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ZDF Studios Takes ARD Degeto Film's 'The Zweiflers' for International (EXCLUSIVE)

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Credit: Elliott Kreyenberg

BERLIN — In a bellwether deal on one of the cutting edges of European TV, [ZDF Studios](#) has taken distribution worldwide on drama series “The Zweiflers,” produced by Turbokultur for ARD Degeto Film and Hessischer Rundfunk (HR).

Created and showrun by David Hadda, the six-part series will premiere in Germany on ARD’s Mediathek streaming service in the spring and also be shown on Das Erste, ARD’s main linear channel, in the near future.

In an age of spiraling costs and a large need to cut through a still immensely crowded market, Europe’s public broadcasters –ZDF Studios, not ZDF in this case – are looking to partner. The most obvious partners are other state TV networks, even in their own country if the co-operation works.

“We have already added ARD Degeto Film projects to our portfolio before. And there will be more in the future. There are no limits to our choice of partners,” Dr. Markus Schäfer, ZDF Studios president and CEO, told *Variety*.

“But there is one basic principle that we follow,” he added. “We want to bring together the best set of partners for each specific project. For ‘The Zweiflers,’ the combination of production company Turbokultur, commissioning broadcaster ARD Degeto Film and international distributor ZDF Studios is a perfect fit,” he added.

What's notable about this deal, closed by ZDF Studios and Turbokultur, is the high-profile and subject of "The Zweiflers."

Series about Germany's Nazi past are legion. Most Germans, however, may be hard pressed to remember a German series which describes the life of a Jewish family in contemporary Germany.

It now has one, and one which looks set to be a conversation driver from its bow, turning on family legacy in the broadest sense – in terms of culture, emotions, trauma connections and forging a sense of belonging in a fast-changing world. Such themes are brought sharply into focus by the main events of Ep. 1.

In one, Symcha Zweifler, the grandfather, announces he is selling the family delicatessen business he founded after WWII. In another, Samuel, the grandson, 30, an artists agent, meets Saba, a young British Caribbean woman and realizes in just the first hours of knowing her, that she could be the love of his life. Saba is dazzled by the delicatessen and understands well the diaspora experience, but grates at Samuel's prejudices about Black women and aims to go to study in Kyoto, before she becomes pregnant by her and Samuel's unplanned child. Floating over the series from its earliest going is the question of whether Symcha should close the business or Samuel take it over, bringing it into the modern world....

"The Zweiflers' is an outstanding series in many ways. It's a great family story spanning three generations, and it's a look at Jewish life in contemporary Germany," said Schäfer.

"At a time when growing anti-Semitism is becoming an issue in very different parts of the world, this series, from its fictional basis, is an important contribution to the very real discourse we need to have," he added.

"Crime thrillers are a staple at ARD Degeto Film but we excel in delivering outstanding family films, comedies, thrillers, and dramas," said Thomas Schreiber, managing director ARD Degeto Film.

"Drama is not just a genre within Degeto; it's a cornerstone of our identity and will remain a pivotal focus moving forward," he added. "We hold 'The Zweiflers' in high regard, a project that fills us with immense pride, and we extend our heartfelt gratitude to the dedicated teams in front and behind the camera for their exceptional work."

Hadda has also put together a high-caliber cast. Aaron Altaras, star of Netflix Emmy Award winning series "Unorthodox," plays Samuel; Saffron Coomber, who broke out in "Three Little Birds" and "Small Axe," is Saba Henriques. Sunny Melles, Mimi Zweifler in the series, starred in Ruben Ostlund's "Triangle of Sadness." Eleanor Reissa, seen in "The Walking Dead: Dead City," is Lilka Zweifler, the grandmother.

The series also stars the award-winning singer and actress Ute Lemper ("Chicago, Cabaret") as Tammi and Mike Burstyn ("Kuli Leml," "Judah"), the first Israeli to perform on Broadway, as grandfather Symcha Zweifler.

Written by David Hadda, along with Juri Sternburg and Sarah Hadda, the series is directed by Anja Marquardt ("The Girlfriend Experience" Season 3, "She's Lost Control") and Clara Zoë My-Linh von Arnim ("Feelings," "Echt"). Turbokultur is an award-winning production house (Deutscher Fernsehpreis, Grimme-Preis) which focuses on telling stories of previously underrepresented individuals and cultures.

"The Zweiflers" is studded with knowing detail. When Samuel takes Saba back to the restaurant, he prepares sponge cake, dosing it with vodka. In another scene, the family discusses the virtues of flavoring artichokes with lemon. This is inside track fiction and all the more affecting.

Variety talked to David Hadda in the run-up to Berlin.



David Hadda

Given the importance of authenticity in depicting Jews in post-war Germany, how did you approach ensuring authenticity and representation in your series, especially considering the challenges of finding actors who could speak Yiddish authentically?

Both authenticity and representation were vital. That's why we included English, Yiddish, Russian—the grandparents only speak Yiddish because that's how people talked. When we started writing the show, I didn't know if I could do it because there was no German Jewish actor of the needed age that speaks Yiddish as required. In fact, we created a flyer in Yiddish to send out to Israel, the States, Yiddish theaters, all to find this grandfather. Finding Mike Burstyn was a moment of joy because then we knew we had the justification to do the show. He introduced me to Eleanor Reissa from New York, from the Yiddish theater, and then we knew we could do it. We knew we could tell a story culturally specific but universal in the sense that these characters happen to be Jewish.

When you say 'happen to be Jewish' do you mean the degree it differs between the family members?

I think it is different for all of them. In Germany, a lot of people don't know much about the Jewish people that live in Germany. Most of the Jewish people living in Germany don't have a German background for more than three generations. The people that came after the Second World War weren't German before the war. Mostly they came from Eastern Europe, from Poland, survivors of the death camps like our grandfather from Auschwitz. I was interested in showing a grandfather and grandparents that lost everything and came to Germany because the allies were here. You had the camps, people were stuck here and lost everything, then continued to do whatever they needed to do to continue with life. For me, this was very empowering to focus on and to take this ambivalence and to see what this fact does to the following generations, to the generation of the mother.

Considering the innovative aspects of the series, how do you see it fitting into the broader landscape of European television?

The series aims to pioneer in storytelling by bringing to the fore a narrative that's not often explored in mainstream media, especially with its focus on a Jewish family in Germany. It's about using the unique platform we have to tell a story that's both specific and universal, leveraging the incredible talent we've assembled, including actors known in the international sphere, to bring authenticity and depth to the characters. Casting was not about finding big names but about finding actors who could authentically portray their characters. The fact that we have an all Jewish cast is a testament to our commitment to authenticity. We've tailored characters to match the actors' backgrounds, enriching the narrative with their personal stories and experiences.

How involved were you in the writing process, did you bring personal touches to it?

I was deeply involved, co-writing the series with my wife, Sarah Hadda, and Juri Sternburg, both of whom bring their own Jewish backgrounds and personal experiences into the storytelling. This collaborative process allowed us to create a narrative rich in authenticity and diversity of perspectives.

From my own life, I drew on family traditions and cultural nuances into the story which not only add depth but also provides viewers with a glimpse into the characters' lives beyond the surface level, making the storytelling more relatable and engaging.

When discussing legacy, it's crucial to consider how past experiences shape current identities and future decisions. The series explores this through the story of the grandfather.

The series seems to challenge and expand on traditional narratives?

Absolutely. By focusing on specific cultural experiences while addressing universal themes, the series aims to broaden viewers' perspectives, encouraging empathy and understanding across different cultures and experiences. The series not only explores identity through the personal stories of its characters but also examines how these identities evolve and intersect, highlighting the importance of understanding and embracing cultural diversity in shaping a more inclusive society.

As the series progresses, it continues to explore the intricate balance between honouring one's heritage and embracing the future, all while dealing with the complexities of family, love, and identity, paving the way for deep, meaningful storytelling that resonates with audiences worldwide.