



Mart leaves buyers wanting more

Sales steady but blockbusters were few

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There's no doubt that buyers were hungry at this year's Berlin European Film Market, but as sales agents packed up their stands on Wednesday one thing was clear: With less standout product available and buyers more discerning in their shopping, it was a more cautious Berlinale.

While Stuart Ford's IM Global made waves with Madonna's

second directorial effort "W.E." and Glen Basner's FilmNation secured solid international deals on Colin Firth and Cameron Diaz starrer "Gambit," there was widespread consensus that the market was slow and lacked new, big-name product -- even if Berlin isn't typically known for offering up a slew of commercial titles.

Foreign distribs' appetites weren't satiated, and many who were looking for bigger pics left wanting more.

"There didn't seem to be that much new product on the market in terms of tentpoles," said Robert Walak, Alliance Films' senior VP of worldwide acquisitions. "Deals are taking longer and people are paying less. But if you look at what was coming out of Sundance, people are being careful with the money they spend. People are aware of where the DVD market is going."

Alliance pre-bought "Gambit" at the start of the fest for Canada, Blighty and Spain while "W.E." sold to StudioCanal's Brit distrib arm Optimum Releasing and Village Roadshow for Australia and New Zealand after Ford brought Madonna to the fest to promote the pic.

Svensk Film also nabbed Scandi rights to the multi-hyphenate's love story, which stars Abbie Cornish as a modern-day New Yorker obsessed with the royal love story between Britain's King Edward VII (James D'Arcy) and American divorcee Wallis Simpson (Andrea Riseborough) in the 1940s.

IM Global continued its aggressive push, as it has at most markets over the past year. It presold Sylvester Stallone's "Headshot" to Germany's Constantin and is expected to have closed a number of robust foreign deals.

One upside to Berlin this time around, said sellers, was evidence of a renewed appetite of U.S. specialty distributors, underscored by another flurry of deals after a zippy Sundance. In just one of the latest, Music Box snapped up "Mysteries of Lisbon," Raoul Ruiz's 4 1/2-hour period drama sold by producer Paulo Branco's Alfama Films.

Magnolia Pictures picked up several foreign-language pics, including pacting a seven-figure deal on Lars von Trier's "Melancholia" and Norwegian pic "Headhunters," while Strand Releasing nabbed Brit pic "Tyrannosaur" from Protagonist Pictures.



"Buyers were very specific about the product they were purchasing," said Hyde Park Intl. topper Ashok Amritraj, whose company made a number of sales, including a multipic deal with German distrib Telepool for "Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance 3D" and "Echelon."

"The hot product sells at great prices, and there is a market for the indie festival product at different prices," Amritraj said. "But the buyers seem much more clear about the product they are buying as opposed to five years ago. They went after a few films and bid aggressively on those."

The U.S. industry's Atlantic drift also continued, as more talent, companies and movies

tied down production, distribution and sales from Europe, most often France.

Brian De Palma is attached to direct "Passion," a remake of 2010 Gallic psychodrama "Love Crime," set up at Said Ben Said's Paris-based SBS Prods; France's SND will produce and sell English-language suspense-thriller "The Incident," which L.A.-based producer Roy Lee ("How to Train Your Dragon") had originally set up at Lionsgate; and StudioCanal bought France, Germany and U.K., plus international rights to the 2929-Mutual Film Co.-produced action-thriller "Blackbird," a market sales standout for StudioCanal along with its "The Dinosaur Project."

With the economic recession largely behind it, the international film biz is facing up to the long-term structural challenges that are warping markets and how business is done: the contraction of arthouse auds, piracy and loss of lucrative TV sales.

"While we are growing as a company, the market remains tough -- really tough," said StudioCanal exec VP of sales Harold Van Lier. "We have had to rethink our lineup, adjust our prices, spend more time in the key territories looking at what works and what does not, forge strategic alliances and strengthen our marketing. But when it sells, it sells very well still. And when it works in the cinemas, it really works also."

Another upside, said several sales agents, was that with only a few titles clicking in competition, foreign distributors dedicated more time to chasing standout market movies.

"Buyers (made) quick decisions on completed titles," said Nicolas Chartier, whose Voltage Pictures launched presales on Rob Reiner family pic "The Third Act," toplining Morgan Freeman and Annette Bening.

"But on presales everything must be right -- the budget, genre and cast, and, (the film is) preferably, a big movie," he added. "The last few days were good for us, and we did well on the Rob Reiner film."

With their traditional arthouse fanbase in decline, international auteurs are now seeking wider auds.

New films announced at Berlin include Abbas Kiarostami's Japan-set "The End" and Olivier Assayas' "Something in the Air." MK2 prexy Marin Karmitz said they are examples of helmers who "at their beginnings were arthouse directors but have looked for new ways of talking to audiences."

Now tapping fresh financing from the Blue Lake Entertainment Fund, Hengameh Panahi at Celluloid Dreams, another bastion of artfilm sales, said she would have more time to help auteurs "reinvent themselves to find a new audience."

HOT TITLES

Selected hot pickups in Berlin included:

- "Blackbird" (StudioCanal)
- "Coriolanus" (Icon)
- "W.E." (IM Global)
- "The Dinosaur Project" (StudioCanal)
- "Gambit" (FilmNation)
- "Goethe!" (Beta)
- "Headshot" (IM Global)
- "In Darkness" (Beta)
- "Innocent Saturday"
- (Bavaria Film)
- "Marley" (Fortissimo)
- "Midnight's Children" (FilmNation)
- "My Best Enemy" (Beta)