

# How Germany Quietly Became an Animation Powerhouse

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Sola Media

Sola Media's 'The Elfkins — Baking a Difference'

Amid a global demand for high-end animated children's content, Germany has emerged as a leader, racking up strong sales and box office thanks to sophisticated storytelling with cross-border appeal: "We can deliver a quality you can market theatrically worldwide."



It was 15 years ago, and a script for a children's animated film landed on the desk of Emely Christians, a fresh-faced producer at recently formed Hamburg, Germany-based production company Ulysses Films.

"I'd never done animation and this was a 3D animated film, something no one was doing in Europe at the time," she recalls. But she loved the script, from two Finnish screenwriters, about a young reindeer suffering from vertigo who has to face his fear to help save Santa and rescue Christmas.

So, cobbling together a coproduction involving partners and financing from Germany, Finland and Denmark, Christians made it. *Niko and the Way the Stars*, aka *The Flight Before Christmas*, made for less than \$8 million, went on to gross \$22 million at the global box office, selling to an astounding 170 territories via Global Screen. "I've never looked back," notes Christians.

Since then, Ulysses animated titles — *Luis and the Aliens*, *Ooops! Noah Is Gone* (aka *All Creatures Big and Small*) and *Bayala* among them — have racked up more than \$100 million at the international box office, a huge figure for a boutique independent European production house.

They also have helped establish German animation as a global brand. At AFM this year, German indie animation titles crowd the halls of the Lowes hotel. Films like Sola Media's *Moonbound* and *The Elfkins* — *Baking a Difference*, Studio 100 Film's *Vik the Viking* and *Maya the Bee 3: The Golden Orb* and Timeless Films' *Dragon Rider* are an indication of the quality, and the market demand, for 3D animation "made in Germany."



Courtesy of Studio 100 Film

Studio 100 Film's 'Vik the Viking'

"The big difference between German animation and the mass of indie animation on offer at AFM is the quality of the stories," says Julia Weber of Global Screen, which is handling sales outside of the U.S. and U.K. for Ulysses' latest, and biggest, production, *The Amazing Maurice*. Budgeted at \$15.5 million, the film will be the first animated feature adaptation based on the Discworld franchise from the late, great British fantasy author Terry Pratchett. Oscar-nominated screenwriter Terry Rossio (*Shrek*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*) is penning the screenplay.

"Just reading the second draft of Terry's script, we knew we were on a different level," says Weber. "The quality of the dialogue is just amazingly, fantastically good. That's what sets it apart. You can have an animated movie that costs three times as much, but if the script doesn't work, if the story isn't original, it isn't going to work at the box office."

The theatrical potential of German animation is part of its core appeal for the global market. Thorsten Wegener, director of business operations at Studio 100 Film, notes that German animated features have positioned themselves in between the mega-budgeted studio animation of Pixar and DreamWorks and the majority of independently produced animated content, typically budgeted at between \$5 million to \$7 million, which can be a risky proposition for cinema distributors.

"We've shown with a budget of \$10 million to \$13 million we can deliver a quality you can market theatrically worldwide," Wegener said.

Christians, speaking from her office in Hamburg, where the walls are covered with international movie posters for her films, says financial constraints have forced German production companies to be more creative, and much more focused, on where they spend their money.

"Of course you can't make a Pixar movie for \$15 million," she says, "but everything we spend goes on the screen. We spend a lot longer in planning — we take an extra two months doing our storyboards and use the time, the one luxury we have, to go over character design, plot and dialogue. When we finally begin to shoot, we only produce the hours we've planned. The edit is done before we start. Unlike a studio production, we don't have the luxury of changing something afterward if we don't like it."

German animation does have the luxury of a strong local market for children and family entertainment. Sola Media's two big German animated titles at AFM — *Baking a Difference* and *Moonbound*, budgeted at \$8.5 million and \$9.5 million, respectively — were fully financed out of Germany. *Elfkings*, a family-friendly story inspired by an old Cologne folk tale, will get a 500 cinema theatrical release from Berlin-based distributor Tobis early next year.

The one disadvantage to the local market however, is its focus on very young audiences.

"In Germany, animation is still seen as something for the very young," says Christians. "We definitely see the difference working with the U.K., for example, where animation is treated with the same respect given 'grown-up' films."

With *The Amazing Maurice*, Christians and Ulysses Films are making their first big move into truly grown-up animation. Given Pratchett's huge fan base — the Discworld books have sold more than 90 million copies worldwide — the film is targeting an audience beyond 6-to-10-year-olds.



Ulysses Films

Ulysses Films' *The Amazing Maurice*

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### 5 German Animated Features to Watch Out For at AFM

*The Elfkings — Baking a Difference*

SOLA MEDIA

Inspired by a Cologne folk tale about crafty elves, this family-friendly tale sees the wee folk return to the city to help save a pastry shop that has fallen on hard times.

*Maya the Bee 3: The Golden Orb*

STUDIO 100 FILM

The latest entry in the franchise — based on the Waldemar Bonsels 1912 children's book that has inspired several TV series and film adaptations — centers on the titular, free-spirited Maya, whose adventurous ways go against the strict, regimented life of the hive.

*The Amazing Maurice*

GLOBAL SCREEN

Based on one of Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels, this story of Maurice, a streetwise cat who, together with a horde of talking rats comes up with a scam to con the poor people of Bad Blintz, will be adapted by Oscar-nominated screenwriter Terry Rossio and feature character design from Carter Goodrich (*Ratatouille*, *Despicable Me*).

*The Oggles*

ARRI MEDIA INTERNATIONAL

The first feature film based on the hit book series from Erhard Dietl focuses on a family of friendly monsters who eat garbage and team up to help the village of Smelliville clean up its local landfill problem.

*Dragon Rider*