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Taking flight

Ten years ago, Lara Juliette Sanders quit her job as a German commissioning editor in dramatic fashion to pursue her dream of being a documentary maker. Now running her own distribution outfit, she tells Adam Benzine of her turbulent decade.



It sounds like the plot to a particularly unlikely Hollywood movie. One rainy day in November 1999, Lara Juliette Sanders (left), a commissioning editor for female-skewing German channel TM3, decided to quit her job and leave her husband.

Fed up with life trapped behind an office desk, greenlighting the creative dreams of others, a tearful Sanders decided to flee to Munich airport and take whatever flight was 10th on the departure board. In that country, she would make her first documentary film, and it would be successful worldwide.

When she arrived at the airport, the board read 'Dominica.' She bought the ticket. Twenty-five hours and three flights later she was in the Caribbean, and within hours she had met the subject of her first feature film. Three-and-a-half years later, filming was complete, and after two years of editing the documentary was finished (and she was penniless).

Fast forward to today and the film is a triumph, having been sold to broadcasters in Finland, Germany, Italy, Norway, Denmark and Greece. Sanders, meanwhile, sets up Lombardo Films, a documentary distribution company (named after her estranged second husband), and now looks after a slate of nearly 30 films.

It would be too outrageous a plot to suspend disbelief for - if it hadn't actually happened.

"I was completely convinced that we had a horrible system of doing TV," recalls Sanders, "and I was in that system, making commercial shit, and I hated myself. I said, 'My God, I am one of these bad guys doing bad movies and bad shows.' I earned a lot of money, but I was not happy in my soul. I was 30 and I realised I would die in this big engine of money and capitalism. One day I was stuck in an elevator and I thought, 'This is a sign - I have to get out.' If you don't risk some-thing, you'll never change anything."



Today, Sanders' decision looks to have paid off handsomely. Her debut documentary, *Celebration of Flight* (left, 1x52'/59'/78'), has been taken by broadcasters across Europe, such as YLE, NRK, ZDF, Rai and Arte, while her second documentary, *The Real Daktari* (1x52'/81'), has been taken by Arte and ZDF.

Meanwhile, other Lombardo docs, including *Sonbol* (1x60') and *Bali's Reef Constructors* (1x43'/52'), are garnering interest from broadcasters such as

Al Jazeera and Greece's ERT.

"We're very specialised," she says of Lombardo Films. "We try to get really non-commercial things which are sellable. That means story-driven films with very strong characters, and also author-driven stories. We're very interested in finding good, new talent that we can support.

"We try to walk this tightrope between really good-quality, story-driven, hard stories, and more general movies. Our catalogue is really one which has very touching documentaries - we have Iranian films, Mexican films, Argentinean films. We really specialise in films about people who have had difficulties in their lives but who are very strong and who can be an example to you."

She is clearly driven towards storytelling, but 10 years ago, Sanders' only motivation was escaping the hamster wheel she'd found herself on. "I quit my job by phone," she recalls. "They offered me thousands of euros to stay, but I went to the airport because that was the only way to escape without telling anyone. I had my credit card and I thought, what can I do that's like a roulette wheel? So I said, 'OK, whichever is the 10th flight on the board, that's where I'm going to go.'



"I was crying, I was sad - I felt like a criminal because I hadn't told anybody and I'd just left my husband. I mean, we'd had some small problems already, but to just leave someone without telling them..."

Within days of arriving on the sandy beaches of Dominica, fate (or luck) saw Sanders meeting 78-year-old Swede Daniel Rundstroem, who would end up being the focus of her first documentary. A former pilot, Rundstroem, along with a 16-year-old Indian boy called Rainstar, was restoring an aeroplane in the middle of the Dominican jungle in a bid to enter a competition in Florida.

"When I saw what he was doing, within a second I understood, and I thought, 'This is my chance!'" says Sanders.

Making the documentary, however, would not prove an easy task. "It was supposed to be half a year and it became three-and-a-half-years. It was horrible. I convinced old colleagues and friends of friends to work for almost nothing for almost five years. I sold everything I had - jewellery, furniture that was my grandparents' heritage."

The process was gruelling, but began to pay off. "I put in €250,000 (US\$333,300) altogether over the six years, not earning any money at the time - nothing, for six years. In the sixth year, ZDF and Arte came up with €60,000, which was the first big amount. And now we're taking every €500 we can to close the gap."

And Sanders' story may well have a big Hollywood ending. Literally. She has written a book, *Up And Away*, which will be published in Germany shortly, and is in talks with a number of major studios, including Paramount and Warner Bros, that are interested in making a big-screen adaptation of her story. Although she admits, "You never know what 'interested' really means."

While talks continue, Lombardo has teamed up with German prodco Enigma Film to begin filming her biopic in Cape Town.

Still, if Hollywood does come calling, she has a keen idea who she would like to play herself. "I would appreciate if it were Scarlett Johansson," she smiles. "I like her very much - I think she would be a good choice. And Clint Eastwood would be the perfect actor for Daniel."

The chances of that happening seem pretty unlikely. But then, unlikelier things have happened.

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