

Strong Market, Weak Festival Offerings as Berlin Wraps up (Berlin)

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While Berlin's Competition underwhelmed, the European Film Market saw a host of deals.

The market was strong and the festival, less so. In what's become an all-too familiar refrain in Berlin, industry attendees reported strong sales and an upbeat atmosphere while festival watches shook their heads at the titles in Berlin's Competition lineup.

With only one Competition title left to screen -- Joshua Marston's highly anticipated *The Forgiveness of Blood* -- many have already crowned this year's Golden Bear winner. Nader And Simin, *A Separation*, a family drama set against political oppression in Iran, was the critics' darling in Berlin this year. Given the current political upheaval in the Mid-East, and Iran's refusal to release imprisoned director Jafar Panahi to attend Berlin as a festival juror, Asghar Farhadi's drama appears a shoe-in for the top honor.

Potential dark horses include Ralph Fiennes' Shakespeare adaptation *Coriolanus*, which The Weinsteins' nabbed for domestic distribution after its fest bow; and Kevin Spacey-starrer *Margin Call*, a tightly wound human drama set during the financial collapse and directed by first-timer J C Chandor. But both have better chances to pick up one of the acting honors. Both Fiennes and co-star Vanessa Redgrave are frontrunners for the Silver Bear thespian awards.

Other Competition titles -- Miranda July's *The Future*, Ulrich Kohler's *Sleeping Sickness*, Bela Tarr's *The Turin Horse*, Michel Ocelot's *Tales of the Night* -- divided audiences. Many were perplexed at the festival's selection and at why two of the most popular films picked -- Wim Wenders' extraordinary 3D dance film *Pina* and Wolfgang Murnberger's WWII-set dramedy *My Best Enemy* -- both screened out of Competition.

Much was also made of the titles that slipped through Berlin's grasp and will now be heading to Cannes -- including David Cronenberg's *A Dangerous Method* featuring Viggo Mortensen and Keira Knightley and Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* starring Brad Pitt and Sean Penn.

Also landing on the Croisette this year will be Lars Von Trier's apocalypse film *Melancholia*, which Magnolia picked up in Berlin in a three-film deal with TrustNordisk which also included Norwegian titles *Headhunters* and *Happy, Happy*.

But while Berlin's Competition underwhelmed, the European Film Market was the best in years.

The pre-sale business was robust, with FilmNation selling out its remake of art heist film *Gambit* starring Colin Firth and Cameron Diaz and doing strong sales on Salmon Rushdie adaptation *Midnight Children*; Exclusive Films International racking up sales on Miley Cyrus-starrer *So Undercover*; Hyde Park's cashing in on Jason Statham vehicle *Echelon*; IM Global fending multiple offers for Madonna's *W.E.* and Sylvester Stallone actioner *Headshot* and Summit International generating heat with *The Perks Of Being A Wallflower* starring Emma Watson.

Parlay Films' drama *The Words*, which has Bradley Cooper playing an ambitious writer whose plagiarism returns to haunt him, was a strong seller, going to Wild Bunch in Germany, DEAPlaneta in Spain and Australia's Becker in a slew of deals. The Wordsscreenwriters Brian Klugman and Lee Sternthal, who also penned *Tron: Legacy* will make their directorial debuts with the new project. Jeremy Irons is reportedly in talks to join the production.

Other buzz-worthy titles included Fernando Meirelles' *360* from Wild Bunch; John Woo's remake of *The Killer* from Essential and Sierra; StudioCanal's documentary *African Safari 3D*; Pathe International's *Don't Be Afraid Of The Dark*, which FilmDistrict and Miramax will jointly release in the U.S., and Metropolis' Irish cop drama *The Guard*.

The winners of the Berlin International Film Festival will be announced Saturday, Feb. 19.