

## Case Study **STORM** - Under One Umbrella?

in cooperation with Cineuropa.org

Photos: Silke Heyer



Photo (left to right): **Marie Gade**, Zentropa Entertainment, Copenhagen; **Britta Knöller**, 23/5 Filmproduktion, Berlin; moderator **Ido Abram**; **Maria Köpf**, Zentropa International, Berlin; **Frans Van Gestel**, IdtV Film & Video Productions, Amsterdam

**STORM** is an outstanding political thriller about a prosecutor working for the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague trying to track down a war criminal - a popular Bosnian Serb. Suited to the story, **STORM** is realised as an international co-production, the first for director Hans-Christian Schmid, with a main cast from e.g. UK, Romania, Sweden, Germany and the former Yugoslavia, and was shot in Germany, Bosnia, the Netherlands and Spain. Initiated by 23/5 Filmproduktion, the director's production company, the project became a truly international cooperation with many partners from many countries, even if most of them then came on board via one connection, Zentropa. Was this set-up chosen because one needs reliable partners for realising such a film? Is it a new concept for the future instead of looking for new partners for each single project? An alternative to the usual funding and financing solutions? Or is it just easier to access funding from various countries? In any case, it seems to be a huge acrobatic act pulled off in less than a year, but luckily with a bit of a safety net...

**Ido Abram:** Britta Knöller, as the initiator of the project, how did it start, how did you come up with the idea with Hans-Christian Schmid, and how did it develop?

**Britta Knöller:** 23/5 is a young company that started in 2004 producing the film *Requiem*, also presented in competition in Berlin, we then completed another feature film and *STORM* is the third project. The director Hans-Christian Schmid and the writer of *Requiem*, Bernd Lange, wanted to make a next feature film together. While they were looking for a topic, starting from their interests in thriller and the films of the new Hollywood generation, they came across an article from the news magazine *Der Spiegel*, which portrayed the tribunal in The Hague. The article portrayed one of the prosecutors, Hildegard Uertz-Retzlaff, who they managed to meet on a research trip to The Hague; she was a fascinating figure, very committed to her work, so it was easy to imagine her as the main character.



In 2006, we started script development, supported by Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg GmbH with 25,000 Euros, helping in the very first steps which are so hard. We took our time to develop the script during two-and-a-half years. In November 2007, we felt the script was presentable and ready to be handed in for subsidies, and just before, in October, I met with Maria Köpf, who used to be my former boss, and she thought it could be an interesting project for Zentropa, so we travelled to Denmark meeting the Zentropa Company.

**Ido Abram:** Maria, what attracted you in the project?

**Maria Köpf:** First of all, the director Hans-Christian Schmid is one of the most outstanding and talented directors we have in this country, so we were interested in a collaboration with him. I believe that also for Zentropa, it is good to collaborate and work on projects and with directors more on a European level. This is the first time we produced a film in English with a bigger budget, and for certain filmmakers in order to enable bigger budgets it's important to go outside the borders and start partnerships. At the same time it is essential to keep European film and talents in Europe.



**Ido Abram:** As you said you wanted to work with the director, so you read the script, acting as the first contact for Zentropa. How does Zentropa's network work?

**Maria Köpf:** They sent me the script that we read and really liked, I was also invited to some of the script discussions; but at first I sent it to Marie Gade, so she could read it, we brought Peter Aalbæk Jensen into the discussion, and we were all really enthusiastic about the project. Also TrustNordisk got involved very soon. In fact it is important to have an international sales team behind you, expertise who can bring out the film into a market. Another attractive thing for me was that TrustNordisk has had this experience over the last years selling Lars Von Triers' films and other interesting European arthouse films. So this was a central step in the set-up.

**Ido Abram:** Marie, was it so easy as it seems or did you have to pull some strings in Denmark?

**Marie Gade:** My boss Peter Aalbæk Jensen doesn't usually read scripts and he is rather proud of this, so I read the script at first. I already knew some of Hans-Christian's previous films, so I gave Peter a copy of the film *Requiem*, and he really appreciated it, so from then there was a lot of enthusiasm and the director came with Britta for the first meeting in Copenhagen.

**Ido Abram:** Britta, so then you had Zentropa on board, and the script was presentable. Did you work with them on the further development of the script or was there a division of tasks from the start?

**Britta Knöller:** We had a lot freedom from Zentropa's side regarding all the creative decisions, including the development of the script and casting. It is important for a director to have this freedom of creativity, that does not necessary mean excluding the co-producers, but to have a person to refer to, as in this case Maria, situated in Berlin. We also have our other co-producers, the German broadcasters, who have been supporting Hans-Christian's films over the years, and who are also involved in the script development.

**Ido Abram:** Frans, when did IdtV Film come on board and how were you approached?

**Frans van Gestel:** I was approached by Zentropa a year ago during the festival in Berlin, I knew they had a strong script with a strong director and they were in a hurry. Knowing Hans-Christian's former films we were attracted by the idea. We managed as co-producers to bring on board in a short time 10% of a 5,5 - 6 million euro budget, that was quite difficult, but we did it.

**Ido Abram:** How did you manage to raise financing from The Netherlands?



**Frans van Gestel:** In order to receive the regular co-production money we went to the Dutch Film Fund. Because we were shooting in The Hague, we went to city hall and asked for a special amount of money because they don't have a film fund, and they were actually very generous because they want to promote The Hague as the international city of justice; the Film Fund Rotterdam, an economical fund, gave us some contributions, and we also did some work in Rotterdam with people from the city; finally we obtained support from a local distributor, and the last slice was from Zentropa The Netherlands.

**Ido Abram:** How did you set up the financing in Germany?

**Britta Knöller:** In Germany we have the luxurious situation that there are many funding institutions to approach. I have become aware of this luxury just now, after doing this first co-production with countries where there are less funding institutions.

It's great that we have regional funders like the Filmstiftung NRW and Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg who supported us, and who had already supported Hans-Christian's previous films. Very generous in terms of support were the regional funding and the BKM, the German Ministry of Culture, and in addition we had prize money from previous films to be reinvested in new projects.

The German broadcasters were the same ones involved with *Requiem*, who were willing to support this new project.

It is important to mention also the new German Federal Film Fund DFFF that not only helps international producers to come to Germany, but also helps German producers stay and produce in their own country.

With all these partners, we raised approximately 4 million Euro.

**Ido Abram:** Maria, how did you fill the gap?

**Maria Köpf:** First of all, it's good to specify that 4 millions seem a great amount of money - but, when it comes to shooting internationally and abroad, all of the sudden it's not enough. In some cases you can also come up with more financing for local films. 4 millions wouldn't have been enough do to the film we wanted to do, so we had to come up with additional

financing. My first idea was to set up a co-production in other European countries, with the necessary creative freedom, so that's in fact how we proceeded and how it worked out, obtaining additional financing from Denmark and The Netherlands.

**Ido Abram: All this looks very simple: a great project with a great director and good partners. But this is an extraordinary set-up. What problems did you actually encounter while setting up the entire project?**



**Marie Gade:** I would first still like to mention Eurimages was also involved in the financing, as the Big Brother of co-productions and of financing in Europe. But about the problems, because the director is established in Europe, it was easy to have access to subsidies. We had instead problems when we went for the commercial money, as TV and distribution. We thought that, because Zentropa sold 50% of the company to TrustNordisk, it would have been easy to get a distribution agreement in all Scandinavia. Instead they didn't appreciate the fact that the film was in English and without an actor as Tom Cruise in the leading role. We had to look for the best offer, and only a 25,000 US\$ arrived, and so we decided that for the moment Zentropa would have put the same amount of money in the film, and now we are hoping that Trust will be able to sell the film to Scandinavia for more than that here in Berlin.

There are problems all around Europe with TV. In countries like Denmark they actually do not buy films in English although they are co-productions; you might only be able to get a pre-buy for a little amount of money. We were not able to do a TV sales, something that would have been possible just a few years ago.

**Ido Abram: Eurimages is a very important funding body for international co-productions, and Zentropa with different offices in Europe could help to access the different funds. Was this the idea for the structure?**

**Marie Gade:** Zentropa likes volume, and in Denmark it's not possible to grow further, and also it is much easier to co-produce with yourself. The ambition is to work as an individual office with its own productions. That is where the creative interest is. We recently also set up an office in Poland, looking into eastern Europe, and we are trying to open more offices in other countries.

**Ido Abram: Was it appealing for you, Maria, to join Zentropa Germany?**

**Maria Köpf:** It was appealing as the idea was not only to co-produce Danish films, but there was also an interest in German films, a change compared to 15 years ago when it wasn't common to think that German productions could have success or international reputation, so for me it is a challenge and a path to follow spreading out internationally, making interesting German films, encouraging new talent, that is if you have a director and a project that is suitable for a co-production. Similar for Lukas Moodysson's MAMMOTH - this is the type of European filmmakers that need this kind of European support, and to be able to raise this amount of money out of such setups. This was one of the main ideas.

**Ido Abram: Frans, why do you see it as an opportunity to become part of the network of Zentropa?**

**Frans van Gestel:** Our aim is to have the possibility to work on more projects, and in the case of Zentropa it is interesting to set up a bond with a company which is represented in

several countries. This would mean sharing knowledge, and not losing time in knowing who the partner is. In co-productions, trust is the most important element, also in terms of time. The longer you know each other, the faster you can go.

Often it's more difficult to get the financing together. With this production, the fact that it took place in different countries also facilitated the financing, it was a natural co-production: it was possible to do shooting in The Netherlands, post-production in Denmark, and so on.

**Ido Abram: Britta, when you started this project with the director did you ever think it could go so far and in so little time? And did you ever think of the consequences of starting such a large co-production?**

**Britta Knöller:** Until end of November we were sure the film wouldn't be ready for the Berlinale. We are actually showing the film on a DCP print that means that it is not completely finished, and that we have to get back to the mix in order to get the 35mm prints ready. And we watched the finished film only one day before the premiere. About the consequences, I am still inexperienced with international co-productions; this is my third feature film. So the subject, the partners, the financing have a very big impact, also the company 23/5 is very small, so it's a challenge to get in contact with a network as Zentropa, with all the positive and negative aspects.



**Ido Abram: Would you do something different?**

**Britta Knöller:** I think from my part I would have asked more questions from the beginning. As it was a co-production with Zentropa, we had to work with facilities from "Zentropa shop", and this a good thing for the equipment, but this way, we had to do post-production in three different countries: Germany, Sweden and Copenhagen.

Also we didn't have much time for the shooting, so we just decided to start the project, and I am happy we did it and pleased we have a finished film. Also the fact that the Tribunal is closing put pressure on us in order to present the film before its closure.

I agree on the fact that trust is very important in these types of co-productions. I worked on the film with Hans for two-and-a-half years and we are a small company and this is like our baby. For us it is hard to understand why things won't work like for

example with the MG that they could not get. When working together with a network that follows more projects at the same time, you sometimes are not sure if they can put as much effort into the single project.

**Ido Abram: Marie, could you point out some good elements of your structure and others that you would like to change in the future?**

**Marie Gade:** I personally think that in co-productions it is good to hold the communication with one person, in this case it was Maria, the first person approached, and from the beginning Maria held all contacts, and Britta as the executive producer spoke only with one person.

Another aspect is that Zentropa has a sales agent, TrustNordisk, and there are not that many distributors in Scandinavia, and although we approached them all it was difficult to sell the project. Sometimes it is better to wait for the sale, and to hope for a better agreement when the film is done, rather than forcing it in the first stage. This also means to wait to have the cash on board.

**Ido Abram:** Maria, could you point out some good elements and others that you would like to change in the future your structure?

**Maria Köpf:** It is important to make the requirements for the set-up clear to the filmmakers. They really must know what a European co-production means in terms of post-production and spend requirements also on different local levels.

I am happy we found a way to deal with the situation. There are many funding possibilities for Germany to co-produce with smaller countries as The Netherlands and Denmark. To respect the requirements under the European convention that the co-producer needs to bring in a minimum of 30%, is really difficult, also with a TV presale being so complicated and with hardly any distribution money available for an ambitious production as this one. In the beginning, we maybe were not completely aware of how much the situation has changed in the last years. Like, for example the Danish TV is searching for more local films in Danish. It has become more difficult for English-language films or non-native language films to get a TV presale in Europe. So we must be aware of how this has changed, also in terms of distribution.

In political terms regarding the European convention, I believe it should be more flexible, because reaching a 70-30% is quite complicated to fulfil with 3 countries like these. If it had been 80-20% it would have been much easier.

**Ido Abram:** Frans, what would you say about it?

**Frans van Gestel:** I agree with the last point, we had difficulties in reaching the 10% that we had to add to the co-production; films above a 5-million-Euro budget are hard to deal with, so that's why we usually look for smaller films.

We came on board one year ago, and six months later we were already shooting. This was our main problem. Complications in finding support, selling to television, and only a short time to create a good connection between my company and the other people involved in the film. We managed to do everything, although during the process you realize that you have lost some time, and you can have cash flow problems for contract issues, because you are in a hurry.

If we would have maybe started six months earlier I'm sure that we would have solved some financial and communication issues. But in the end, we went to Berlin with the film, so we are very satisfied.



*Questions from the audience:*

**Did the script change when the other producers came on board?**

**Britta Knöller:** 23/5 wanted to be quick in the financing, investing most of the time on the script.

After November 2007, we had only adjustments according to the cast and the location we found: This didn't bring big changes, because the work was mostly between the actors and the director, who is keen on getting them involved.

**Can you elaborate on the budget and the difficulty in satisfying the 70-30 split...?**

**Britta Knöller:** As we were saying before, the first applications were for over 6 millions, but we didn't manage to obtain the whole financing, even if in Germany with a successful director we had more possibilities in receiving support. In the other countries it was more difficult bringing a foreign director, rather than to the German fund that already knows the director and his work. The total budget for the film was finally around 5.8 million Euro.

**Britta, when did you start casting and were you able to do any preliminary work with the actors?**

**Britta Knöller:** We started casting around November 2007, when we were still presenting the submission, because you need a cast to submit your application. It was quite difficult, we had in fact the possibility of casting actors from all over the world, and it wouldn't have had a negative impact on the film. We had to choose at least one actor from each The Netherlands, Denmark and Germany, and everything else was very free.

We started working with the actors as soon as they said they wanted to get involved, with an intense week of rehearsals before the shooting started.

**Frans, about European co-production: Are you implying that co-productions apply more to small budget productions?**

**Frans van Gestel:** For me from The Netherlands where I can get funding only from 3 parties, it's difficult to get 10% for a bigger film, so it's a reality to face. There are exceptions in the case of a film shot in The Netherlands with a well-known director that gives me more chances for a presale with broadcasters or subsidies from a distributor in my country. The market we are working with is changing, there is the same amount of people watching a smaller number of films, so when you do an arthouse film you also have to think about being the best, looking for the right partners. But this doesn't necessarily have to mean that it has to be a big budget film.

**What made you decide to produce in English and feel it was the right decision?**

**Britta Knöller:** In this case the language of the ICTY in The Hague is mainly English, so we thought that having a German-speaking main character would have been too much of a mixture. It was actually a natural decision to give a true picture of The Hague and the Tribunal, and we also hoped it would be easier to reach markets we didn't manage to reach with German-language films before, so I think it made sense.