FRED BURCKSEN
ZDF ENTERPRISES

By Anna Carugati

As a wholly owned subsidiary of the German public broadcaster ZDF, ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE) is tasked with the international distribution of ZDF-produced and third-party programming, co-productions, licensing and merchandising. ZDFE has built a reputation as a supplier of quality drama, factual and children’s programming, in addition to being a reliable co-production partner. As Fred Burcksen, the company’s executive VP and COO, tells World Screen, he and his team are always looking to serve the market with the best product possible.

WS: There is a lot of demand in the market for drama. One of ZDF’s new dramas, Kuldarren 56: Rebel with a Cause, performed quite well recently.

BURCKSEN: Kuldarren aired in March on ZDF. It’s a three- part miniseries. It did very well for us. What’s fascinating is that, as you know, with miniseries you are scared of losing your audience in the second and third episodes. In Germany with Kuldarren, it was the other way around: the second episode got higher ratings than the first and the third higher ratings than the second, so we’re very happy with that.

Kuldarren was produced by our friends at UFA, a great production company, and it takes place in the 50s, a period that has not been highlighted much in the last few years. It’s a beautiful story. It’s about prosperity coming back to Berlin ten years after the end of World War II, but the city is still destroyed. It’s about women’s liberation and it’s about rock and roll. It has all those elements.

WS: You also have other new dramas.

BURCKSEN: We are very proud of new product coming from Germany, which is a little bit edgier. Dr. Klein and Bettys Diagnose are edgy family series that people probably won’t expect from Germany, but will generate a lot of interest.

WS: ZDF has also had a long tradition of quality factual programming.

BURCKSEN: Factual has always been important for ZDF and ZDFE. The new lineup consists of many different genres. We have a title called First Flight: Conquest of the Skies, which questions the fact that the Wright brothers were the first to fly, so that is a challenging subject. We have a production called Why Size Matters and it teaches that there is a reason behind size and why we are bigger than certain animals, which is a very interesting subject. And the third title is The Lesser Caucasus: Between Ararat and the Caspian Sea, a wildlife show portraying the edgy border between Europe and the Caucasus.

WS: You have been branching out into entertainment formats as well.

BURCKSEN: Entertainment is a smaller genre for us that we are trying to get into. We brought a show to MIP TV called The Game Begins. It’s a shiny-floor show with a fantastic German host. It’s a true family format show, that’s what’s exceptional. It brings kids, parents and celebrities together and they [play] life-sized board games—games that everybody knows. The good thing is that you don’t have to explain the rules because everybody knows the games.

WS: And there aren’t that many shows that bring all the family together in front of the television.

BURCKSEN: That is the unique selling proposition of this format.

WS: ZDF is the German public broadcaster, but ZDFE has gone beyond German borders and works with many different countries.

BURCKSEN: We do, but it’s always in partnership with the network. And the bottom line is we have to serve our network. We are there to make our network stronger, not the other way around. We have been able to do so by partnering up. It’s really about synergies. So we always have two missions when we are out in the market: first, we look for good content for the network, and second, we look for distribution deals. And of course we try to combine forces there and bring substantial money to the table.

WS: There seem to be more topics that can travel nowadays—viewers are more sophisticated and interested in a variety of subjects.

BURCKSEN: Definitely. These are very interesting days and there are lots of opportunities. German programs have always traveled, like Sturm der Liebe and Alarm für Cobra 11. You will see many German series, such as SOKO Köln, in Italy and France. But what we see now is that there is a strong interest in original stories, no matter where they come from. Everyone is still interested in what the U.S. is doing and what the English are doing, but there is an authentic interest in Danish drama, in Italian politics. We also see a development in Germany toward edgier programs, faster-paced programs. So that is very inspiring.