

IM Global's Stuart Ford on His Cannes Plans, Soccer Obsession and Beating Cancer

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The CEO and founder also opens up about his 15 movies and getting "diplomatic immunity" from Harvey Weinstein.

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When **Stuart Ford** launched IM Global five years ago, the odds weren't in his favor.

Foreign presales -- in which international distributors buy rights to a movie and in turn help finance it -- were suffering as the world economic crisis was bearing down. But Ford -- who cut his teeth working for **Harvey and Bob Weinstein** -- has grown IM Global into a powerhouse, increasing its sales revenue from \$15 million in 2007 to \$170 million last year. Along the way, India's Reliance Entertainment, seeking to extend its Hollywood foothold beyond DreamWorks into the independent arena, took notice, buying a 76 percent stake in IM Global for an undisclosed sum in May 2010.

The new capital allowed Ford, 42, to accomplish his next goal: moving into film production. Reliance and IM Global, on its own or with joint-venture production unit Automatik, invested \$250 million in its first eight productions, including **Pete Travis'**

fanboy action movie *Dredd*, which Lionsgate will release this fall, and the big-budget adventure *Walking With Dinosaurs*, which Fox is scheduled to open in fall 2013.

Despite his 15 years in the industry, Ford says he still feels like an outsider. Born in Liverpool -- his family was in the horse-racing business until his dad went bust -- he had a very formal British education at the Blue Coat School before going to Oxford and graduating with a law degree. Sitting down with *THR* in his West Hollywood office on the eve of his company's fifth anniversary, his customary hot tea in hand, Ford offered his thoughts on IM Global's expansion, the upcoming Cannes Film Market and his bout last year with cancer. He and his wife, Molly, a former actress, have two sons, Oliver, 6, and Charlie, 3, and live in L.A.'s historic Hancock Park neighborhood.

THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER: You broke into the film business in unusual fashion. How did your well-laid plan to practice law go awry?

Stuart Ford: It was the classic story -- I was the first kid in my family to go to a university. I got a B.A. and M.A. in law from Oxford and moved to London, where I worked for a law firm that had an entertainment practice. Harvey and Bob were clients of the firm, and they basically pitched me and I moved to New York in 1997 to work for Miramax. I was 27.

THR: What did you do for them?

Ford: There was a guy named **Charles Layton** [now president of Alliance Films] who worked for Harvey and Bob, and he didn't have an actual job description. He just did stuff and was a fixer, and I went to work for him. I went from this energetic, hardworking entertainment attorney to basically flying around the world with Harvey and looking after talent, making talent deals, buying movies, whatever he threw at me. There were a couple of years when I was missing in action because I was permanently on the move.

THR: How did you handle Harvey's personality?

Ford: I got a pretty easy ride. Some people used to joke that I had diplomatic immunity, because he was always great with me.

THR: How did you become involved in international sales at Miramax?

Ford: I kept getting promoted, and after serving as president of acquisitions, Harvey named me president of international sales. I realized it was the right fit for me to work within the Hollywood system, but with an international face. That was my resting place, if you like.

THR: You left in 2004 as the Weinsteins broke with Disney. What happened next?

Ford: I took a detour into the soccer world and then made a deal with **Henry Winterstern** to take over First Look International in L.A. in late 2006. The only deviation from this plan was that in the six months that it took us to do it, Henry resigned and I ended up running it. Six months later, I basically took the staff and set up IM Global.

THR: What was the first big project you sold?

Ford: *Stopping Power*, which ended in disaster. It was a \$55 million **Jan de Bont** movie starring **John Cusack** that was shut down on its first day of production. I've never had such gray hairs in my life. All the foreign distributors had given us their deposits, and we had to return them. In a funny way, you couldn't have had a more disastrous first picture, but the fact that we cleaned up the mess and got the deposits back put us in good standing with people.

THR: How long did it take you to recover?

Ford: We slowly started again and got some momentum six months later. The first movie that had any real traction for us was *Religulous*, which was **Larry Charles'** documentary starring **Bill Maher**. It wasn't big, but foreign distributors liked it. We've handled 80 or so films these past five years, and standouts include the first *Paranormal Activity*, which we sold internationally and was a game-changer for us. On a more upscale level, I'm proud of the sophistication with which we marketed challenging films like *Religulous*, *A Single Man* and *W.E.*

THR: Can you talk about the Reliance relationship and how much the initial buy-in was worth?

Ford: I can't discuss that, but I can't emphasize enough how supportive Reliance has been. When I sold them a majority stake in the company two years ago, they made certain minimum commitments toward backing our growth as a film financier, which at the time were substantial. Two years in, they've channeled three times that level of commitment into films IM Global is backing. On a day-to-day level, they have let me grow the business with minimal interference, but their L.A.-based associate, **Deepak Nayar**, has become a fantastic sounding board.

THR: What attracted Reliance to IM Global?

Ford: Obviously, most of the trade press has focused on Reliance's DreamWorks relationship and activities at the studio level. What is less well publicized is that via its considerable backing of IM Global, Reliance has very quickly become one of the pillars of the independent film world, and you'd have to consider Reliance's investment to be an economic and strategic success so far.

THR: How has your own role changed?

Ford: I'm still very hands-on -- all these years working for the Weinsteins across so many different areas means being an all-rounder is in my blood -- but in order to grow the IM Global operation in a structured way, I've handed off more and more day-to-day responsibility to senior executives including **Jonathan Deckter**, president of sales, and **Brian Kavanaugh-Jones**, who heads Automatik, our joint venture with Alliance.

THR: You are now focused on growing the financing and production side of your business. Why?

Ford: We have a very clear model, and that model primarily involves stepping into the mid-budget space that studios are, for the moment, neglecting. *Walking With Dinosaurs* is less a case of this, since it's a \$75 million all-audience film, but *Dredd* is absolutely a case in point. It's a \$40 million action movie. We've moved at a hell of a clip in 18 months and have 13 projects in production or postproduction. We'd like to make four or five a year. And now we have *Dead Man Down*, starring **Colin Farrell** and **Noomi Rapace**, which started shooting April 30 in Philadelphia. And we're shooting the **Liam**

Hemsworth corporate thriller *Paranoia*, directed by **Robert Luketic**, in July. We'll be selling both projects to foreign buyers at the Cannes Film Market. We also have *Manhunt* starring **Gerard Butler**.

THR: *Safe* was the first IM Global production to hit theaters. What do you make of the film's relatively modest \$7.9 million opening domestically in April?

Ford: It landed squarely in the range of what we were expecting for a **Jason Statham** film, and the movie's theatrical gross will almost certainly end up in the same range as Jason's other films, which works successfully with our business model because we are effectively eliminating exposure via the foreign marketplace on *Safe* and all our other titles.

THR: What is the health of the sales business entering Cannes? Will it be a busy market?

Ford: It's in a slightly fragile state because of the countries in the European Zone that are struggling, and Japan is still challenged. But then you have the growth territories like Brazil, Russia and India. China is a growth market too, but it is still small in terms of buying. We are going to be launching **Lee Daniels' *The Butler***, starring **Forest Whitaker, Jane Fonda, Matthew McConaughey** and **Oprah Winfrey**. It's about a butler who works for numerous presidents in the White House. We'll also be launching two genre pics: **Scott Stewart's *Dark Skies*** and **Daniel Stamm's *13***.

THR: At Cannes last year, you were in the middle of battling testicular cancer, which you beat. What did you take away from the experience?

Ford: It was a very important reboot for me, in terms of my personal life and my health. And on a business level, it helped me accelerate the process of delegating to really great executives. The way they collectively kept the light switch on while I was having my treatment was fantastic. I've spent more time focusing on the big picture, which is the hardest thing in foreign sales and independent film, because it's such a hamster wheel for everyone.

THR: What does your family in England think of the path you've chosen?

Ford: My family is horrified. My parents had two precocious kids who both went off to Oxford -- first me, then my sister. She married her university professor and is a very successful lawyer in London who stayed on the straight and narrow. The other went off to a world and job they don't understand. Whenever I call my mum, her first instinct is to say, "What have you done now?"

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MY SOCCER OBSESSION: Ford is 6-foot-2 and might have been an athlete, but he gave up soccer after high school. He still has close ties to the game.

When leaving Miramax in 2004, Ford led a group of investors, backed by the Kraft family in Boston, who tried to buy his hometown team, the Liverpool Football Club. "It was fun being part of this very public takeover of one of the most storied sports franchises on the planet. We were unsuccessful, but it was a great ride," he says.

Ford wasn't quite done with soccer, however. He was a consultant for FIFA (organizer of the World Cup) and served as executive producer on two soccer pics for the organization: *Goal II: Living the Dream* and the direct-to-video *Goal III*.

Ford also produced FIFA's official documentary on the 2006 World Cup in Germany, which stands as one of the most-watched events in television history, garnering more than 26 billion viewers.

So how does Ford fulfill his soccer obsession these days? "My 6-year-old son is a convert," he says, "and the two of us can be found watching Fox Soccer Channel together very early every Saturday and Sunday morning."