

**CHAIRMAN AND CEO,
A COMPANY**

Alexander Van Dülmen

**The German risk taker discusses
how he survived a decade of
uncertainty and why he's still
betting on Eastern Europe**

By Scott Roxborough

10 YEARS AGO, ALEXANDER VAN DÜLMEN borrowed 48,000 Euros (\$45,000) to start up a licensing and sales operation specializing in the then largely-unknown markets of Russia and Eastern Europe. His timing was awful — the media bubble had just burst (van Dülmen was himself a refugee from Kinowelt, market-listed company that had gone belly up) and most viewed Eastern Europe as risky, unpromising and hopelessly corrupt. A decade later, Van Dülmen has been through multiple shareholders, market crashes and currency devaluations but the firm he started — A Company — has continued to grow. A Company and its subsidiaries now operate in 29 countries, boasting a slate of nearly 400 films and annual revenues in the tens of millions. Van Dülmen last year came on board one of the most talked-about projects in the indie world: the big-budget sci-fi epic *Cloud Atlas* directed by the trio of Tom Tykwer and the Wachowskis siblings

Did you always want to start up your own business?

No. I didn't have much choice. By the summer of 2002 I'd been unemployed for almost a year. The crash of the Neuer Markt meant it wasn't easy getting work in the media industry. I was up for an acquisitions job with a big U.K. company but that fell through. When that happened, I decided that's it. I have to try it on my own: tap my contacts from Kinowelt and build a network. It was out of desperation, more than anything.

Do you remember your first market as your own boss?

It was the AFM. I flew there with 48,000 Euros in borrowed capital and I signed commitments for \$3 million worth of film rights. I didn't have the money. I had about 3-4 months to sell the rights or that would have been it. Two weeks later, I flew to Russia and met with people from Russian TV I'd



Van Dülmen will be celebrating the tenth anniversary of A Company with a Berlin blowout on Feb. 11.

known from the Kinowelt days. They agreed to buy the films for a \$600,000 profit. I was happy as a new born baby. I called people up: "it worked! It worked!" A lot of people told me to take the money and run. But I knew we were just getting started.

What was the attitude towards the Eastern European market at the time?

People were terrified of it. They were scared of Eastern Europe. But I was always convinced of the potential there. I was alone in that. Now you can see how the market has grown. One of the films I sold for Russia for a few hundred thousand back then would easily be worth a million now.

Besides the growth in the market, what has changed over the years in your corporate strategy?

Our profile. For a long time we were focused on what can we sell — and quickly — to TV. It made sense at the time because there wasn't much money in the theatrical business in Russia or Eastern Europe. Then, in 2006, we did a big exclusive deal with The Weinstein Company — and we suddenly had all these horror and genre films like *Machete* which were harder films for TV. They had to work in the cinemas.

In the beginning it was tough. Then we got the *Saw* franchise from Lionsgate. *Saw 3* was the first film that made money for us in the cinema. It was a special moment. Now we are much more focused on bigger titles. We have *Sin City 2* and *Machete 2*, we've got Billy Bob Thornton's Berlin competition film *Jayne Mansfield's Car*. And of course we're a co-producer on *Cloud Atlas*, which we have for Russia and Eastern Europe. But TV sales are, and remain, our core business.

What's coming for the next decade?

We are still investing in emerging markets — in Russia and Poland particularly, where we see over average growth. With AR-Films from Russia coming on board last year as our majority shareholder, we have the capital and position to take our biggest step yet. This year we want to launch our own theatrical distribution operation in Russia. The idea is to do the publicity and marketing ourselves and do booking and billing through a studio. In ten years I think A Company has become established on the market. It's hard to imagine the market without us. But this will take us to a whole new level. It will make us a really big player in the territory. **VIII**