

U.S. Buyers Inject Cash, Energy Into European Film Market (Berlin)

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Courtesy of Berlinale 2011

Sly Stallone's still the man for international buyers. IM Global's \$40 million-budgeted Sylvester Stallone action project *Headshot* attracted heat here at the European Film Market with German giant Constantin taking the hit for local territory rights in a major pre-sale deal.

"We are pleased with this acquisition in a rather soft market," Constantin film head Martin Moszkowicz told *The Hollywood Reporter*.

The size of Constantin's check couldn't be confirmed, but sources suggest it was in the neighborhood of \$5 million. Back in the day, no one in the international biz would have blinked an eye at that level of pre-buy but the marketplace now, after two years of harsh economic times, is a more cautious place.

"The market has changed, the economies have changed, I don't think we're ever going back to the feeding frenzy we saw a few years ago," said Eric Christenson, president of Hollywood Studios International. "But distributors still need films to program against the Hollywood majors. There might not be the same volume but if you have the right project, they are willing to step up."

Christenson reported strong pre-buy interest in Hollywood Studios' upcoming Einstein biopic, which Wayne Wang is set to direct, as well as for Venezuelan actioner The Zero Hour from director Diego Velasco.

One welcome return to the EFM were the deep pocketed Americans. After nearly deserting Berlin the past few years, the U.S. boys were back in town this year, signing multiple domestic deals for everything from mainstream genre to foreign-language art house.

"The U.S. buyers are being extremely aggressive," said Rikke Ennis, CEO of Scandi sales giant TrustNordisk, which inked two big pre-sale deals with Todd Wagner and Mark Cuban's Magnolia Pictures: for Lars Von Trier's Melancholia and for Norwegian thriller Headhunters. Magnolia is also thought to be eying Trust's Happy Happy, the Anne Sewitsky-directed Sundance winner.

"The buyers still don't want to take big risks but if they see titles that can make money -- like these Nordic crime movies -- they go for it," Ennis said.

Anecdotally, industryites also expressed relief that there seemed to be another old dog up to the same old tricks. "It's good to see Harvey [Weinstein] back in the marketplace making big plays again," one veteran financier said. "After a few quieter years, he [Weinstein] is buying big again."

The Weinstein Company tethered U.S. rights to Ralph Fiennes' directorial debut, Coriolanus, early in the EFM.

Weinstein has always enjoyed a Fiennes starrer, having worked with him before.

"My brother's relationship with Ralph [Fiennes] stretches back many years and includes two of our most cherished productions, The English Patient and The Reader," Harvey Weinstein said on announcing the deal. "He's a brilliant artist, and we are honored and delighted to partner with him in bringing Coriolanus to American moviegoers."

Even the filmmaker himself was drawn into thanking the Weinstein Co. for stepping up to the distribution plate after telling THR how tricky getting his Shakespearean adaptation made.

"He really embraced it. This has been a long road and I cannot think of a better company [Weinsteins] to do it in the U.S.," Fiennes said. But not until it was shot and paid for, a trend that began more than two years in the marketplace with buyers able to play and wait and see game on certain projects.

Even The Gambit, a red hot-art heist project from FilmNation with Colin Firth and Cameron Diaz, didn't lock down domestic distribution, although with buyers circling, a deal could come any day now.

As buyers begin looking to exit and sellers wind down activity as the market hits the home straight, the consensus seems to be relief that there has been meaningful activity.

Certainly well-cast and well-made projects didn't have problems finding suitors.

FilmDistrict took U.S. rights to Miramax's horror title *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark*, produced by Guillermo Del Toro and Mark Johnson, and starring Guy Pearce and Katie Holmes.

Annapurna Prods. looked certain to tie up North American rights to Wong Kar Wai's martial arts epic *The Grandmasters*, featuring Tony Leung, Zhang Ziyi and Chang Chen. ATO grabbed North American rights to *The Woman in the Fifth*, a psychological thriller from My Summer of Love director Pawel Pawlikowski. ARC Entertainment teamed with XLRator Media to pick up U.S. rights to John Carpenter's horror thriller *The Ward*. Sony picked up Angieszka Holland's Nazi-era period film *In Darkness* (aka *Hidden*).

And, Sony and Samuel Goldwyn Films partnered to take U.S rights to the comedy *A Good Old Fashioned Orgy*.

An orgy of buying this EFM wasn't, but most buyers are going home satisfied, some even smiling.