

SVT, Suède

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Entretien avec Henrik Von Sydow

Acquisitions Executive, Music and Fine Arts, SVT (2000-2023)

30 septembre 2019

Marie-Odile Demay >

Henrik von Sydow, you're the buyer of arts and music programming at SVT, the Swedish public broadcaster. Can you tell me a bit more about what you're looking for in the programs you're buying?

Henrik von Sydow >

First of all, we have to explain that the arts are a pretty niche topic in TV programming. I should say, it's not culture in general. It's basically music, painting, and all kinds of liberal arts. And it can be in the form of documentaries or performances, in the case of the performing arts. So there's this dedicated time slot on SVT 2 on Saturdays at 7 p.m. that's open-ended. So my colleagues in arts acquisitions and I have Saturday evenings on SVT 2 all to ourselves.

Marie-Odile Demay >

You're saying you're putting together fine arts, like music and painting, in the same programming slot?

Henrik von Sydow >

Sometimes, yes. Normally, the Saturday slots are for performing arts, like dance, classical music, and theater. We also combine other kinds of art for theme nights, which we do quite often. I'm in charge of acquisitions, which means I buy productions from foreign producers as well as Swedish programs from independent producers. So, in a budget dedicated to arts programming, 75 % is acquisitions. The other 25 % is spent on in-house productions, which means financing external productions and making our own programs. I work with two colleagues who are in charge of dance, opera, and theater. Together, we put together the schedule for that dedicated time slot. As I mentioned, I'm primarily responsible for music programming.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Can you tell me a bit more about what you're buying?

Henrik von Sydow >

I'm buying documentaries of all lengths. They're usually one-off documentaries about music, but also about other kinds of arts. And then performances can be anything from short dance routines to long operas, and sometimes even drama or theater-based drama. We also have to remember that only English-speaking drama is relevant to please our audience. We gave French and German dramas a try, but that proved more challenging. Unfortunately, even with subtitles

and a star-studded cast, nobody watches them. Just to let you know, all our content is subtitled, not dubbed.

Marie-Odile Demay >

What are you looking for in a program?

Henrik von Sydow >

Of course, I'm looking for quality. It can be tough to pin down exactly what makes something high-quality, but we all recognize it when we see it. Quality can mean different things to different people. It can be technical. It can be the quality of the performance or the direction of the film. It can also be about finding the right balance between dynamic quality and more static quality. What do I mean by that? I'd say it like this. We could have the famous opera star Jonas Kaufmann in every opera, over and over, and people would still love it. That's what I mean by static quality. But we should be aiming for dynamic quality, which isn't necessarily about what's new, but what is different in some way and opens your eyes. It's interesting, when you've been a buyer for a while, you can spot the dynamic quality in the first few minutes. You think to yourself, "They've got something there." It's tough to put your finger on it. It's tough to answer because technical quality is just the start, and so are famous actors or singers. That's just the beginning.

Marie-Odile Demay >

It's not just about the form, right? Could we say that part of it is down to the director's point of view and personal approach? Like Larry Weinstein does in his films, for example?

Henrik von Sydow >

That's exactly it. That's basically what I mean by "dynamic quality." Larry always brings something new to the table and it's always great to see what he does next. I suppose you could say that the opposite of a Larry Weinstein documentary would be an acted documentary. You know, Claude Monet, who was a pretty good painter, was born in 1853. Take a look at this picture of his mother in front of a house somewhere and then look at his kid at school. And, of course, there are the water lilies. Then he dies. It's a bit of a downer, isn't it? We try to steer clear of the typical biopic as much as we can.

Marie-Odile Demay >

What should a film about art be about then? If we're talking about subject and directing, the ideal film would be a Larry Weinstein-directed Jonas Kaufmann documentary!

Henrik von Sydow >

I think so! One really interesting and important thing to think about is that a documentary about art has to start right at the beginning. It has to get going right away. You can't start with three and a half minutes of drone footage. You've got to grab the viewers right away. On TV, we have about thirty seconds to get people interested. It's really important that the documentary gets off to a flying start.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Are you talking about that typical National Geographic technique where they give an intense tour of the entire film within the first thirty seconds of the program?

Henrik von Sydow >

Not quite. That can also be a bit dull. This is the typical US way of making documentaries, where you have maybe three, four, or five talking heads at the start who will say something nice about Monet and his work. I don't think that's the best approach.

So when I say I want the documentary to start right away, I want them to pick up the storyline right away. It doesn't have to be in the exact order things happened, but you have to start off strong. It's also about storytelling. If the storytelling is good, that's probably the most important thing when it comes to documentaries. When it comes to broadcasting a performance, it's all about how the opera is directed. There isn't much you can do in that situation. So the cinematography is really important because that's a big part of the process. Some people are really good at taking the stage version and making it work for TV. François Rousillon and Barbara Willis Sweete, along with other brilliant directors like them, are doing that.

Marie-Odile Demay >

What do you think is the best art form for television?

Henrik von Sydow >

That's a great question. The visual arts are definitely the easiest to take. Now, literature might seem challenging at first, but it really depends on the author. This year's Nobel laureate, Peter Handke, is a bit tricky for television because his prose is so dense. It's really tough to enjoy passages from his books when they're quoted on TV. On the other hand, authors who are more approachable or portraits of authors are easier to take on TV. Classical music concerts are a real challenge because there's not much you can do with them. As it turns out, some directors are really great at that too. It's how the director or the filmmaker takes the essence of the book, the prose, or the poem and builds on it with a storyline. The same goes for classical concerts, rock concerts, and operas. I don't think it's really fair to say that some genres are better suited to television than others. It really comes down to how they're put together.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Can you tell me more about music concerts on TV?

Henrik von Sydow >

I think it comes down to timing. It's about knowing when to cut to a close-up, when you have to back off and make a wide shot, and so on. It's like music, really. Some directors have a natural talent for this, while others don't. It's also about the director knowing what the viewer wants to see. It's really about anticipating what the viewer is interested in, rather than focusing on what's going on or the music score.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Could you tell me a bit more about films on the visual arts?

Henrik von Sydow >

When it comes to films on the visual arts, like painting, sculpture, and architecture, it's more about the artist than the paintings or sculptures themselves. I recently purchased a fascinating documentary about the Venetian painter Tintoretto, for instance.

It's about the artist's life, which gives a context for seeing their work and understanding the connections between them. It also shows the shift from Renaissance to Rococo Italian painting. The camera moves with the painting, following its turns and movements. I think that's a good approach. When it comes to music, the portrait approach can also be useful. I just purchased a documentary about Italian Renaissance composer Carlo Gesualdo, who had a very tumultuous life. Even though there was an actor in a funny hat playing a part in the situation, it was very well made, and the narrative kept you on your toes.

When it comes to art documentaries, it's usually the artists and their work that are the focus.

Marie-Odile Demay >

What about the ratings for your Saturday night slot?

Henrik von Sydow >

Ratings are, of course, pretty poor. But we have to put this in context. This is on SVT 2, the cultural channel, while at the same time, SVT 1 is airing a variety of entertainment shows. That means our audience is pretty small. But it's not getting any smaller. We've done pretty well, all things considered. You know, public broadcasting is facing challenges due to competition from commercial channels, the internet, and platforms like YouTube. We're not cutting back on our arts programming, but it's never been a big draw. Of course, it all depends on the subject matter. Unfortunately, dance is the least popular genre. And regular classical music, as opposed to contemporary music, is much more popular. Now, I'm talking from the audience's perspective. Mozart, Haydn, and the other Vienna classics are always a hit. Modern music isn't as popular. So, the further you stray from the norm, the less appealing you are to the audience. But of course, we want to show everything we want to be, including classical. It's a combination of things. Unfortunately, our audience isn't that big.

Marie-Odile Demay >

If the ratings aren't great, why is arts programming so important for SVT?

Henrik von Sydow >

It's important for SVT because, first of all, art is a good thing in itself. Secondly, if we don't do it, who's going to do it? It's not being done by anyone else. It's kind of a moral obligation to show arts and music programming. Another important thing is connecting generations. So, if we bring classical art, literature, and music to Swedish TV, we keep the connection to the great things

from the past alive. As a mass medium, it's tempting to focus on what's popular now and what's trending. But if we just focus on what's popular now, we'll lose the connections to the past. That could mean we're ignorant of what came before. It's important to keep the arts, culture, and music alive and well so that we can connect with generations before us and continue the legacy.

Marie-Odile Demay >

That's inspiring! Is that what you're thinking, or is that the general idea at SVT?

Henrik von Sydow >

Well, most people at SVT aren't aware of our art programming team's work in the Saturday slot on SVT 2. They know we're doing great things, but they're not always up to speed on what's going on. On the plus side, management lets us make most of the decisions. The bosses aren't involved in the day-to-day of this slot. We're a small but dynamic and independent team within SVT. I should also mention that what we're doing is regulated by charter, as is usually the case with public service broadcasters. According to Swedish law, SVT is required to broadcast arts and culture. On top of that, we're also required to showcase art and culture from all over Sweden, so we're not just focused on what's happening in Stockholm.

Marie-Odile Demay >

What are your thoughts on new media and digital technologies like VR? What's SVT doing about it? For example, ARTE is doing these ARTE Trips 360° VR clips that are about two to four minutes long. You can virtually walk into and explore the painting *Las Meninas* by Velázquez.

Henrik von Sydow >

SVT isn't really into VR. I've got two things to say about VR. It shouldn't be used for everything. For instance, Velázquez does sound interesting, but it depends on how it's done. It's possible that VR could either become obsolete or survive. If we have to use these heavy glasses, like Google Glass, it'll probably die out. If it's something simple and lightweight, though, VR will really take off. And it would be great for opera too, because you'd feel like you were there in the moment. I don't think SVT would be interested in that. Not until that technique is more effective. Then there are other new forms of technology we probably won't go for, like the Japanese way of making 8K and 16K images. I think 4K would be a great unique selling point for my programming. If I can't do it in broadcast, I'd love to do it on our play service on the internet to have 4K programming and really high picture quality. We're currently looking into the feasibility of doing that. It's really about the capacity of the service. We're looking at things like how big the service will be and how many gigabytes the files will take up. So that's the main challenge, but I'm confident we'll overcome it.

Marie-Odile Demay >

So, you have a website where you broadcast some arts programming. Is it just catch-up, or do you have dedicated programs for the web?

Henrik von Sydow >

We always offer SVOD access with everything we broadcast. Ideally, we'd get the rights for the entire license period, but that's not always possible. I think that distributors are unfortunately falling behind in this area. They don't give us much, and they don't seem to understand that thirty days of catch-up is no longer enough. We need to gently encourage them to embrace the new reality. If you were to ask me whether we have any programming that is only on public service and not on broadcast, I would say that it's pretty rare for our arts programs. Other sectors are much more on top of that. We don't have much drama, but we do buy some evening factual entertainment series and we sometimes buy them just for the Play service. But my programming is still pretty tied to the old way of doing things, both in terms of linear broadcasting and SVOD afterwards.

Marie-Odile Demay >

You're very focused on television.

Henrik von Sydow >

Definitely. I can give you a number: 95 % of our audience watches our programs on our broadcast slots. That's just 5 % on SVOD. So, 95 % of our audience watches our programs when they're broadcast because our audience is quite old, I'd say. And they're not early adopters.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Is this the end of television as we know it? Clearly, that doesn't mean television is on its way out.

Henrik von Sydow >

Television is still going strong, but not as strong as it used to be. And it seems we're not far from the right-wing parties in Sweden, who want to limit what we broadcast. They don't want us to make entertainment at SVT. They want to shrink the public sector and public television. We're protected well into 2026 by our new charter, which was just renewed. But after that, things might be very different for us.