

'We want to be the world's number one'

Amid rumours of a bid for Endemol Shine, key Banijay execs talk to Tara Conlan about the company's rise and future ambitions

MARCO BASSETTI laughs when *Broadcast* floats the idea that Banijay Group buying Endemol Shine Group (ESG) would create a veritable archipelago of island-themed shows in the catalogue of the Paris-based production and distribution giant – putting *The Island*, *Survivor*, *Temptation Island* and *Shipwrecked* in the same ship. However, when asked if ESG is a target, the Banijay chief executive says: “This is speculation. We prefer not to comment until the process is over.”

Banijay is understood to be one of the few firms still actively pursuing a deal for ESG, with the likes of ITV and Fremantle ruling themselves out of the sales process for varying reasons. For Banijay, an agreement would catapult it right to front of the independent production pack and massively boost its catalogue and bargaining power in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

Speaking about coming market changes, Bassetti says: “There will be further consolidation and we want to be an enactor of this. We believe we are more of a consolidator than a consolidated entity.” However, he adds: “There are lots of opportunities. We are still well positioned to grow organically.”

Bassetti's history – like that of Banijay and its founder Stéphane Courbit – is intertwined with Endemol. He is a former Endemol Italy boss, who rose to become president of the wider group, a post he held until a debt restructuring process ended in 2012. He joined Banijay a year later as chief executive and many of Bassetti's key management team also held posts at his former firm.

Courbit, meanwhile, reportedly tried to buy out Endemol in its entirety in 2006 when he was chief executive of Endemol France, where he made his name launching *Loft Story*, the French version of *Big Brother*. His bid failed, but he left the following year with around €235m (£210m) in the bank, triggering the creation of Banijay.

BANIJAY TIMELINE

2008

Stéphane Courbit creates Banijay Entertainment after buying Air Productions

2009

Deals for Spain's Cuarzo Producciones, Germany's Brainpool and Nordisk Film in Denmark

2010

Bunim/Murray Productions acquired in the US, though ownership of UK producer Zig Zag Productions ends acrimoniously

2012

Majority stake in Australia's Screentime is acquired

2014

Banijay Studios North America launches

2015

Merger between Banijay and RDF Media owner Zodiak Media Group announced; stake in Stephen David Entertainment bought

2016

Vivendi becomes stakeholder in new Banijay Group

2017

Survivor creator Castaway Television is acquired

2018

7Wonder is acquired; Banijay Asia, Banijay Studios Italy

the enigmatic media mogul may reflect on what Banijay has achieved since the acquisition of French company Air Productions in 2008. And though he rarely gives interviews, the intense speculation over Banijay's interest in ESG has thrown Courbit – embroiled in France's Bettencourt affair in 2015 – back into the spotlight.

Even without ESG, Banijay today owns major production players across the world – including the UK's RDF Media, Germany's Brainpool and most recently France's Terence Films – and its most famous shows include *Tipping Point*, *Location Location Location*, *Keeping Up With The Kardashians*, *The Crystal Maze* and the *Secret Life Of...* franchise. Its catalogue also ranges from the grandfather of reality shows, *Survivor*, which it bought last year, to *The Inbetweeners* and Nordic drama *Wallander*.

Independent working

The firm claims to be the world's largest truly independent production company, with around 1,000 staff in 16 countries working under 61 production banners. It is 68.6% controlled by a holding company comprising Courbit's LOV Group and DeA Communications – part of Italy's De Agostini Group. European media group Vivendi owns the other 31.4%, having initially joined the board following the merger with Zodiak Media in 2016.

Banijay is often described as a ‘confederation of entrepreneurs’ who are, as Bassetti tells *Broadcast*, not “weighed down with reporting in every day” and “bureaucratic infrastructure”.

He notes that all key managers have incentive plans that allow them to share the company spoils, adding: “It's a business where people are important.”

This focus on freedom and independence has allowed Banijay to negotiate strongly on talent deals that incentivise and lock in key staff.

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MARCO BASSETTI
CHIEF EXECUTIVE



BANIJAY GROUP

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Another key facet of the operation is that its entire top team have worked in production, so “people are speaking the same language” and have experience of making shows, Bassetti says. However, he acknowledges that a key group-wide challenge is how business models are changing with the arrival of new entrants such as the FAANGs.

Bassetti describes his working relationship with Courbit as “pretty normal”. The pair speak daily and meet during the week, and they agree that a focus on production and distribution of content is the overarching strategy.

For now, Banijay is purely focused on making shows, rather than launching channels or diversifying, as some other producers have done. “We don’t want to be in competition with our clients,” says Bassetti. “We are doing the usual YouTube channels, but we are not looking to create any competition. We want to be in digital but only with something that makes sense with a clear business model.”

Growth ambitions

Shows Banijay is particularly keen to push include the revamped *Shipwrecked*, which is returning to E4 after six years off air in the UK, and *The Duo*, a singing show from production subsidiary Mastiff Denmark, for Danish public broadcaster DR1. Recent areas of growth include India, where it has launched Banijay Asia, and Germany, where the group has merged Banijay Productions Germany and its stake in leading company Brainpool under former Endemol Shine northern Europe chairman Marcus Wolter.

Wolter, who is now a Banijay Germany shareholder, explains: “Germany is a key market for us; it’s a great opportunity to build up the local company within the group.” He highlights the range of shows the outfit has, such as entertainment show *Beat The Star* and sitcom *Pastewka*, as a signal of how “the time when international hits only really came from the US and UK is definitely over”.

One of the earliest to board the Banijay train was Nordic group chief executive Jacob Houllind, whose production companies are major players in this territory and whose drama catalogue helped put Nordic noir on the world map. His own company, Nordisk Film TV, was acquired in 2009 – with the exec choosing to sell to Courbit rather than Endemol – and he



Hidden: crime series launches at Mipcom

INVESTMENT APPROACH

Banijay’s UK-based head of format acquisitions Carlotta Rossi Spencer takes a novel approach when investing in programming: looking at what is happening in global politics as well as social and economic trends to inform what kinds of shows she backs. “We come up with good ideas that can travel,” she says

‘Comfort formats’ are currently popular as people want uncomplicated shows to unwind to after a hectic day, she notes, pointing to French gameshows *Guess My Age* and *The Legacy*. “*Guess My Age* is a success for us – it has had good runs in Germany and Russia – and *The Legacy* has been on for 15 years in Italy and is still doing well in France.”

APPETITE FOR DRAMA

Meanwhile, head of scripted at distribution wing Banijay Rights Caroline Torrance says the group is well poised to continue taking advantage of the appetite for scripted programming and has 11 new dramas launching at Mipcom, including crime series *Hidden*.

Torrance points to Banijay’s super-indie size as one of its strengths, citing the example of international drama *Straight Forward*’s creation. The crime caper is a co-production that she is “sure would never have been made” but for Banijay’s New Zealand and Danish operations (Screentime and Mastiff) meeting. Scandi SVoD Viaplay has local rights to the John Banas-penned series, while TVNZ has a first window in New Zealand. Streamer Acorn is also a co-pro partner.

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PETER LANGENBERG
CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

stayed with the group when the founder revealed his global expansion plans.

Houllind says the group’s philosophy of not being “top-down” explains why so many owners have “converted from shareholders to employees”, adding: “That gives a clue as to why Stéphane has been so successful – people feel it’s still their own company and aren’t strangled by group guidelines.”

Meanwhile, the UK remains vital for Banijay. RDF managing director Jim Allen says his business is in “good health”, though, like all independents, it faces more competition and the key is keeping a balance between thriving and surviving. He notes that RDF is “lucky” to have returning series such as entertainment label Fizz’s *Tipping Point* and *The Crystal Maze* (below). It also produces the popular *Secret Life Of...* series, which airs on C4 in the UK and has sold well abroad. Meanwhile, Allen currently has 200 people making a revamped *Shipwrecked*.

Allen says having access to Banijay’s catalogue helps feed the desire for revivals, but returning formats need to be engineered to last to ensure “they don’t burn brightly for just one or two series”.

Banijay UK boss Peter Langenberg became group chief operating officer in 2016, around the time of the merger with Zodiak, which he calls a “turning point”. The Dutch-born exec increased the number of UK businesses the group owns, notably in scripted, and this has led to the launch of start-ups such as Neon Ink, run by former ITV Studios drama execs Kate Lewis and Julia Walsh; and Fearless Minds, a joint venture with *Thorne* producer Jolyon Symonds.

Banijay’s British operations are now working on a venture with an unnamed Northern Ireland firm to help fulfil broadcasters’ commitment to more shows from the nations and regions; a “huge international production” from Yellowbird UK, the British outpost of Nordic noir specialist Yellowbird; and 7 Wonder-owned Little Wonder’s first commission.

“We want to be the number one international production company in the world – that’s our ambition,” says Langenberg. “We want to create a company where we produce content for all platforms. We will be cautious, but we want to rapidly grow the business.”

Fuelling that is likely to be Courbit. What he and Bassetti do next could determine the shape of the international television business in 2019. ③



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“Elstree was an excellent production base... were spacious and with good facilities. We have stores on site which made things much easier... variety of locations that are within easy reach of central London. I look forward to going back.”

Chris Fry, Producer: Humans



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