

Berlin: 2012: IM Global CEO Stuart Ford Talks EFM, Eurozone Crisis (Q&A)

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IM Global CEO Stuart Ford

In the decade since film executive and foreign sales agent **Stuart Ford** started coming to Berlin, the European Film Market has transformed into a must stopover for foreign sales agents. Much has changed for Ford as well. In 2003, he was still with Miramax and arrived in Berlin to promote the international premiere of *Cold Mountain*.

Ford spent seven years at Miramax, rising up through the ranks to become Executive VP of Miramax International. Ford now runs IM Global, which he founded in 2007. The company is one of the most successful film financing, sales and distribution companies in the world, backing a diverse slate of films, including the first *Paranormal Activity*, *Insidious*, *The Inbetweeners*, *A Single Man* and *Skyline*. Upcoming titles include *Dredd* and *Enchanted Kingdom*. In 2010, Reliance Entertainment acquired a major stake in the company.

IM Global arrived at EFM this year with two new projects: film noir puppet comedy *Happytime Murders*, from the iconic Henson Co., and erotic thriller *Plush*, reuniting director **Catherine Hardwicke** with her *Thirteen* star **Evan Rachel Wood**.

Happytime Murders, which will almost certainly be rated R, is one of the buzzed about titles at the market because of its unique concept. **Brian Henson** — son of Jim Henson — is directing the film, set in a world where puppets and humans live side by side. **Todd Berger**'s much-raved about script follows a puppet private eye and disgraced ex-cop who is on the trail of a serial killer. **Katherine Heigl** is in final talks to star in *Happytime Murders*, which Henson Co. CEO **Lisa Henson** is shepherding.

In *Plush*, Wood plays a rising rock star in a downwards spiral after losing her band mate and brother to an overdose, while her second album is a critical and commercial disaster. She embarks on a relationship with her replacement guitarist and finds new hope, but trouble lurks. Over the weekend, Ford spoke with *THR* about the state of the presales industry and EFM.

THR: With this Berlin, how many times have you been to EFM? What did you sell your very first market here, and for whom?

Ford: I first came to Berlin in my Miramax International days. In those days Berlin was less about selling and more about launching movies. I think we were giving *Cold Mountain* its European premiere.

THR: What makes Berlin different from other markets?

Ford: It is more contained. There is less new product than at Cannes and AFM, less noise generally and the

buyers tend to come with short, but focused priority lists.

THR: How do you gear up for a market? What tricks have you developed over the years to keep your energy at such sustained levels?

Ford: These days its **Jonathan Deckter** [IM Global president of international sales and distribution] and his sales team who do all the heavy lifting before the market to be honest. I still spend a lot of time on marketing materials and there's usually a degree of talent relationship management needed prior to launching a project at market.

THR: What do you like about the process of a film market?

Ford: Personally I still enjoy the bonhomie of these international gatherings. On a business level there's a degree of efficiency to selling international rights that's sadly lacking in most other aspects of the independent business.

THR: For top sales agents such as yourself, what is the state of the business these days?

Ford: The business is in robust health. If anything, the economic landscape and the ongoing technological evolution may have knocked a lot of the fringe players and lower level product out of the marketplace.

THR: *Happytime Murders* is likely the most unique project at EFM. Has it been difficult explaining the project to buyers? And can you say whether other projects also are generating keen interest?

Ford: A combination of a smart teaser promo and a terrifically funny script have meant that buyers fairly easily understand what the movie will be. The most interesting and challenging discussion is over how to market the film and how audiences will react. That is where we earn our corn. We've also brought Brian and Lisa Henson into town to help us paint the bigger picture.

THR: Are you concerned about the European economic crisis?

Ford: There are still plenty of robust independent distributors who need a slate of commercially viable product. Where the Eurozone crisis bites hardest is on pricing and that's just a reality that we and other producer/ financiers need to adapt to as projects are assembled.

THR: How would you describe the level of business here in Berlin?

Ford: Solid. Buyers are largely in a prudent, bottom line-focused frame of mind. I'm actually more comfortable operating within that sensible and prudent commercial environment than in the slightly hysterical, frenzied climate that can sometimes inhabit the Cannes or AFM markets. What we need is a stable, fiscally responsible film industry. This EFM feels nice and grounded.