



How Brit flicks became the toast of Toronto

The Toronto Film Festival is being dominated by UK movie-makers. Kaleem Aftab on the home-grown talent that's cleaning up in Canada

British film producers have overtaken the Toronto Film Festival this year. On paper it already seemed like a rich year for British film with the world premieres of new films by big name directors such as Sally Potter, Michael Winterbottom and Mike Newell. But the real success story has been the work of British producers who have been behind several of the most talked about films in Canada, *End of Watch*, *Dredd 3D*, *Zaytoun* and *Byzantium*.

One of the hardest tickets to get was for the premier of *Zaytoun*, the story of an Israeli pilot, played by Atlanta-born actor Stephen Dorff, who is shot down in Lebanon in 1982. The CEO of a UK distribution company described the film as “a hot title” and it had nothing to do with the director or the star but was down to the producer being Gareth Unwin. Two years ago, Unwin came to Toronto with *The King's Speech*, where it began its journey to Oscar glory and everyone wanted to know whether he would repeat the trick. The film, though, does not live up to expectations.

Liverpool-born producer Stuart Ford, whose company IM Global had three films showing in Toronto, Barry Levinson's dystopian sci-fi *The Bay*, a new horror film from Rob Zombie, *The Lords of Salem*, as well as the North American premiere of *Dredd 3D*, an adaptation of the 2000AD comic strip, which last weekend became the first 18-rated film to open at number one since 2010 in the UK box office. *Dredd 3D* highlights the international scale that British producers are working on. The film is set in America, produced by British company and shot in Africa.

Ford says, “Toronto has become a big trading post in recent years and has also become the de facto start of the awards season so I think that British producers who have higher-end material who are looking for American distribution or if the film is further down the track, looking for critical support then Toronto is the place to be.”

But the big reason that he feels that this has led to the current explosion of British producers in Toronto is because the American studios are less interested in the business of producing upscale films that looks for critical acclaim: “All the studios have by and large shut down their specialty divisions... the truth is that the Brits make these films as well or better than anybody.”

It's a sentiment backed by Nigel Sinclair, co-chairman and CEO of Exclusive Media, “The

Brits have a long-standing tradition of excellent film-making and the current crop of established and emerging talent are continuing that legacy.”

Sinclair was basking in the reception for *End of Watch* at the festival, starring Jake Gyllenhaal and Michael Peña as LA cops. Sinclair likes to work with top American talent as his company currently have both John Pogue's *The Quiet Ones* and Ron Howard's *Rush* .

Stephen Woolley had both Mike Newell's *Great Expectations* and Neil Jordan's English-seaside-set werewolf drama *Byzantium* debuting. He's been coming to Toronto since he brought *The Company of Wolves* to Toronto 28 years ago.

“When I first came to Toronto, it was a little-known secret. There was a point in the Nineties where the festival became more of a marketplace. It's a very exciting and nerve-racking time to bring your film. There are too many films, but not enough distributors.” Tessa Ross, Controller of Film and Drama at Film4, was selected to take part in one of the festival's Mogul Sessions. Proclaimed by Toronto as “the godmother of contemporary cinema”, she held an “in conversation with” session. Film4 had world premieres of Roger Michell's *Hyde Park on Hudson*, which features Bill Murray playing American President Franklin D Roosevelt, the new Martin McDonagh comedy about a script writer (Colin Farrell) struggling to write a serial-killer script, *Seven Psychopaths*, and Sophie Fiennes' *'The Pervert's Guide to Ideology'*, starring academic philosopher Slavoj Zizek. The TV channel also commissioned Michael Winterbottom's film about prison life, *Everyday*. Finola Dwyer who was behind *An Education* is the Brit behind Dustin Hoffman's debut, *Quarter*, about four ageing opera singers played by Billy Connolly, Maggie Smith, Tom Courtenay and Pauline Collins.

In addition to these world premieres, a number of titles such as Joe Wright's *Anna Karenina*, Ben Wheatley's *Sightseers*, Peter Strickland's *Berberian Sound Studio* and the British remake of Nicolas Winding Refn's *Pusher* all made their North American debuts. As for an early frontrunner for Best Picture at the Oscars, my money would be on Ben Affleck's *Argo*, which not only combined being crowd-pleasing and political but is also a brilliant satire on Hollywood. These are all attributes that makes it seem more amenable to Academy voters than the Venice Silver Lion- winning *The Master*.