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Cross purpose

Domestic tax credit changes and international demand for multi-platform content are fuelling the global ambitions of Italy's Cross Productions. Gün Akyuz reports.



Off-beat police drama Rocco Schiavone

Cross Productions is one of a number of Italian production companies currently enjoying sustained growth on the back of the country's revised tax credit system and other financial incentives to bolster its audiovisual industry.

The prodco's growing reputation already includes a handful of scripted hits, ranging from its highly successful local version of Norwegian teen show *Skam* for Italian streamer TIMVision, to the off-beat police drama *Rocco Schiavone* and *Il Cacciatore* (The Hunter) on the Italian pubcaster's secondary channel, Rai Due.

Launched in 2013, Cross Productions emerged from Magnolia Fiction, the arm of the now Banijay-owned Magnolia. It comes backed by Germany's Beta Film, which acquired shares as part of the buyout.

At the helm is Cross Productions' president and veteran independent producer Rosario Rinaldo, who has a very specific vision for the company. "It's called Cross Productions precisely because core to our production philosophy is that we're after a cross-media presence. We've consciously worked in this way for years now, ever since its launch."

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Rosario Rinaldo

The company has been building up its presence in both shortform and longform, developing a model of production to allow it to exploit content across all distribution platforms, from generalist channels to OTT digital platforms, says Rinaldo. He cites early examples such as shortform comedy 140 Secondi from 2015, which aired on Rai Due in access primetime, as well as Rai's web service raiply.it. Another was Il Candidato for Rai Tre.

At the other end of the slate comes Cross Productions' drama development. The decision was to develop a style of fiction aimed at "a slightly more curious audience that is attracted by series on Netflix or other online services," says the exec.

The spearhead was Rocco Schiavone, adapted from Antonio Manzini's books, which premiered in fall 2016 on Rai Due. At the time the channel was undergoing a revamp to attract younger viewers, including new types of fiction, under director Ilaria Dallatana. A third season has now been commissioned on the back of its success. The show has also done brisk international business in the hands of Beta Film.

"We can say that Schiavone has been for us and for Beta Film the first product really able to cross the Alps and appeal to an audience beyond Italy," comments Rinaldo. International sales for the show have so far topped €2m (US\$2.27m).

"That's an important figure because it goes beyond that first wave of Italian products such as Gomorra – the show that helped to finally switch the spotlight back on to Italian content," says Rinaldo. Buyers range from platforms like Starz to Germany's generalist pubcaster ARD, where it has been lined up for a primetime slot in early 2019, says Rinaldo. "That'll be the first time in 20 years, since [mafia drama] La Piovra," he notes.

Cross Productions has continued down this path, following up with Il Cacciatore, based on a true story of Italian prosecutor and mafia hunter Alfonso Sabella. Rinaldo says the objective with the drama was to get closer to the true crime genre circulating globally at that time, such as Narcos. The series launched on Rai Due earlier this spring and a further two seasons have already been commissioned.

"Since then, our strategy has been increasingly concentrated on products that, first and foremost, target different audiences, locally and eventually also internationally," he says.

Those international ambitions are already bearing fruit with its current project, Wolfsburg. "We're developing it and both Netflix for Germany and Rai are onboard as equal coproduction partners," says Rinaldo.

The €17m series is currently at the advanced script stage and close to going into production, although negotiations over secondary windows and distribution rights are still ongoing between the parties, says the exec.

Set in the early 1960s, the story centres on a young Italian who emigrates to Germany and seeks work at the Volkswagen car factory in Wolfsburg to escape impoverished post-war Italy. Days before his journey he is mysteriously wounded in a wood, and once in Wolfsburg turns into a werewolf and begins killing.



Il Cacciatore is based on the true story of mafia hunter Alfonso Sabella

The hybrid series mixes several genres, from gothic horror to the supernatural and crime, and also draws on Italy's neorealism film movement. Present, too, is the theme of immigration, in an era when Italians were once Europe's migrants. "It touches several things, including racism, and at an international level it's a universal story," says Rinaldo.

The project, which is slated to start production in 2019, will be produced in both Italian and German, and will have a director attached for each country, although both have yet to be assigned, according to the company. Concept and script were both developed in-house at Cross Productions by Giacomo Bendotti, Ilaria Macchia and Stefano Sardo, with additional writing by Alessandro Fabbri and Gianluca Bernardini.

Alongside its established partnership with Beta Film, Rinaldo says shows like *Wolfsburg* are helping take Cross Productions to the next level as an international player. "This type of work that we're undertaking is coherent with the identity we're building at Cross – that is, an Italian production company able to offer high-quality product with international appeal."

Cross Productions' first international drama is already poised for delivery. Primetime romcom *Lontano Da Te* was commissioned by Mediaset Spain for Telecinco. It has taken both Spanish and Italian rights, allowing Cross Productions to bypass an Italian buyer. There will be several versions: a Spanish show (7×80'); an international (10×50') version, distributed by Beta Film; and an Italian version (5×100'), cut for Canale 5 in Italy.

The series centres on a chance encounter between an Italian businessman and a Spanish flamenco dancer at Prague airport ahead of their flights home. But once back in their respective countries, they both discover feelings for each other, which build across the series.

It's clear that Italy's tax credit framework is filling a much-needed void in the country's audiovisual industry, which has allowed companies such as Cross Productions to invest in, research and build a development slate, says Rinaldo.

Up to that point, the country's public broadcaster and its Rai Fiction division were effectively the sector's principal form of support, notes the exec. It is still Italy's largest investor and producer of fiction, accounting for over 70% of Italian drama and around €200m annually. Other players like Sky and Mediaset remain small investors in local fiction, with the latter having all but ceased investments for a while.

While Rai's budgets haven't necessarily increased, the tax credit system



Romcom Lontano Da Te was ordered by Mediaset Spain for Telecinco

now helps to finance an individual project, Rinaldo points out. The dividend for independent production companies such as Cross is the ability to retain rights to their IP. "These rights have become our assets and made production companies like us and many others stronger and more able to continue to invest in content and research," he says.

"I can and am now able to develop 10 projects simultaneously thanks to the tax credit system. The moment we were able to benefit from tax credits, we could start developing shows we were unable to finance before."

Cross Productions' slate continues to expand briskly. "The number of hours we're producing is growing," says Rinaldo. "We're going ahead with a third season of Schiavone and a second and third season of Il Cacciatore, all set to start production in 2019. We'll also have Wolfsburg in 2019."

Currently on air is also a second season of Skam Italia, with a third already in production.

"We've multiplied our development slate and are now developing many projects simultaneously," continues Rinaldo, noting around 10 new projects are now in development and on the table with the likes of Rai, Mediaset, Netflix and Amazon, including new projects aimed at younger audiences.

Cross is also going directly to the international market with projects like Lontano Da Te and Wolfsburg. At the MIA event in Rome earlier this month, the prodco pitched a new project to international buyers ahead of formalising anything with Italian partners, and received very positive, concrete replies, according to Rinaldo.

"We believe we're able to expand further with a product that's instantly international but at the same time local. From what I've understood over the course of the past year or so, global platforms increasingly want local shows with the characteristics, storytelling and production values of international shows. That's what Netflix is clearly asking me for. It's also what Amazon is asking for."

The latter has acquired second-window rights to Schiavone and Il



Shortform comedy 140 Secondi aired on Rai Due

Cacciatore for Italy.

Rinaldo also has some strong views about nurturing young talent to service growth within the Italy's audiovisual industry, referring to current shortages as inevitable "growing pains" for the industry. "I'm happy that the problem exists at all," he says.

"What this does is stimulate producers to seek out new talent, and it's what I'm doing with shows like *Il Cacciatore*, which is written by newcomers with hardly any prior experience. We're doing this on other projects."

The same applies to directors. "Again, with *Il Cacciatore*, we discovered the talented director Stefano Lodovichi, who had previously only done a small film," says Rinaldo.

Then there's the company's local version of *Skam*, which also deploys young talent, all under the age of 35. According to TIMVision, the show has significantly helped increased subscriptions among younger audiences.

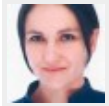
Rinaldo says it's his job as a producer to nurture talent and convince the likes of Rai that Cross Productions' talent is up to the task. He also believes more established talents are tending to "self-limit" themselves to fewer, more traditional choices, rather than embracing the wider, more competitive market.

"I'd prefer to take a risk with young, emerging talent who are infinitely more free-thinking," says Rinaldo. "Productions like *Il Cacciatore* back me up and prove that this model can work. We're generating results by betting on young talent."

He does express concern, however, that global digital platforms backed by huge resources are beginning to acquire talent exclusively. "That's the bigger risk and it's already happening at Netflix and Amazon, who are signing up the big showrunners."

Rinaldo also expresses cautious optimism about Cross Productions' future growth in the face of the wider economic challenges Italy currently faces. "I'm convinced we're in happy moment for Italy's audiovisual industry, and this sector should and can continue to grow," says Rinaldo.

The biggest deciding factor will be whether the current Italian government maintains the country's fledgling tax credit system in the face of wide-ranging spending cuts across all areas of public spending, he notes. "We're on a growth path and we hope it won't be derailed by the new government looking for cuts in our sector," he adds.



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31-10-2018
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