

GERMANY

# DEUTSCHE COURAGE

A network of regional funds and the German Federal Film Fund have combined to make Germany a popular international location for high-budget film shoots.

**MARTIN BLANEY** looks at how the territory plans to bolster itself during what may be a quiet 2008

Warner Bros' *Speed Racer* was attracted to Babelsberg Studios by a new federal funding incentive

The German film industry may never have looked so good. Last year, Germany hosted a record number of international and US productions and boasted a stunning array of local talent, including Oscar-winner Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck (*The Lives Of Others*), Fatih Akin (*The Edge Of Heaven*) and Marc Rothemund (*Sophie Scholl — The Final Days*). Add to that an enticing film fund launched in January 2007 by the German government, and you have an amazing success story.

The German Federal Film Fund (DFFF) incentive scheme, which is handled by the German Federal Film Board (FFA), has an annual budget of \$88.1m (£60m). It reimburses 20 cents (\$0.29) of every euro spent in Germany up to a maximum of 80% of a film's total production costs.

In its first year of operation, the DFFF generated a 'German spend' of almost \$588m (£400m) after backing 99 features and documentary projects to the tune of \$87.3m (£59.4m).

According to the DFFF's project director Christine Berg, the first year exceeded all expectations. "The fund has been so successful because we worked very closely with the industry and have wanted to strengthen the position of the German producers and the film industry in Germany as a whole," says Berg.

One of the biggest projects to take advantage of the funding was Warner Bros' *Speed Racer*, directed by the Wachowski brothers and starring Émile Hirsch, which received \$13.2m (£9m) for its shoot at the Babelsberg Studios in Potsdam, from May to September 2007.

A year ago, this new piece of the financing puzzle was on the minds of the film's producers. Debbie Elbin, based in Berlin at the time and working as production consultant on the film, was asked by producer Joel Silver — who had been

to Babelsberg two years previously with *V For Vendetta* — to check out the new incentive and assess whether the German industry could handle the high number of visual effects shots the project required.

"We knew there were certain capabilities because a small part of Warner's *300* had been done at Scanline in Munich," Elbin explains. "My mission was to find technicians and artists in Berlin or the rest of Germany, and in the end quite a few people moved to Berlin to be involved in the project."

The second highest sum paid out by the DFFF — \$8.6m (£5.8m) — was to another US studio project, Columbia Pictures' *The International*, directed by Tom Tykwer. "This was a dream for us, as the project paired up money from America with a German director and his team," says Berg.

According to Lloyd Phillips, a producer on *The International*, another persuasive factor for their choice of location was the tradition of film-making in Babelsberg. "Studio Babelsberg has really become a centre of film-making in Europe and very few other countries in Europe have the same facilities," says Phillips. "We found that being able to establish our production here and then send our German crew to Istanbul and Milan was a very efficient way to make a film at a very reasonable price."

The Weinstein Company has also chosen to shoot a large chunk of its Second World War drama *The Reader* at Studio Babelsberg, using a mostly local crew (except for the heads of department who are from the US and UK) and local actors.

Based on the bestselling book by Bernhard Schlink, the film was set to star Nicole Kidman as a woman who strikes up a relationship with a much younger man, but Kate Winslet has replaced her in the role. The shoot is set to continue in Germany as planned.

Last year saw the five-month shoot of Bryan Singer's \$60m *Valkyrie*, a thriller about a failed plot to assassinate Hitler, starring Tom Cruise. The United Artists production was based mainly in and around Berlin.

But it is not just the Berlin-Brandenburg region that is proving popular. International projects are also shooting in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), Bavaria and Hessen where enticing regional film funds, stunning scenery — from castles and mountains to cityscapes — and good-quality studios are on offer. The first of these regions includes the impressive Magic Media Coloneum (MMC) soundstages in Cologne and respected post-production facilities, such as Dortmund-based RuhrSoundStudios.

Recent projects partly based in NRW include Amos Gitai's Venice competition film *Disengagement* starring Juliette Binoche, Roger Spottiswoode's *The Children Of Huang Shi* and Paul Schrader's *Adam Resurrected*.

However, amid all the euphoria about the boom in production activity, it seems unlikely the same number of big-budget US projects will be winging their way to German studios or locations throughout 2008.



Debbie Elbin



**'The International was a dream as it paired money from America with a German director'**  
Christine Berg, Federal Film Fund

In addition to the combined threats of the US writers' and actors' strikes, the ever-weakening dollar is reducing the benefits available to US producers. Debbie Elbin says she would think twice about shooting *Speed Racer* in Germany right now.

"The [DFFF] incentive was strong enough to make it advantageous last January when the euro was worth \$1.32," Elbin recalls. "Now we are talking about \$1.46-\$1.48 and that really hurts, so I don't think the advantages are the same." (Elbin has since set up a new company PS:USA in New York, which aims to entice international producers to shoot in the US.)

While the studios in Hamburg, NRW and Bavaria are largely occupied with television productions and so will not be too negatively affected, Studio Babelsberg is doing all it can to attract major local and European productions to its facilities in 2008 to compensate for the loss of US projects. Its cause was helped last year by a DFFF roadshow conducted in Rome, Copenhagen and London to bang the drum about the new incentive.

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