved in a project that has had so much pre-sale interest before. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. How often does the BBC and The Weinstein Company come together to put a stamp
on one of the greatest novels ever written?”
Ben Donald, executive producer for international drama at BBCWW, agrees. “It’s one of those projects that comes around once in a generation and gives actors and actresses a chance to take part in a truly iconic role. If productions are done well, they can endure and that is the draw for top talent. It’s like being offered the chance to play Hamlet.”
This adaptation, Donald adds, will differ markedly from others that have gone before. “From the production perspective, there has been no previous adaptation of War And Peace that has made an effort to depict these characters at their real age,” he points out. “War And Peace is essentially a coming-of-age story, but previous productions have cast the protagonists as much older. These are, in fact, very young protagonists, so this TV adaptation is in the spirit that Tolstoy intended it to be.”

BBCWW is no slouch when it comes to bringing co-productions together. It just inked a partnership deal with Spain’s Atresmedia to co-produce an original English-language sci-fi drama titled The Refugees, which will be aired later this year. It is also a partner with Sundance Channel on The Honourable Woman, the drama series starring Maggie Gyllenhaal. Sundance Channel’s Nena Rodrigue, head of original programming and development, says The Honourable Woman “was a collaborative process with both the creative teams of Sundance and the BBC. We had many meaningful conversations with Hugo Blick, the writer/director, and Greg Brennan, the producer of the series.” The Honourable Woman is a co-production between Sundance Channel, Drama Republic and Hugo Blick’s Eight Rooks production for BBC Two in the UK and Sundance Channel in the US.

Rodrique, attending the Summit for the first time this year, believes the key to a great co-production is “to make sure the vision and respective goals are aligned”. She adds: “I am always amazed at how elusive interpretations can be. Once you have the same understanding, the rest is just process, fun and true partnership.”

With more than 50 years of co-production behind it, Scandinavian companies have become masters at the art of regional collaboration. But it is only in the last few years that the Nordic territories have become serious about international co-production. Following the success of DR’s The Killing and The Bridge, on the back of the international success of Stieg Larsson’s Millennium trilogy, companies such as Yellow Bird Entertainment, Filmlance and Tre Vanner have become hot properties. Zodiak Media snapped up Yellow Bird; Filmlance is now part of the Shine Group; and Tre Vanner late last year was scooped up by the 95-year-old Nordic film titan Svensk Filmindustri.

Filmlance has been the driving force behind the widely acclaimed co-production The Bridge, whose three seasons have seen it travel way beyond Scandinavia. The Tunnel, a co-production with Sky Atlantic and Canal+, is a French-English bi-lingual remake loosely based on The Bridge. A US TV version of The Bridge, set on the US-Mexican border, has also been renewed by FX for a second season.

Meanwhile, crime thriller Exposed, an adaptation of a Liza Marklund novel and co-produced by Peter Traugott’s TBD Entertainment, Yellow Bird and Universal TV, received a pilot order from ABC in January. Netflix has also ordered an eight-part third season of Lilyhammer, a co-production between NRK and Rubicon TV, with Netflix on board as international distributor.

Michael Hjothe, co-founder of Tre Vanner and executive producer and writer for much of the drama coming out of the Swedish production house, is back at the Summit for the third year in a row. “It’s an oasis of sorts,” Hjothe says of the Summit. “We have two to three hours in which we are able to focus, behind closed doors and without interruptions, on some of the key questions and issues in our business. It’s very rare that people at decision-making level spend this amount of time actually talking about what matters in the business. You get to know the partners better, and you get an easier read on whether potential partners might be right for you.”

Hjothe is currently at work with long-time collaborator and writer Hans Rosenfeldt (The Bridge) on the third season of Sebastian Bergman, the Swedish police drama featuring criminal profiler Bergman and a 10-episode TV series and co-pro titled Deja Vu. He is also on board as executive producer on The Grey Zone, a 50:50 TV co-production with Denmark’s Cosmo Film.

Hjothe believes one of the biggest challenges in co-production is the lack of market maturity in terms of

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financing and digital rights. “We know digital rights are increasingly important, but we don’t know how much they are worth,” he adds. “In co-production, that can be quite tricky. There is concern that we are giving away our rights cheap. And we are also uncertain of who the future players will be in digital and how that will affect our business.”

Premiering in Sweden in March, Welcome To Sweden is a co-production between TV4 Sweden and Entertainment One Television (eOne). A true story, it is the Swedish broadcaster’s most ambitious co-production so far, says Asa Sjöberg, TV4’s director of programmes. “Greg Poehler, the star and creator of the show, fell in love with a Swedish woman and they decided to move to Sweden,” she says. “So it has an authenticity about it. Also, as a fish-out-of-water story, it resonates here. Sweden is a country with a lot of new immigrants. There are many things about our culture that can be strange and awkward for someone who has not been born here.”

Sjöberg notes that TV4 has had great success with serious drama, including Wallander, Johan Falk, Maria Wern and Beck, all of which were co-produced with German partners. Wallander also did well on BBC4 in the UK. “But Welcome to Sweden is the first time that an American network has shown an interest in a Swedish show,” she adds.

Carrie Stein, executive vice-president of global production at Entertainment One Television, adds: “For me, Welcome To Sweden has been a challenge and very interesting on a cultural level. In the post-production process, there were certain scenes I looked at and thought were fantastic, but TV4 looked at them and they were not so sure. What might be funny or interesting to our audience could be culturally insulting to a Swedish audience, and vice versa.”

Stein adds that the biggest challenge in co-production from a US point of view is the issue of control: “Everyone wants ownership and figuring out ways to share ownership is the conundrum.”

The next frontier for co-production may be Central and Eastern Europe if the success of ventures like mini-series Spies Of Warsaw are any measure. The co-production between TVP1, BBC America, BBC Four and ARTE, starring David Tennant and Janet Montgomery, was filmed in Poland and executive produced by Richard Fell for Fresh Pictures and Dariusz Jablonski for Apple Film Production. “It was a model co-production,” says Apple CEO Jablonski, one of Poland’s leading independent film producers and a member of the European Film Academy. Jablonski spent his earlier years in film working with the influential Polish film director and writer Krzysztof Kieslowski.

Jablonski points out that Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and other territories in Central and Eastern Europe all have long and rich film traditions, so the creative potential is clearly there. “More to the point, we now have broadcasters like TVP who are willing to put money into international co-productions under the right circumstances,” he adds.

Co-production is not new to these territories. “We have been co-producing with each other for decades,” Jablonski says. “What is new is co-producing with Western European and North American companies. Spies Of War is a good example of what might be called a model co-production.”

HBO Europe is only three years into scripted-drama production and it produces in local languages in Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania. It has not as yet done any drama co-productions, although it has been active in documentary co-pro.

“What is important to us is a direct connection with local audiences in these countries through their language and culture,” says Antony Root, HBO Europe’s executive vice-president of original programming and production. “Our eyes are always open for co-production opportunities, but there will only ever be a very limited number of projects that can satisfy our language and cultural needs.”

However, Root — who was also at last year’s Summit — agrees that, when it comes to co-production, “there is a sense internationally that Central and Eastern Europe may be the next region to pop”.

He adds: “Generally, we see a growing international interest in the potential of these countries to tell stories about themselves that have not previously been told on television.” He points to Agnieszka Holland’s Burning Bush, which is selling strongly internationally through Beta Film, as an example.

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