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The European Media Programme – A Producer's Experience

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Gerry Gregg

In 1988 the European Media programme was launched to encourage film and television production in Europe for European audiences. The same year the Irish Film Board was abolished.

As 1992 approached, such was the perceived success of the Media Programme, the European Commission decided to extend and expand the media initiative until 1995. Meanwhile, in Ireland the Government had followed up the coup de grace on the Film Board with the cap on RTE advertising revenue. Ostensibly the cap was designed to encourage advertisers to place their bets on the new national independent radio channels airtime and on TV3. By January 1992, the planned private commercial and TV channel TV3 was a non-runner and the private national radio channel Century had pulled up with considerable losses. Twelve months later the cap is still in place, RTE have scaled down dramatically its purchase of independently produced programmes and Europe is the only friend most Irish producers have.¹

In 1988 I was selected to participate in the inaugural EAVE programme. This project was designed to encourage producer training by selecting participants with programme ideas, film treatments, documentary proposals, etc. and subjecting their ideas, budgets, talent, choice etc. to expert scrutiny in the course of intense marathon seminars held in hotels in remote locations. Of the twenty projects selected that year, at least three went into production - Isaac Julien's *Young Soul Rebels* and Jaco Van Dormael's *Toto the Hero* being the most notable. My project was a Russian road movie to be directed by John T. Davis as a sequel to his acclaimed film *Route 66*. Despite good reaction, the absence of substantial national support for the project ultimately sealed its fate. This is a recurring theme in all my experiences with Europe. The Irish end constantly collapses under the strain of insufficient finance, resources or commitment.

In 1989 SCRIPT was launched. SCRIPT awarded me £15,700 to develop a screenplay on the life of International Brigader and Republican Frank Ryan. The research for this film took us to Berlin, Spain, the United States and Britain and a screenplay was delivered without any support from any Irish source with the exception of Bord Tráchtála who financed the air fares to Spain, Germany and the US and allowed us access to phone and fax facilities in their New York office. The Ryan story was rejected by the Arts Council for script support and RTE passed on the project. Attempts to interest private investors proved fruitless. Again a strong Irish story which attracted the support of German and Spanish co-producers was stalled at the script stage due to the absence of support from any Irish backer. Since 1989 Ireland has received proportionately more SCRIPT awards than any other country. Yet to my knowledge only one film has gone into production and an Irish script mountain is getting higher and higher.

1989 saw the launch of EUROAIM. EUROAIM's brief is to encourage the sale and marketing of European productions. While EUROAIM's main event is the annual MIP showcase in Cannes, it also hosts the Donostia Screenings every autumn in Spain.

In 1989 our film on the veterans of the International Brigade 'The Last Parade' was chosen for this inaugural showcase and we have been selected every year with documentary films on Northern Ireland, labour history and the experience of Protestants in the Republic. The material has not sold to any territories outside the UK but

1. This article was written in January 1993 prior to the re-establishment of the Irish Film Board and the removal of the cap (restricting advertising on RTE).

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EUROAIM has, like all the other European schemes, enabled us to meet producers with similar interests and editorial sympathies and Euroaim has proved to be, as has EAVE, a spawning ground for co-production ideas and partnerships.

Last year I was asked to produce a documentary film on Luke Kelly in association with EXPOSURE Film and Video's Jack Talbot. That year also saw the DOCUMENTARY initiative of the Media '95 programme launched. We successfully applied for a 10,000 ecu development loan. This allowed us to research the early career of Luke Kelly in Britain and meet possible co-producers. To date, Channel 4 has expressed a willingness to put up approximately half the total budget of £140,000. However, before Christmas RTE informed us that they would not be getting involved due to 'financial constraints'. Thus a film to mark the anniversary of Luke Kelly's death, one of Ireland's most loved entertainers will probably not now be made unless the cap is lifted or else a commercial investor can be found for the project.

The European Media Programme has proved an invaluable source of contacts and professional affirmation. Amid all the 'No' letters from RTE and the Arts Council, it is encouraging when one comes across a letter from Europe saying 'we like your script - here's 10,000 ecu' to develop it or, 'we like your film and we are going to screen it at the next EUROAIM event'.

The frustrating aspect of all this for us and for the EC's Media Programme, is that the Irish independent producer gets little or no support from a philistine state, from a penny pinching national broadcaster and from an Arts Council that is committed to primarily supporting 'experimental' films. In most other European countries these are the primary sources of finance for producers. In Ireland as Derry O'Brien has said at a recent 'Sharing Stories' seminar in Edinburgh - 'RTE is increasingly the broadcaster of last resort for Irish independents'. The admirable success of some producers in obtaining funds from private investors under the provisions of Section 35 of the Finance Act is no excuse for the state evading its responsibilities in this important cultural sphere. Section 35 funding is unlikely to be a real runner for most of us engaged in documentary and low budget drama production.

Since 1988 the European Community has been a substantial source of support and encouragement to Irish producers. It has been a beacon of hope in a landscape of gloom and doom. However, as Irish governments continue to have a begging bowl mentality in relation to Europe the idea of matching a European pound with an Irish pound continues to be unpalatable. As long as that culture of dependency continues Irish producers will continue to pile up good scripts and ideas onto an ever growing paper mountain. Maybe it is time Europe had a word in Albert's ear about where some of the £8b should go. The abolition of the cap, the restoration of a National Film Board and the enforcement of the spirit of the EC ten per cent quota directive for independents from the £80m spent annually by RTE on television production would go a long way towards transforming a lot of those scripts and ideas into movies and jobs.