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1,000 Reasons to Co-produce – or Not?

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When Amos Kollek introduced his very substantial team to the audience after the screening of his film *Restless* at the 2008 Berlin Film Festival, he said he had had nightmares at the thought of having to work with all the co-producers who accompanied him. On the stage were five producers from five countries – Israel, Germany, Canada, Belgium and France.

Why did he agree to put up with this crowd of busybodies? What was the rationale behind this international co-production? Did it help or hinder his project? Well, we'll see – but let me just say that Kollek's film ran in the competition of one of the world's most important film festivals. It also won a prize (Prize of the Guild of German Art House Cinemas). More about *Restless* later. First I'd like to give you a few of the 1,000 reasons for setting out on the adventure of co-production:

It has become very difficult to produce a film solely in one's own country. Today's budgets are too large for a single national film industry or subsidy apparatus to cover them.

In Germany a feature film costs around €3-4m, which can be refinanced only very rarely through national box-office takings. This is why we have national and regional film subsidy. In Germany and other European countries television is the major financer, but it has the tendency to subject cinema projects to its own specific programming requirements. Cinema producers would very much like to become independent of television, but if they don't deliver obviously commercial products that can refinance themselves through the box office and DVD sales, they have to rely on funding programmes and the TV channels. In Germany, television representatives are now on the committees of every regional funding body and decide which cinema projects should be supported. This is why a lot of German films look like TV movies. If you produce art-house films in Germany, and you don't want to stay in the low-budget sector, you need to look for your partners abroad. You need to make sure that an international distributor has given the film a minimum guarantee well before the start date, and you need partners who also believe in the project as you do and are willing to commit themselves to it.

Once several countries are involved in a film, it's more likely to be shown in these countries at least and gain a wider audience that way. But first of all it's up to the producer to recognise the material's potential and to spend the next couple of years on the project. In order to be eligible for subsidy, all the co-producers need to convince a national distributor about the quality of their film. In most European countries a distribution contract is a precondition that has to be met before funding can be applied for at all. No one wants to produce a film that won't get a public showing – it's hard enough as it is.

So you've written a really complicated, many-faceted screenplay – perhaps a historical drama needing a lot of costumes. Or you've fallen in love with an actress who's perfect for the leading role, and the story takes place in different countries and different times. You've already got a television channel on board and the national funding bodies are on your side. But you still can't complete the financing. The film is too expensive, and that's that. Your producer shrugs his or her shoulders in regret. Sorry, but with all the will in the world the money can't be found. Couldn't you re-write it? Keep to a single country? Do without the leading actress? You stick to your ground. You're convinced that the material will only work in all the different countries (and languages); you insist that the screenplay was written for this actress alone.

This was exactly my starting point when the author and director Jeanine Meerapfel came to me with her project *Anna's Summer*. The story unfolds over a period from the 1920s to the millennium. It takes place in

Greece, Germany, Spain, England and the Caribbean. It's about a Jewish family from Thessalonica who have been scattered around the world by the war. Anna, the title figure, returns one summer to the family home in Greece (she now lives in Berlin) and encounters all her lost relatives once again. Angela Molina was intended for the leading role. Jeanine Meerapfel had already worked with her, many years before.

As a producer I had a problem. I liked the screenplay and I wanted to produce the film. I wanted its complexity, I wanted its different time periods, I even wanted its different languages. I loved Angela Molina as much as Jeanine Meerapfel did, so of course I wanted her for the leading role. There was no going back. For this film I needed partners in Europe; it would be impossible without them. The screenplay was still being revised, and we still weren't quite satisfied with it, but we had to translate it if we wanted to interest other producers. I have good contacts in France, but their English is even worse than mine. Would I be able to convince them with an English version of a still unfinished script? Or did it make more sense to invest in a French version, even if I'd have no use for it later?

(Here a practical tip in brackets: please mark all changes in new versions! Keep all scene numbers, and never force your producer to read or translate the whole script if you haven't altered much. You'll drive your translator mad, you'll force up your initial costs, and all for no good reason. I speak not only as a producer, but as a translator of screenplays, and I'm telling you – it's not funny!)

We got over this stage with *Anna's Summer*, and we did actually find a Greek partner via the detour through France. And in Spain we found a producer who had once worked with Angela and who liked both the screenplay and the director's ideas. Life was sweet – we could begin. I'll spare you the boring financial details, except to say that we put together a co-production between three countries: Germany with 70%, Greece with 20% and Spain with 10%. This is a classic constellation in Europe, although Greece took on an above-average share of the overall costs of around €2m. This was possible thanks to our producer Fanis Synadinos, who was keen to produce his first cinema project in order to boost his reputation. Fanis earned very good money in television, so he was in the position of being able to invest personally in the film. (As you see, there are many different reasons for co-producing.)

And because most of the action took place on a Greek island, he could reckon with the support of the Greek Film Institute, Greek television and other financiers such as the Ministry of Tourism. But his role wasn't restricted to fundraising – and here I come to an essential point about co-production. Jeanine Meerapfel had set her screenplay on a particular Greek island. She could see her locations, she knew exactly what she wanted. But we couldn't film on this island because there were no cars on it, only a garbage truck. Everything and everyone was transported on donkeys – and believe me, it's expensive to transport an entire film crew plus equipment on donkeys, quite apart from the time it takes. And I wasn't too happy about sending Angela Molina off on the back of a mule either.

So we needed an island that looked like the one the director had in mind, but with roads and cars. The search took a whole summer. Our Greek co-producer gave us a location scout and all his political and family contacts, and we finally found our dream island of Symi, near Rhodes, which fulfilled our logistical and visual requirements. Without our Greek partner we would have fallen at this early hurdle.

But the project continued. We had a lot of roles for Greek actors. So here too it was invaluable to have a cooperative partner with very good contacts in the Greek film and theatre scene, and who persuaded the Greek stars, who were unknown in the rest of Europe, to come to an audition.

The co-production really paid off during shooting, when an international team had to work together. Some posts were doubled, because of the different locations. There were two makeup artists because of language difficulties – makeup artists always have the role of therapist and agony aunt or uncle – and there were two set designers – one German, one Greek – who didn't get on at all at first. It was a clash of two cultures and two totally different ways of working. It took a while for the collaboration to work, but then the results were very good. The famous nitpicking of Alex, our German designer, and the talent for improvisation and marvellous creativity of his female Greek counterpart led to a brilliant main set – Anna's house – which looked like a typical old middle-class-Jewish Greek house, and not like a house full of

German ideas about a typical old middle-class-Jewish Greek house.

It was a truly European production. The cameraman, Andreas Sinanos, was Greek; he had a German camera assistant and he worked with Greek electricians who had learned their trade at Cinecitta. They were so fantastic that we took them to the German shoot so as not to annoy Andreas. Our costume designer had worked in theatre and film in France during the Greek military dictatorship, and she came everywhere with us. And the makeup artist followed us to Cologne too, because the Spanish actress Rosana Pastor wasn't prepared to go in front of the cameras before being made up by anyone else. The two of them couldn't really talk to one another, but they communicated through a whole system of signs and gestures and understood each other perfectly.

This brings me to the subject of language, which is a hugely important issue in European co-production. In our case we had been sure that English would be our common denominator, but we were wrong. Because of Cinecitta some of the Greek team spoke very good Italian or French, but hardly a word of English, which was the main second language of the Germans in the project. But others often found it easier to use the scraps of German they had picked up from tourists. Sometimes there was an almost Babylonian confusion. But the good thing is that the barriers tend to disappear, and certainly become less important, during work on a shared project.

The music for *Anna's Summer* was composed by a Greek jazz musician who plays in a lot of different combos. For this film he had to dip into a variety of musical traditions, like Argentine tango, Greek pop music, Sephardic songs and classical pieces.

The Spanish co-producer stayed in the background. He had made his contribution by signing up Angela Molina and by finding and convincing Rosana Pastor. He came up with his 10% production share through the Spanish funding system and the involvement of Canal+ Espagne, and he weathered with us the bureaucratic storm of applying to Eurimages for funding.

Eurimages granted us finance for *Anna's Summer*. There's a nice story here too, because the Turkish and Greek representatives on the enormous jury got together to support the application. On large committees like this one the quality of the film is of course not the only issue; there are political considerations too.

The film has now been screened in many countries and at hundreds of festivals, so the effort was worth while. It's a good European film, and it became one because its production respected the story's mixed cultural background and because the project was enriched by the experience of some very different people.

Another example of a successful co-production is the film *L'Annulaire (The Ring Finger)*, a Franco-German-British co-production with a German share of about 30%. Diane Bertrand, the French director, wanted to film a novel by the Japanese author Yoko Ogawa. This is about a young woman who leaves her home town after an accident in the factory where she works and goes to look for a job in a foreign port. She finds employment in a strange laboratory and has to share her shabby hotel room with a sailor (he sleeps during the day and works at night; with her it's the other way round, which means that they never meet and their fantasies about each other are all the more powerful). The story takes place during a tropical Asian summer; it's about the discovery of desire and a young woman's awakening into adulthood.

Our director went looking for a suitable port location for her film. She travelled to about twelve European cities, most of them on the Mediterranean, before making her surprising and irrevocable decision for Hamburg. Yes, Hamburg, that cold, windy, reserved and sternly North German city with absolutely nothing of the sultry, tropical climate of the novel. I still find Diane's decision very brave, and I think her concept worked very well.

This project also had good reasons for becoming a European co-production. All the exteriors were going

to be shot in Hamburg. Our director was adamant about this, even when our first application to Hamburg's film-funding body was turned down. And we producers didn't give up either. We recalculated the production costs, looked for more partners and went back to Hamburg with a project that didn't give the financiers a chance to say no.

Another source of public funding for Franco-German co-productions is the so-called mini-traité, a co-production agreement between the two countries that was signed in 2000. It closed a gap that had existed for years, and is now invigorating co-production between two strong film traditions.

With the still-young regional subsidy Ile de France, the support of Canal+ (which is indispensable for the French film industry), the French distributor and the famous world-sales company Pyramid, our financial possibilities were now exhausted, but we still hadn't got the budget together for this complex film. So we needed another co-producer, who we then found in the Bureau, a company based in London and Paris that specialises in the arcane British funding system.

In this case there was no obvious reason for the collaboration – we simply had the necessity of getting the film financed. But I must say that the producer Bruno Berthemey and the director came up with a brilliant solution, which was also great for the film: the film music was composed by Beth Gibbons of the band Portishead. Among hundreds of other musicians, Diane had also heard her work. She got in touch and sent her the screenplay. Beth Gibbons had never composed film music before, but she liked the idea of a challenge. And so we had another partner involved in the artistic side of the project, which meant that we could fulfil British funding criteria. After a really long and difficult funding phase of almost three years we were finally able to start shooting in early 2004.

We had a motley creative and technical crew, and again the initially complicated structure of an international co-production turned out to be very good for the film. For example, the French cameraman Alain du Plantier and the set designer Thierry Francois created some marvellously unusual images that put Hamburg in an altogether new light. Okay, they fell in love straight away with all the usual locations – the warehouses, the port, the Reeperbahn and the Elbe Tunnel – but all these places suddenly looked exotic and different – just right for the Japanese novel we were filming.

We shot the interiors in an old chateau near Paris. We even had no qualms about matching Place des Vosges to inner-city Hamburg. In short, this European cooperation also led to an increase, not a limitation, in creative potential.

The film has been seen in several countries and at a number of festivals. And like *Anna's Summer* it wasn't bound to its country of origin. Yoko Ogawa felt that its Hamburg setting was very true to her novel. This project also brought together actors from many different countries. The main role was taken by Olga Kurylenko, a Ukrainian living in France (she has meanwhile become the new Bond girl). She played opposite the French actor Marc Barbé. Her 'room mate', Stipe Erceg, comes from Croatia and lives in Berlin. The German Hanns Zischler played the owner of the down-at-heel hotel – and so on down to the wonderful Sotigue Kouyaté from Peter Brook's ensemble. The language on set and location was French, and I made sure that all the German crew could speak it, because in my experience French talents lie in areas other than languages.

I could give you quite a few more examples of successful and fruitful international co-production, but let's take a look at some of the reasons for not doing it.

Firstly, the idea of the film itself. There are lots of screenplays and films with a national or regional idea, and here you need to remain within the culture if you don't want to dilute the story's originality and tone.

Currently (April 2008) on release in France is the most successful French film for forty years – twelve million people have seen it up to now. It is a comedy called *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*, and France is in

stitches over its humour, which is based on prejudices about the Northern French. This film is so specific to everyday French culture that it would be incomprehensible to outsiders. There are films that only work in their own country because they reflect a specific humour or history, particular myths and habits. These films don't need co-production. They should be able to be financed, and above all refinanced, in their own countries, and they shouldn't look abroad simply because they need funds.

Co-productions are complicated and expensive. I've already outlined some arguments positively, but here's the other side:

Travel is necessary. The best thing is to meet in Cannes or Berlin, but if that isn't possible you have to rush back and forth between your various bases, running up hotel charges and astronomical phone bills as you go. Each co-producer has costs that don't directly help the film – operating costs, producer's fees, secretaries, etc.

The contracts are another important factor. These days they can pretty much only be drawn up by specialist lawyers who know their way around the complicated and differing national and European regulations. As soon as you exceed a certain financial limit you need completion bonds. These are banking instruments that make sure that you stick to the budget and protect the interests of your various investors. They cost money, too, of course.

As soon as public funds are applied for, the rules of the institutions apply. These are similar in most countries – i.e. all funding has the aim of supporting the local film industry, so they require you to spend the money they give you locally. In some respects, though, the rules are very dissimilar and not always compatible. In many parts of Germany you have to spend 150% of the subsidy figure. This isn't always easy – for example, if there are no locations in the region willing to provide funds. And because every region attaches such conditions to the allocation of subsidy, cooperation is often impossible because things cancel each other out.

I often receive enquiries from co-producers who have heard about the generous funding conditions in Germany and want a piece of the action (it's currently worth €200m per annum). And because there's no particular reason to shoot in Germany, they come up with the idea of filming some of the interiors in the studio. But this in turn raises costs and usually isn't appropriate to either the budget or the story. Original locations are in many cases much cheaper and more useful.

The worst thing is when scenes are written into a screenplay simply for the possibility of attracting regional funds: even though the film as a whole takes place in Berlin and Munich you give the protagonists a day out in Hamburg. But Hamburg has its own funding body and requires regional potential to go into the film, and so you need a separate shoot there. I always advise against such escapades unless they are necessary to the content of the film or we're threatened with having to build a studio set.

Despite its federal organisation, Germany is a prime example of wrongly understood co-production. The system leads to migrations up and down the country that are solely to do with the funding system and nothing at all to do with your film. In order to get a film financed, you apply to funds in Berlin, Hamburg and Munich, and already you have another travelling circus on the road. The first question you ask a cameraman is not about his filmography but where he lives (I'm exaggerating a little, but you get the idea). And so it happened that with *Anna's Summer*, we had to film a demonstration in 1968 Berlin in Cologne – because that's where our funding came from. So we looked all over Cologne for a street where you didn't immediately notice the difference in the windows (in Berlin they're quite different from Cologne, and it broke my heart to do it but we had no choice).

Transfer these necessities to Europe as a whole, and imagine the conditions you have to fulfil now – three days in Dublin, a week in the Belgian countryside, the interiors in Cologne, all depending on which funding body is involved in the project, and in what way and under which conditions. You can see how a lot of energy and money can get lost on the road when it should really go into the film itself. Quite apart from the lost shooting time, or the effort you have to put into moving, adaptation and acclimatisation instead of

concentrating on essentials.

Once the film's in the can it can go into post-production, often the last chance to spend your money where you're supposed to spend it. The film will be cut in the director's home town, but the sound designer comes from London, and the mixer, too, but the lab's in Paris – and so it goes round again as you lose time and your sanity trying to coordinate all the different places, functions, ideas, technology and languages.

And there's more, there are even more reasons not to co-produce: once the film has been released after its festival career, the harassed producers will hunch over the figures (together, if you are still on speaking terms), because you have to account for your costs to your – public – bankrollers. You have to show that you have fulfilled all your regional commitments, that you have employed the right number of creative staff while still keeping to the rules of economy, and above all that you haven't embezzled any taxpayers' money. You have to calculate, compare, substantiate; you have to fill in a million forms and wait an eternity for the money you're owed; you have to employ a so-called collecting agent, who gets a share of the profits. This person collects the proceeds and distributes them according to the production contracts to the individual partners, who are meanwhile involved in quite different things and can't answer questions any more. Which in turn makes it difficult to balance up with people like Eurimages, etc. etc. etc.

Many of the arguments for a co-production can be turned into arguments against it. But as I'm in favour of European co-production, allow me to give you a few practical tips to avoid turning its advantages into disadvantages:

Perhaps you're still working on your material, and you have found a good partner in your producer. You work well together; you have agreed on a development. You know you'll need one or more European partners to realise your project, but you don't actually want them all chipping in with their own ideas. So do your writing, trust your producer and rely on him or her to choose the right moment to involve other partners. Or insist that he choose the right moment and above all the right partners. If he is clever, he will already have set things in motion, will have introduced the project to several other producers and will be letting you get on with your work. And – together with your partners – do apply for a project development grant from Media Development so you can all get on with your work in peace. If your collaboration is a good one, a co-producer will bring good ideas to the project and will ask the right questions if and when you get stuck. He will suggest (not insist on) locations, and will encourage you by the simple fact of being there and by going on the adventure with you.

To return briefly to my opening example: Amos Kollek's *Restless* is a wonderful film. Apart from a few scenes it takes place in New York, but its subject matter – the Middle East conflict, the conflict between father and son, love and despair – concerns the whole world. This is why it wasn't difficult for him to find partners in so many countries. *Restless* is a universal film that can work all over the world because it moves its audience above and beyond national borders and cultural differences.

Voilà – universality: the essence of cinema and the chance inherent in co-production.

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