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Firefly shines brightly in Serbian production ecosystem



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Seven years ago, Serbia's Firefly Productions was not even born, and Firefly Studios was just a drawing on a restaurant menu. Today, its cofounder, chief operating officer and producer Ivana Miković is juggling local commissions with international coproductions while her newly opened state-of-the-art studio is enticing big Hollywood names.



Ivana Miković is someone who wastes no time getting down to business.



Ivana Miković

The cofounder, chief operating officer and producer of Belgrade-based Firefly Productions, who began her career as a BBC news producer in the Balkans, has a media career stretching back over 25 years. In that time, she's been news manager for News Corp's Fox TV in Serbia, general manager of Antenna Group's TV B92 channel and deputy general manager at Serbia's public service broadcaster RTS.

Throughout, she's demonstrated her ability to get things done, including launching a news platform (United Group's N1), turning RTS into a tapeless and HD environment, then helping to pivot its drama department towards high-end TV series.

But since leaving the corporate world behind in 2019, she's turbo-charged that rate of delivery, launching a production company in the eye of a pandemic storm, developing 10 projects in her prodco's first year of launch, and then delivering five drama series in a year to Telekom Srbija.

And all of this, while at the same time creating and building Firefly Studios, a state-of-the-art studio facility in Serbia that opened for business at the end of 2023.

Miković oozes the energy such a feat requires as she explains how she overcame the challenge of upending your whole business plan in the face of a once-in-a century pandemic event. "I'm a big survivor," she says. "So, I said to Bob [Jevtic], who is my content partner,

okay, 'we are planning to produce two titles, we're going to move those to the summer. Let's use this time to write', and we literally put 10 titles in the pipeline."

At the same time, Miković was preparing an architectural plan for her Serbian studio complex. So how did the seed get planted to build a state-of-art studio facility on the outskirts of Belgrade?



Mediawan Rights has picked up Constantine's Crossing

"My idea came out of a meeting with Kreka," she recalls, referring to veteran and award-winning art director and production designer Miljen 'Kreka' Kljaković (Delicatessen, The Pillars of the Earth), who is now creative director at Firefly Productions.

"I met him when I was at my previous job, I wanted him to redecorate all the sets – everything was decaying. He said: 'I'm too old for that. I don't feel like doing it, but I'm going to help you with advice'."

Barely drawing breath, Miković continues: "We started, meeting, having coffees from time to time, and he was always complaining: 'I'm always away from home. I would like to be at home and sleep in my own bed. If only we had studios, all the Hollywood productions would come to Serbia. We have good terms, we have the incentives and everything else. We have good crews, but we don't have the studios'.

"And I said, can you draw me a little something on that studio? And he pulled the menu out where we were sitting in the restaurant, and he drew a little something. I took it to an architect friend, she said, 'oh, it's three to four million this, plus this, plus that'... I went to a bank, and they said, 'you need to have an investor, you need to have the guarantees la, la, la...' And literally – just like that – within three weeks, I just started working on it."

Fast-forward seven years and Miković is overseeing a busy studios facility that's been full since it opened last October. "Literally on the day of the opening, the following day we had all three studios filled with local projects, and still, they're not empty," says Miković, who notes that Serbia is still the premier studio destination for productions in Central and Eastern Europe – as "full for the next two years." That's good news for Miković's new film

studio, which she says, “from summer onwards” is going to be only housing “foreign projects”.

Among the first is Martin Scorsese’s eight-part docudrama *Martin Scorsese Presents: The Saints*, for Fox Nation. The series was developed by Scorsese for Lionsgate Alternative Television and created by Matti Leshem. It has Miković attached as line producer and Kljaković as production designer and explores the stories of eight saints including Joan of Arc, Francis of Assisi, John the Baptist, Thomas Becket, Mary Magdalene, Moses the Black, Sebastian and Maximillian Kolbe. Firefly Productions is servicing the project at locations in Serbia and at Firefly Studios.



The Family examines the final three days of Slobodan Milosevic’s regime

Situated in the town of Pancevo, within 25 minutes of Belgrade and the capital’s airport, the facility boasts three sound stages (two of them 2,000 square metres each, and the third measuring 3,800 square metres). Also in the complex is a water tank and four hectares of backlot, as well as production offices, a workshop, restaurant and horse stables.

One of the stages recently housed *Constantine Crossing*, a new 10×52’ drama set during World War II that Firefly is coproducing with Telekom Srbija. The story centres on the search for Christian artefacts with magical powers.

“We built an 18,000 square metre replica of the city of Constantine,” says Miković, who adds: “We are very excited about the post prod. We are delivering at the end of the summer and hopefully it’ll be on air in the early autumn 2024.”

French distributor Mediawan Rights announced it had picked up *Constantine Crossing* for international distribution at Series Mania last month. Commenting on the news of the first Balkan-originating series to be added to its catalogue, Valerie Vleeschhouwer, MD of Mediawan, said: “We are confident that this series has the necessary assets to persuade the international market.”

... will be music to the ears of Miković, who is looking to focus on English-language coproductions as she moves forward into the next phase of her business’ development.

“From this year, I am going to slightly reduce the number of series I am producing. I’m going to focus on the studio and on coproductions, because I have an English title slate,” she explains.

That slate includes *Fatal Ally*, a tense thriller based on the book of the same name by Tim Sebastian, the English television journalist and novelist. “Tim Sebastian used to work with me when I was a kid at BBC Serbia,” explains Miković. “He likes spy movies and so he wrote a spy novel and I said, ‘let’s do something together’ and we created this title so hopefully we will work together on it.”

The other two projects are *Rabies*, based on a Serbian best-seller about an outbreak of rabies at Heathrow airport, and *Gorilla*, another book-based project loosely centred on the ‘Marković affair’, the 1968 French political scandal following the death of Stevan Marković, a friend and bodyguard of actor Alain Delon.

Books have, in fact, formed the backbone of Firefly’s production strategy since the company set up in 2018 – that and a “writers’ room” model of developing, says Miković, who credits Jevtic for developing this side of the business. It’s proven to be a successful formula, leading to 14 drama commissions in the space of six years.

Firefly’s relationship with Telekom Srbija has formed a crucial piece in the jigsaw. “All our local content is exclusively for Telekom Srbija, and they have been a wonderful partner,” comments Miković. “They have been open to new genres, new ideas, top-notch IP.”

Series that Firefly has coproduced with Telekom Srbija include the prodco’s first title *Tycoon*, a thriller following the turbulent life of a business tycoon and his dysfunctional family; mystery drama *No Trespassing*; *The Clan*, about two local thieves as they struggle to become leaders in Belgrade’s criminal underworld; thriller *Underneath*, about an investigator who unravels the mystery behind a series of ritualistic murders; and comedy series *Felix*.



Tycoon has been commissioned for a further season

Three of these series – *Tycoon*, *No Trespassing*, *Underneath* and *The Clan* – have been commissioned for further seasons. Other Firefly productions include *Children of Evil*, a 10-

part thriller based on the best-selling novel by Miodrag Majic, the only Serbian title to premiere on HBO Max; and the award-winning dramas *Black Wedding*, about an intelligence operative investigating a bloody massacre in a remote village in eastern Serbia, and *The Family*, about the final three days of Slobodan Milosevic's regime.

Looking forward, Miković says she's focused on her studio ("if I had six studios, I think I could fill them", she notes) and ensuring her business has several revenue streams on the go at once. "I come from the corporate world. You need to have, several plans, several revenue streams, not just one project at a time, but a pipeline of projects that are in preparation, then another couple of titles that are being filmed and another one in post-production. So, if you lose one, you're not dead."

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