

Independents have their day

By Scott Roxborough and Gregg Goldstein

May 25, 2007

CANNES -- U.S. independent distributors have snatched up Cannes festival titles like a starved partygoer unleashed on the buffet, with several domestic deals locked up. But as the Cannes market winds down, most attendees complained of sluggish business, with a clearer divide between A-product and the also-rans.

Miramax Films rang in one of the biggest acquisitions in Cannes early Thursday morning, nabbing all North American rights to one of the most sought-after titles of the fest, Julian Schnabel's French-language drama "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly" for around \$3 million.

IFC is thought to be close to a final deal for domestic on Gus van Sant's In Competition "Paranoid Park" for its day-and-date label First Take. The deal is said to be one of the biggest First Take acquisitions to date.

Another deal nearing the finish line, according to a source involved in the deal, is music video director Anton Corbijn's Joy Division biopic "Control." **First Independent Pictures** and a yet-to-be-determined division of Wagner/Cuban Companies (likely Magnolia or HDNet Films) were in negotiations to jointly acquire rights to the film Thursday, but the Weinstein Co. was closer to closing a deal by the end of the night.

Sony Pictures Worldwide Acquisitions Group splashed the cash this year, most recently pre-buying North American rights to the comedy horror film "The Cottage" from Cinetic.

Like all of SPWAG's buys here at Cannes -- which included Millennium Films' Al Pacino-starrer "88 Minutes" and horror-actioner "Legion" -- it hasn't been determined yet whether it will be distributed theatrically (and if so which arm of Sony or which strategic partner of SPWAG's will distribute).

Earlier this week, Sony's indie division Sony Pictures Classics took domestic rights to Eran Kolim's crowd-pleaser "The Band's Visit" from Bleiberg Entertainment. And Sony Pictures Entertainment scooped up North American rights and a slew of other territories to Paul W.S. Anderson's "The Long Good Friday," from U.K. production and finance banner Handmade Films.

"We obviously had a really good market in terms of finding things that were worthy of being acquired," said SPWAG president Peter Schlessel, who was involved in multiple transactions including one of the festival's big deals for James Grey's "We Own the Night" for label Columbia Pictures. "I felt like it was a very vibrant marketplace."

Other prominent domestic deals announced in Cannes include:

-- IFC Entertainment's day-and-date First Take scored a double play, picking up two of the Palme d'Or frontrunners: Romanian abortion drama "4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days" and the whimsical "Flight of the Red Balloon."

-- Roadside Attractions nabbed Nadine Labaki's Lebanese rom-com "Caramel," a Directors' Fortnight entry.

-- ThinkFilm and Discovery Communications acquired North American rights to Iraq War documentary "Taxi to the Darkside," from Alex Gibney ("Enron -- The Smartest Guys in the Room").

On the sales side, market execs reported so-so business, with only A-level titles flying off the shelves.

"What we saw here was a really robust market," said Kim Fox, head of worldwide sales & distribution at QED International, which did brisk business on Neil Burger's "The Return," "Echo" and "Powder Blue."

"It started on Day 1 and hasn't stopped. Coming from a tired and depressed Berlin market to this was really exciting. But strong pictures always sell, ... and that was the case this year especially," Fox added.

Smaller indies and international sellers had less to crow about, with mainly bread-and-butter deals for smaller territories.

"It's been slower than usual and I have the feeling that from Monday onward there was less traffic than usual," said Simon de Santiago, head of the international division for powerhouse Sogecable's sales division Sogepaq.

"The market has been pretty dead for the most part. Spain has seen a lot of movement, but I have the impression that there are mostly big, big American films from the studios this year," said StudioCanal international sales director Muriel Sauzay.

"It's become a two-class society. There are the huge projects and then the handful that are generating major buzz, the ones that everyone is chasing after. Those start bidding wars and get deals done here. Then there are all the rest," said Stefan Menz, president of German sales outfit Atlas International.

But for any serious international player, Cannes' Marche du Film is still a must-go.

"Overseas sales are increasingly important as our movies have bigger and bigger budgets," said CJ Entertainment vp international sales Kini Kim.

Tatiana Siegel, Jonathan Landreth and Pamela Rolfe contributed to this report.

Links referenced within this article

Find this article at:

http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/content_display/awards_festivals/cannes/news/e3ibd63e2cb25a26096fa23ef00aa0ea932

Uncheck the box to remove the list of links referenced in the article.

© 2007 VNU eMedia Inc. All rights reserved.