



# VARIETY

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EXCLUSIVE

## Beta Nordic Stakes Out Cinenord

By Elsa Keslassy

Beta Nordic Studios, the umbrella for Beta's production activities in Scandinavia, has acquired a majority stake in Cinenord, a leading Norwegian production banner specializing in high-end series.

Founded in 2004, the company is led by Silje Hopland-Eik and Alexander Eik, the producer-director duo behind the popular Scandi series "Atlantic Crossing" and "Wisting," as well as the family franchise "Casper and Emma."

Cinenord's pipeline of high-profile scripted projects include "Bergman," a series about Ingmar Bergman that Eik is writing and will direct. "Alexander has been working on 'Bergman' for nine years and wants to create a fresh, fun and colorful show about the man behind the artist," said Hopland-Eik.

"Beta Nordic Studios is looking to work with the best producers and Cinenord is one of them — it's a real diamond in Norway with a consistent track record," said Martin Håkansson, the co-director of Beta Nordic Studios. Beta reps "Atlantic Crossing" with Sofia Helin and Kyle MacLachlan, in international markets. The show scored record ratings throughout Scandinavia, even doubling the average rating share of some channels, and was recently bought for the U.S., where PBS plans to air it in April.

"The alliance of Cinenord and Beta Nordic Studios will be mutually beneficial," said Justus Riesenkampff, co-director of Beta Nordic Studios, "because we are not as big as other media companies and we try to be as little as corporate BETA NORDIC CONTINUED P.35



Beta Film is selling series "Echoes," the Berlinale Series Market Presents player produced by Neusuper.

## TV Sidebar Grabs Bigger Spotlight

By John Hopewell

Year by year, the Berlin Film Festival's drama series strand and market movers closer to center-stage. As in so many ways, COVID-19 may merely accelerate that process. The Zoo Palast Berlinale Series showcase no longer screen a time-consuming 20-minute taxi ride from the festival center, but online, its titles as accessible as festival movies.

For industry attendees movies — first arthouse and documentaries, later studio-style indie tentpoles — were the name of the game at Berlin. Now many producers who go to Berlin to talk movies

are looking for a future with TV. After canvassing marketgoers, five takeaways about Berlin's drama series lineup and Berlinale Series Market, which celebrates March 2 its Co-Pro Series pitching sessions, emerge:

### The Biz So Far

Keshet Intl. has swooped in on sales rights to Norway's "Suck It Up," a drama produced by Monster Scripted for Viaplay and a reported standout in the Series Market Selects showcase. Global Screen has boarded neo-Nazi mole thriller "Hinterland," from Germany's TV CONTINUED P.35

EXCLUSIVE

## Helmer Graf Unleashes 'Dogs'

By Ed Meza

In his latest work, "Fabian — Going to the Dogs," Dominik Graf adapts a work that defines the tragic, hedonistic and dysfunctional era of the Weimar Republic from a writer widely known for his children's books.

Set in 1931 Berlin, the story, based on Erich Kästner's novel of the same name, is seen through the eyes of Jakob Fabian (Tom Schilling), a fatalistic writer who finds solace in his love for Cornelia, played by Saskia Rosendahl ("Never Look Away") and his best friend Stephan (European Shooting Star Albrecht Schuch), and the wild nights of the city's outlandish establishments while longing for the return of decency in a society gone astray.

The film screens in competition at this year's Berlin Film Festival.

Graf, one of Germany's preeminent filmmakers, is behind such lauded works as "The Cat," "A Map of the Heart," "The Red Cockatoo," "Beloved Sisters" and the series "In the Face of Crime." With "Fabian," he explores an era that very much mirrors our own.

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EXCLUSIVE

## Georgian Talents Tackle the Taboo

By Christopher Vourlias

When Ketie Danelia was approached a few years ago with the script for "And Then We Danced," Levan Akin's gay romantic drama about a young man's sexual awakening in the masculine world of Georgian dance, the producer knew the risks. "Everyone was telling me not to take this project, because it's very dangerous. Which turned out to be true," she said.

In a conservative, patriarchal country where the powerful Orthodox Church holds tremendous sway, filming was a challenge. Locations would balk at the last minute, concerned about the potential backlash; far-right groups threatened the cast and crew. When the movie finally premiered in Tbilisi in 2019, after bowing GEORGIAN CONTINUED P.35

EXCLUSIVE

## Voltage Bows Italian Comedy 'Life'

By Nick Vivarelli

Voltage Pictures is launching international sales at the EFM on Italian romantic comedy "Per Tutta La Vita" ("For All Life"), from the writer-director team behind global hit "Perfect Strangers."

"Strangers," a dramedy involving cellphones and personal secrets, grossed over \$31 million domestically and spawned remakes in a

dozen territories including France, Germany, Spain, Greece and South Korea. In total, those remakes have grossed an estimated total \$270 million worldwide. An Arabic adaptation is currently shooting.

"For All Life" turns on four couples who discover that their marriages are no longer valid because they were all performed by a fraudulent priest.

Paolo Costella, who co-wrote

"Perfect Strangers," directed with "Strangers" director Paolo Genovese and Antonella Lattanzi. "For All Life" is co-produced by Marco Belardi via his Lotus Production, a Leone Film Group company, with pubcaster RAI's RAI Cinema unit. RAI Cinema will distribute the film in Italy.

"For All Life," which is now in post-production, features an all-star Italian cast comprising Claudia

Gerini ("Suburra"), Filippo Nigro ("Medici"), Carolina Crescentini and Fabio Volo.

Voltage is also launching sales at EFM on another Italian title from Leone Film Group with international market potential, English-language teen romance "Time Is Up," starring Bella Thorne and Italian pop star Benjamin Mascolo, directed by Elisa Amoroso ("Chiara Ferragni — Unposted").

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"We are living here in Weimar 2021," he told *Variety*. "The war of opinion in politics and society is conducted almost exclusively with hatred — in some circles, murder is a better means than debate. Democracy is on the defensive and its arguments are weak. The turbo-capitalist economic structures in Germany have become fully and openly totalitarian since 1990. The internal structures of the state have largely decayed. We are once again going to the dogs."

Indeed, that dissolution is evident in the film's portrayal of decadent Berlin, which despite its permissiveness was far from liberated and enlightened. "Sexuality is always an important theme, in any narrative," Graf said, pointing out that the Berlin of that period was a very "misogynistic society." While there were outstanding female artists, there was also "tremendous amounts of prostitution and violence against women." It's a discourse that is very much highlighted in the film and in the novel, he added. A main character even "holds a great fiery monologue ... about the destroyed relationship between the sexes, but everything is ambivalent in every respect, destructive, self-destructive — even in Kästner himself."

"Today's public discourse on sexuality is limited to abuse of power and victim culture, that is important, but other eras have dealt with it in a more multiperspectival way. The past becomes almost alien to us today because we are surrounded by societal codes. [Sigmund] Freud, with his 'Civilization and Its Discontents,' would have had his fun with us guinea pigs." The film, which Graf co-wrote with Constantin Lieb, captures the sense of tension and foreboding that was evident in Kästner's book.

"I had the impression of continuous turmoil in the novel, a fractured world for everyone, created by the First World War, which was far from over in 1931. Fabian had been quite young during the war, [Stephan] Labude too ... both are traumatized, and the next catastrophe is already looming. What is it like to be part of a broken era and yet feel quite normal yourself when the world is ending all around you?"

Graf said he could not have imagined any other actor than Schilling in the role.

"He has great emotion in his often small gestures and minimalist facial expressions. I've seen that in many roles with him; he's always looking for the truest performance in a scene. His humor can be very dry. He comes across as cheeky and very sensitive, and sometimes lost in a touching way. That's Fabian."

In creating the world of 1931 Berlin, Graf said he wanted to "suggest something like slivers of the time, particularly on the surface of the images," using documentary footage and his own short street scenes shot with Super 8mm in order to depict the distance of time. "This is a rough narrative, little gloss and no longer the Golden '20s. But in the chaos of the time there is also an enormous vitality; you have to show it like a kaleidoscope, I thought, and yet like everyday life."

Graf is next looking to tell the story of an influential 19th century French writer who left her mark on European history. "I'd like to make a film about the grandiose Madame de Staël, her years in Western Switzerland, politically harassed by the despot Napoleon, living through accumulating romantic disasters, just before fleeing to Russia."

"Fabian" was produced by Lupa Film and is sold internationally by Les Films du Losange. 📌

### TV CONTINUED FROM P. 1

Ringel Film. Road Movies will co-produce the Wim Wenders and David Byrne-directed series "This Is Music," produced by Norway's Oslo Pictures. RTL Klub Hungary is backing Joyrider's Cold War thriller "Balaton Brigade," a third Co-Pro Series title, to be directed by Golden Bear winner Ildiko Enyedi ("On Body and Soul"). Berlin captures non-U.S. production in an expansive mode, sensing a main market chance to sell beyond borders as Hollywood's studios hold back even more titles for their own platforms.

**Women Move to Center Stage**  
Ten of the 18 series in Berlinale

Series, the festival section and Series Market Selects — which features projects with more commercial series play — have female protagonists.

### Series Are Getting Shorter (And All the Better For It)

Walter Iuzzolino, at Channel 4 VOD service Walter Presents, commented at Sweden's Göteborg Drama Vision last month that an executive at a streaming platform had told him that the streamer was looking for shorter series, not returnables in the "Sopranos" or "The Crown" mode. Berlinale Series shows the upside. Russell T. Davies' "It's a Sin" weighs in at

five episodes; while Gustavo Pizzi's "The Last Days of Gilda" and Pablo Fendrik's "Amongst Men" at just four. "As film directors and writers pour into series, they're making short series. It's very different to make a four-part series to one which has 24 episodes," Fidel says. It's also more liberating. Before, TV series had certain narrative obligations, such as to persuade audiences to watch the next episode or season. Now, with limited miniseries, creatives are unleashed.

### Germany's Y.A. Boom

Just a decade ago, German TV was among the most traditionalist in Europe. Now operators are

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as possible to allow our partners to be creative, autonomous and flexible."

Being part of Beta Nordic Studios will allow Cinenord to better access international markets and partner with European and worldwide producers, as well as benefit from Beta's international distribution network.

"Beta Nordic Studios is driven by a really ambitious and talented team, and they're able to help producers deliver high-end local content," Hopland-Eik said. "They're giving European productions a shot at becoming international." The producer added that Cinenord already cherished its collaboration "Atlantic Crossing," which sold to more 30 countries.

Cinenord is the fourth company under

the umbrella of Beta Nordic Studios, which was founded in 2019 and comprises Finnish production company Fisher King ("Nymphs," "Bordertown"), Icelandic Sagafilm ("The Minister," "Stella Blomkvist") and Dramacorp ("Cryptid," "Agent Hamilton").

Going forward, the company will "continue delivering projects spanning children's films, comedies, Nordic noir thrillers and historical drama," Hopland-Eik said.

"That's our DNA: we want to make shows with stories rooted in the Nordics, because that's where we are, but it's essential to reach out audiences beyond the Nordic regions with universal stories or historical figures that will resonate." 📌

### GEORGIAN CONTINUED FROM P. 1

in Cannes' Directors' Fortnight to rave reviews, police units had to escort moviegoers into the theaters. Through it all, Danelia remained undaunted. "I knew why I was doing it," she said.

"And Then We Danced" is among a wave of films that are bringing the stories of women, immigrants, queer people, and other long-marginalized groups to the foreground in Georgian cinema. Festival players such as Nana Ekvimishvili and Simon Gross's "My Happy Family," a Sundance selection about a middle-age woman who suddenly leaves her family, and Ana Urushadze's "Scary Mother," a Locarno premiere about a woman who finds freedom while writing a novel, are among the titles that are increasingly confronting and upending cultural mores in the former Soviet republic.

Each boundary-pushing film to land a coveted festival birth and garner critical acclaim, Danelia said, "creates an open door for the younger generation." Elene Naveriani, whose film debut, "I Am Truly a Drop of Sun on Earth," follows a prostitute and a Nigerian immigrant living on the fringes of Georgian society, said while "there was no space for these people to speak before ... the narrative is changing."

"It's a very different narrative. It's a

different way of seeing the world."

The warm reception from the international film community goes beyond simple accolades. The Georgian National Film Center's annual operating budget is just €1.8 million (\$2.2 million), an amount that covers not only production funding, but operational and administrative costs; the country's 25% cash rebate scheme, meanwhile, was suspended last year, due to the coronavirus pandemic.

With budgets for the average arthouse feature falling in the \$970,000-\$1.2 million range, according to Danelia, ambitious Georgian films — particularly those tackling difficult or controversial themes — would be impossible to finance without majority co-production partners from elsewhere in Europe.

"Every project that we have is a fight," said the producer, who recently wrapped shooting on Naveriani's LGBTQ-themed "Wet Sand." "[But] you see the result. You see that this is worth fighting for."

Led by a host of bold female filmmakers, the new generation of Georgian voices "talk more openly about the challenges they face," said director-producer Rusudan Glurjidge ("House of Others"), who is prepping her next feature, "The Antique." 📌

mounting high-end European co-productions, Fidel notes, citing "Furia." They're also driving into young adult fare. "It's a big trend," says EFM head Dennis Ruh. It also looks likely to produce some of the standout German series at this year's Berlinale, whether Series Market Presents player "Echos," produced by Neuesuper ("8 Days") for ProSieben's Joyn, about Munich rich kids discovering a city underworld; WarnerMedia's buzzy "Para — Wir Sind King"; and the awaited "Wild Republic," from X Filme Creative Pool, about youth offenders creating a new society in the Alps, sold, like "Echos," by Beta Film. 📌