

Kinostar at 25: 'In Our Niches, We Can Dominate'

Since 1997, brothers Matthias and Michael Roesch have steadily grown their pan-European production, distribution and sales outfit with a shrewd expansion strategy that includes everything from B-movies to live opera **By Scott Roxborough**

● On the surface, Michael and Matthias Roesch, the German brothers behind German exhibitor, sales agent and pan-European distributor Kinostar, have little in common with Ron and Russell Mael, the duo behind legendary L.A. cult band Sparks, other than sibling ties and parents with a penchant for first-name alliteration.

But much like the Maels, the Roesches have carved out an enduring business in the entertainment industry by finding and serving niche audiences on the periphery of the mainstream. In place of Sparks' theatrical art-rock, think the Turkish- and Polish-language movies that Kinostar has turned into chart-toppers across Europe; the live performances of Russia's Bolshoi Ballet company that draw a devoted, high-end crowd to cinemas in Germany, Austria and Portugal; or the Uwe Boll-directed B-movies Kinostar has sold worldwide.

And, Sparks-like, the Roesch brothers have succeeded by playing to their individual strengths.

Michael is Kinostar's charismatic frontman who travels to L.A., Cannes and Istanbul, making contacts with talent and drumming up new business. Matthias — Ron Mael to his brother's Russell — is the back-room guy, happiest crunching the numbers



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on a spreadsheet back at Kinostar's home office in Stuttgart.

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His brother Michael counters, "Matthias has one of the sharpest analytical minds I know. He's the one who can keep every little detail in his head and analyze the financial side, where, honestly, I'm hopeless. We like to say I'm the foreign minister and Matthias is the finance minister."

Both, Michael notes, were "major film fans" before they got into the business. Michael began writing screenplays in college and worked as a film journalist "to pay

the bills." A story for a regional paper — a profile on the Scala, a 1950s-era, two-screen cinema in Neckarsulm (population 26,000) — took a turn when the owner noted he was in financial trouble and was planning to shut down.

"It was a such a beautiful cinema, with the old cash registers and the 1950s font on the sign," he recalls. "I thought, 'You can't shut this down.' I told him maybe me and my brother could help him out."

The Roesches took over the Scala's lineup, programming their favorites: *Pulp Fiction*, *The Blues Brothers*, *From Dusk Till Dawn*, *Blade Runner*.

"This was before the DVD boom and people were starved of this kind of stuff," says Matthias. "They came in droves. In just two to three years, we went from ticket sales of 6,000 a year to more than 43,000."

The brothers copied the approach in other cinemas, finding theaters in out-of-the-way spots (Heilbronn, Bretten, Mosbach) with an underserved audience and packing them in with a combination of movies they couldn't see anywhere else.

At the same time, Michael was dipping his toe in the production and sales business. It all started with a chance encounter with soon-to-be-infamous German director Uwe Boll.

"I was sitting at an event at the Berlin Film Festival and there was a guy talking behind me, loud so everyone could hear, saying he'd made a movie — on 35mm no less — that was better than any of the shit being shown at the festival," Michael recalls. "I had to talk to him. I turned around. And there was Uwe."

Boll had just finished his first film — the comedy sketch compilation *German Fried Movie*. He and Michael quickly hit it off and decided to go into business together.

After getting ripped off by sketchy sales agents on their first two projects together — "the sales company literally stole

all the money," says Michael — he decided to handle world sales in-house.

In addition to sales, Michael has produced several of Boll's best-known films, including 2005's *BloodRayne* with Ben Kingsley and 2007's *In the Name of the King: A Dungeon Siege Tale* starring Jason Statham. Michael even took on scripting duties on Boll's 2005 video game adaptation *Alone in the Dark* with Christian Slater and Tara Reid, and on 2008's *Far Cry* starring Til Schweiger.

While critics were not always kind — the Golden Raspberry Awards gave Boll a rare worst career achievement honor in 2009 — the German director has been good business for Kinostar. *In the Name of the King* sold to more than 150 territories worldwide, and the company racked up impressive sales figures for more recent Boll titles including *Rampage* (2009), starring Brendan Fletcher, and *Assault on Wall Street* (2013), with Dominic Purcell.

On the distribution side, Kinostar was slowly building a name for itself with an eclectic mix of art house titles (Philip Gröning's 2000 film *Love Money Love*), documentaries (2005's *The Real Dirt on Father John*) and B-movie genre fare, much of it — *Sanctimony* (2000), *Seed* (2006) or *Postal* (2007) — directed by Boll.

But another chance encounter, this time at the American Film Market in 2007, led Kinostar in a new direction. The company had just closed the Turkish deal for *In the Name of the King* with leading indie distributor Özen Film. Michael was sitting in the Kinostar's sales office at the Loews Hotel when he walked Özen CEO Mehmet Soyarslan.

"He'd heard from his colleagues how great the *Name of the King* trailer was, so he came to see it," remembers Michael. "We got to talking and he said, 'Don't you have a distribution company in Germany? We're looking for a new partner for our Turkish films.'"

The Roesches knew there was a huge audience for Turkish

Turkish Delights: Five Kinostar Hits

Kinostar wasn't the first distributor to discover the box office potential of Germany's Turkish-speaking population. But the company's hit rate, picking films that appeal to the Turkish diaspora — everything from brash comedies to prison dramas to period epics — is second to none



Recep Ivedik 4
(2014)

German Box Office

\$6M



Recep Ivedik 5
(2017)

German Box Office

\$4M



Conquest 1453
(2012)

German Box Office

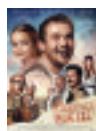
\$3.7M



Düğün Dernek
(2013)

German Box Office

\$3.1M



Miracle in Cell #7
(2019)

German Box Office

\$2.8M

films in Germany — Turks make up Germany's largest ethnic minority, with up to 7 million German residents claiming some Turkish heritage — but it was largely untapped.

"Back then, a lot of theater owners, even some of the big ones, did not believe in the potential of the Turkish audience," says Michael.

But Kinostar did. Signing with Özen Film, the company began to release the studio's titles in Germany and hit gold with their second movie: *Recep İvedik*, a broad comedy starring Şahan Gökbakar as the titular character, a foul-mouthed, monobrowed taxi driver. *Recep İvedik* grossed more than \$3 million in Germany and has spawned five even-more-successful sequels (*Recep İvedik 7* is currently in the works).

"Kinostar wasn't the first to target the Turkish audience, but they're better at it than anyone else," says Oliver Fock, managing director at Cinestar, one of Germany's leading multiplex theater groups. "They really know their audience and they know how to get them into the theaters."

The Roesches also knew how to keep the creatives happy: by making sure they profit fully from their films' success.

"The classic model for distributors is you pay a big minimum guarantee and if the film does well, the distributor profits disproportionately. The filmmaker gets their minimum guarantee [MG] but doesn't share in the success," says Michael. "If the film's a flop, it's the opposite. The filmmaker gets their MG but the distributor is left holding the bag. That never made sense to us. We do our deals where we pay no or a very low MG, but when a film's a hit, the producers get the lion's share of the profits."

Notes Boll, "If you have a contract with Kinostar, you can count on it. They are absolutely dependable. That's sadly rare in this business."

Kinostar has since expanded beyond Germany and is the leading distributor of

Turkish-language fare in Europe. The Turkish diaspora has come out in force for everything from period epic *Conquest 1453* (2012) to prison drama *Miracle in Cell #7* (2019), a Turkish adaptation of the 2013 Korean film of the same name.

And it isn't just Turkish films. Kinostar is also the exclusive international distributor of Polish box office champ Patryk Vega (*Pitbull*, *Women of the Mafia*), whose hard-hitting crime and action films have been particularly successful in the U.K.

"There are a lot of Polish people in England who recently left Poland and miss Polish content," Vega told *THR* via email. "Several of my productions make it into the top five in the U.K. Kinostar made it possible to reach this wide audience."

On the opposite side of the spectrum, Kinostar is also the exclusive distributor — in Germany, Austria and Portugal — for Pathé Live, which brings fine art, opera and ballet, often live-screened performances, to cinema audiences.

"This is a very particular audience and it is very different than the regular cinema audience. The marketing, the approach has to be very bespoke. Kinostar has always understood that," notes Raphaël Lemée, international sales manager for Pathé Live.

Kinostar is Germany's second-largest distributor in the live-events segment, thanks to Pathé Live's live streamings of Moscow's Bolshoi Ballet (which the company put on pause following Russia's invasion of Ukraine). Kinostar's 2014 screening of *The Nutcracker* grossed \$1.14 million in Germany alone.

"In the end, it's all about creating an event," says Michael. "For the studios, it's *Spider-Man* or *James Bond*, but for our audiences, the new *Recep İvedik*, the new Patryk Vega, the new Bolshoi Ballet, is just as big a deal. We know we can't compete with the major studios, but in our niches, we can dominate the market." **THR**

Box Office, Ballet and Bullets: The Kinostar Success Story

With everything from *The Nutcracker* to Polish crime sagas, the brothers Roesch know how to give audiences what they want



SLAYING THEM

The 2007 period action epic *In the Name of the King: A Dungeon Siege Tale*, starring Jason Statham and directed by Uwe Boll, still reigns supreme as Kinostar's most successful international sales title, sold in more than 150 countries worldwide.



FAN FRENZY

Kinostar was quick to capitalize on the K-pop craze. Concert film *BTS — Love Yourself* sold more than 48,000 tickets in Germany, grossing close to \$500,000.



BOLSHOI BOX OFFICE

Before stopping their live screenings of the Bolshoi Ballet in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Kinostar was the second-largest distributor of classical performances (after the Metropolitan Opera). The 2014 screening of *The Nutcracker* grossed \$1.14 million in Germany alone.



MÓWISZ PO POLSKU?

As the exclusive international distributor of Polish box office champ Patryk Vega, Kinostar regularly sees his crime thrillers chart in the U.K. Corruption drama *Petla* (2020) opened at No. 9.



PULP FICTION AND SCHINDLER'S LIST

Kinostar bought its first theater in 1997, in the sleepy southern German city of Heilbronn. Programming both cult classics (*Pulp Fiction*, *Blade Runner*) and studio blockbusters (*Jurassic Park*, *Schindler's List*), they boosted attendance sevenfold in three years.