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## International Documentary Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), November 2009

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IDFA – International Documentary Festival Amsterdam is without doubt the most important documentary festival in Europe, if not the world. During the festival there was a lot of emphasis on IDFA as the ‘biggest’ documentary festival in the world, and this may well be true; but it is far more important than that. IDFA is highly regarded throughout the international documentary community not so much because it is ‘big’ but because it not only sustains documentary traditions but it looks forward with a distinctive vision of documentary for the future. In opening IDFA 2009 the festival director, Ally Derks, remarked “we focus on the creative documentary. This means we choose films that express the filmmaker’s vision.....IDFA looks for documentaries that are interesting from a cinematic point of view, or are innovative, socially relevant or urgent, and that stimulate the viewer to think, to discuss, to reflect and to ask questions”. The festival is generous, hospitable and very helpful. It is staffed by an army of volunteers who are keen to assist in any way.

### Australian films screening

This year there were 13 Australian films screening at IDFA, more than have ever been invited to screen there before. They were spread across a diversity of categories including the four competition categories. The films are - IDFA Competition for feature length documentary *Contact* (Bentley Dean, Martin Butler), *The Miscreants of Taliwood* (George Gittoes, Gabrielle Dalton), IDFA Competition for first appearance *The Snowman* (Juliet Lamont, Dylan Blowen, Rachel Landers), *Stolen* (Violetta Ayala, Dan Fallshaw, Tom Zubrycki), IDFA competition for mid length documentary *The Matilda Candidate* (Curtis Levy, Helen Panckhurst), IDFA Competition for Short Documentary *My Uncle Bluey* (Britt Arthur, James Grandison),

*Salt* (Michael Angus, Murray Fredericks), IDFA Reflecting Images – Best of Fests *A Good Man* (Safina Uberoi, Himan Dhamija, Jenny Day), IDFA Reflecting Images – Panorama Section *I Psychopath* (Ian Walker, Sally Regan), *Indonesia Calling: Joris Ivens in Australia* (John Hughes, Andrea Foxworthy), *Strange Birds in Paradise – A West Papuan Story* (Charlie Hill-Smith, Jamie Nicolai, John Cherry), IDFA Doclab *Big Stories, Small Towns* (Jeni Lee, Sieh Michawala, Martin Potter), *Trendsmat.com* (John Barratt).

Before departing the filmmakers prepared marketing materials such as posters, flyers, postcards and other promotional information. A trailer was created to showcase all the films; this was put on the Screen Australia website and also was put on the Screen Australia You Tube portal. In addition a two page flyer outlining all of the films, their screening times, dates and venues, and contact details was produced. Thank you to all involved in this work.

## About IDFA

IDFA comprises a 10-day festival with film screenings of some 300 films; a three day project pitching forum; a 10-day Docs for Sale event; a three day Academy of master classes and tutorials; Paradocs, IDFA's home for experimental and art film; a nightly Talk of the Day and a multitude of social events that allow filmmakers from all parts of the world to meet and engage with each other. Over this period the audience figures were in excess of 165,000 and the net revenue is estimated at around Euros 750,000. Veteran doc makers Frederick Wiseman, winner of the Inaugural IDFA Living Legend Award and D.A. Pennebaker were feted by the public, held master classes, and attended sell out screenings of their work.

IDFA, like other documentary festivals is interested in reaching out to a broad and diverse audience. It is a world wide concern. Documentary needs to reach out to people who would never normally see a documentary; it must reach out to as broad an audience as possible and not just be seen by people who are already committed to documentary. More and more filmmakers are talking about films rather than drama or documentary and many filmmakers are crossing the genres with ease, this year filmmakers Julien Temple and Gillian Armstrong, better known for their narrative story telling have non dramatic films being released, and it is likely there will be many more. Mark Lewis, for instance, is correctly insistent that his *Cane Toads The Conquest* is referred to as a film without any specific reference to a genre.

## IDFA Forum

The IDFA Forum takes place over three days during the festival and is the centrepiece of a number of wonderful development opportunities that the festival hosts. Canada's Hot Docs Festival became a partner with IDFA and stages the same model in the first half of the calendar year. These forums are an important alternative to markets like MIPTV or the World Congress of Science and Factual Producers where specialist factual projects are marketed. Tough economic times in Europe and fears of the internet cutting into the reach of broadcasters have made responses to the many interesting projects pitched at the Forum more measured, with many commissioning editors offering to have subsequent meetings with producers and directors. Long time Forum moderator and Canadian based Knowledge Network CEO, Rudy Buttignol, put it best 'the favourite tune seems to be, "I'd like to see it at rough cut"'.

One of the most impressive pitches combined a fully interactive website with a digital video documentary series *From Zero – People Rebuilding Life After the Emergency* is an Italian project. The pilot website is established at Southern Italy Earthquake camps set up after a natural disaster occurred there last autumn. The team of directors are following eight survivors of the

earthquake as they attempt to get their lives together. Whilst these stories are uploaded onto TV there will also be user generated pages, a forum for community discussion and supplementary video projects. The docs will be created later by editing together all of the footage being generated on the site.

Probably the most unusual approach for getting access to a documentary subject was revealed by feisty French director Letmiya Szairyd, who gained the trust of notorious British punk designer Vivienne Westwood by stripping naked in front of her and her models to prove her sincerity. The trailer for the bio pic was one of the most entertaining of the forum. It has support from ARTE/ZDF and gained support from around the table, most notably from BBC's Storyville.

Producer Roger Graef pitched *When They Are All Free*, looking at the history and impact of Amnesty International as it approaches the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its inception. It is planned as part of a planned series looking at poverty being devised by the group who devised the award winning, multi-broadcaster *Democracy* series.

One of the knockout successes was a film with an Australian connection – director Phil Grabsky and Australian producer Gil Scrine with the project *The Boy Mir*. This sequel to the international hit *The Boy Who Plays on the Buddha's of Bamiyan* has Grabsky following the same young Afghani boy since the collapse of the Taliban regime. The moving trailer depicts Mir growing from youth to young man in his native village among his tight knit family.

Forty three projects were pitched at the Forum. This was in a mix of public presentations, individual meetings and round table pitches (comprising seedling and rough cut projects). In addition there were eight producers whose projects did not make the final selection who were invited to pitch their projects in one on one meetings with commissioning editors and sales agents. It is also worth noting that there were seventeen former Forum projects included in the screening selection of IDFA this year. The projects were nearly all observational documentaries, many of these character driven, which seemed to fulfil the desires of the filmmakers and the needs of the commissioning editors.

With reference to commissioning editors there were, as always, representatives from Arte, ITVS, SBS, CBC, ZDF, ORF, Knowledge Network, TV Ontario, DR TV Denmark, TV2 Denmark, YLE, Canal +, Planete, France 5, France 3, SWR Germany, WDR Germany, NDR, Germany, DR Germany, ERT SA Greece, TG4 Ireland, NOGA, YESDOCU<IBA1 and 2 all from Israel, RAI Italy, NHK with a new representative Tomoko Okutsu, AVROm Ikon, VPRO and NPS all from the Netherlands, EBS Korea, Television TV3 Catalunya Spain, SVT Sweden, TSR and SF TV Switzerland, Taiwan Public TV, TRT Turkey, Channel 4, BBC Storyville and Al Jazeera English all from the UK. WNET 13, Link TV, POV American Documentary, The Documentary Channel and Sundance Channel USA.

There were very few changes to the representatives of the above organisations, what was interesting to note was the huge number of representatives from Arte France, with around 15 commissioning editors sitting, at various times, on the table.

The salutary and important quote for all filmmakers to remember would have to be from Nick Fraser, BBC Storyville - "Assume nobody knows a damn thing about your story"

As for the future the Forum will continue to look closely at the balance between the Central Pitches and the Round Tables as producers are beginning to prefer the more intimate and less gladiatorial nature of these sessions. The Seedling Project section is becoming relevant in terms of finding new fresh projects, but the Central Pitch is still useful as an advertising tool for projects and for allowing Commissioning Editors to inform filmmakers of their needs and plans for the future.

IDFA is also in talks with the Channel 4 BritDoc Foundation and Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program to join forces on a planned Good Pitch event on continental Europe. The Good Pitch is an initiative aimed at helping directors with social purpose projects access finance from NGO organisations such as charities and foundations. Another project along these lines is from Link Television (Lorraine Hess) who is working with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation on *The Progress Report*, an on line initiative. They are looking for documentaries about global development that can be used in small pieces for the platform.

## Workshops and markets

The festival is supplemented with workshops and markets, such as Docs for Sale, where buyers and festival programmers and directors preview films from the festival (and beyond) on line. Via Docs For Sale anyone authorised can view the film on line. The filmmakers are able to track who has watched their film and can then schedule follow up meetings. This means that if you promise you will screen a film, then you will need to. No escaping. Docs For Sale is also a place where you can meet representatives of any number of sales agents and festival directors. Enquiries were made of all Australian films screening at IDFA and Docs For Sale facilitated introductions for filmmakers.

## Sales agents attending

It was noteworthy that a number of sales agents who work more in the theatrical domain were there – Han-Way, Magnolia, Fu-works and Celluloid Dreams, with Han-Way out in force representing the new Julien Temple films and sponsoring a master class run by Julien Temple which was most entertaining, provocative and informative.

Of course the specialist documentary sales agents were there. "Pertinent and impertinent is what I want" Catherine Le Clef declares of the kind of docs her company, Cat & Docs, is looking for. Le Clef set up her new Paris based outfit in October after leaving Fortissimo (where she was head of TV and ancillary sales). In the space of a few months she has already assembled a formidable slate headlined by three films in competition at IDFA, *Dreamland*; *Jaffa*, *The Orange's Clockwork* and *The Last Train Home* (which was the ultimate winner of the top IDFA prize this year). Catherine Le Clef is one of the best connected figures in the world of documentary sales. It is, she suggests, no longer easy to sell a single documentary to 40 countries, buyers have shallower pockets than in previous years. Nevertheless she argues that documentaries have increasing traction in the theatrical marketplace. "The

potential of films to be released in cinema in some countries is higher than ever". The aim of the company is to build up the slate to around thirty films.

That hugely reputable sales agent Films Transit - Jan Rofekamp and Diana Holtzberg - as usual was well represented in the program with nine films screening including three in competition *Space Tourists*, *The Most Dangerous Man In America* (shortlisted for Oscar contention 2010) and *Google Baby* as well as one from Australia, Safina Uberoi's *A Good Man*. *Garbage Dreams*, *Pax Americana* and *Weapon of War* rounded out their slate of screenings.

Another sales agent with a good relationship with Australia is Zurich based First Hand Films. They have a new web platform filmsbazaar.com. The platform, launched in 2009, is looking to provide international producers with a way of reaching distributors and potential financing partners. The aim is to provide a space for every project, film or series, with a direct link to the filmmakers, for more visibility, viral marketing and for international sales. Esther van Messel, CEO of First Hand Films says 'what I am trying to do is make a very selective, smart, online catalogue. My idea is that programmers and buyers will have easy access onto the site, which is carefully curated by the First Hand team'. First Hand has an enviable record of handling IDFA winners. In recent years the company has represented such titles as *Burma VJ – Reporting from a Closed Country* (shortlisted for Oscar nomination this year), *The Monastery* and *To See If I Am Smiling*.

Other sales agents with impressive catalogues who are interested in supporting documentary internationally which are not ones which have been referred to in previous reports (or who have had a change of personnel) include:

Autlook Film Sales (Peter Jager, Susanne Guggenberger and Andrea Huck) a Vienna based worldwide sales agent for feature and TV documentaries. They distribute internationally to all media, do presales, support production development and make marketing strategies for films they are working with. Documentaries in their line up include *Our Daily Bread*, *Echoes of Home*, *Calling Hedy Lamarr*, and *Zunt*.

Brightwide (Luc Martinon) is a social and political VOD platform in UK. Specialise in screening the best of international social and political films.

Deckert Distribution (Heino Deckert) has an impressive catalogue of director led award winning films such as *The Three Rooms of Melancholia*, *Citizen Havel*, *Hotel Sahara* and *Rabbit a la Berlin*.

Dogwoof (Andy Whittaker, Oli Harbottle) is an independent film distributor in UK for documentary and social issues films. Previous successes include *Black Gold*, *The Age of Stupid*.

The Film Sales Company (Andrew Herwitz) a hugely successful NY based company which secures financing and distribution for independently produced narrative and documentary films. Successful titles include *Born In To Brothels*, *Glass*, *A Portrait of Phillip in Twelve Parts*, *A Jihad for Love*. Andrew has several Australian documentaries in his catalogue.

Galloping Films (Carlos Alperin). Galloping Films is one of the few Australian distributors to have a consistent presence at international documentary festivals.

Icarus Films (Elenore Martin) is a distributor of documentary films in North America. They specialise in social political and historical documentaries, dedicated to distributing films about people and ideas too often unseen and unheard.

Mercury Media International (Calum Gray) a UK based distributor which combines traditional distribution through Mercury with online distribution through its EU supported portal [www.jointhedots.tv](http://www.jointhedots.tv).

CreativEast (Min-Chul Kim) is a South Korean based sales agent and producer with a small but impressive catalogue. At this stage not able to take on foreign productions except for South Korean sales which are not huge. Having said that the films at IDFA were very well received with *Iron Crows* taking out the award for best mid length film. Min-Chul's energy and enthusiasm for his work shone through.

Kudos Family Distribution (Klara Grunning Harris) keen to represent and distribute high end creative documentaries. Klara brings to the organisation many years of production experience from US broadcaster ITVS. They have bases in Norway and US and a small but impressive catalogue. Klara also acts as an EP through her own company Hell in a Handbasket.

Wide Management (Anais Clanet) a Paris based sales agent with an extensive and impressive list encompassing independent film from across narrative and non narrative disciplines Has worked with Australian filmmakers.

JMT Films (Michael Treves) a Tel Aviv based distribution, co production and international sales company for international documentary and fiction films

Off The Fence (Gerbrig Blanksma) is a company well known to Australians, but through Ellen Windemuth and Tony Chow. Gerbrig is from the Amsterdam head office of this international company with offices in Bristol, Singapore, New York and Capetown. They develop, finance, produce and co produce international non fiction film across a wide range of genres. They will also co produce with broadcasters such as Animal Planet, Nat Geo, BBC, Discovery, NHK, France 5, Arte, ZDF and NDR.

## Meetings

Other meetings took place with a number of representatives of film festivals, most particularly Cameron Bailey from Toronto International Film Festival, Sean Farnel of Hot Docs, Erkko Lytinen DocPoint Helsinki, Christine Hille Dok Leipzig, Susanne Hoffman Prix Europa and Input, Avra Georgiou Montreal and Los Angeles Greek Film Festival, Shona Thomson Edinburgh Film Festival, Janet Pierson of South by Southwest and Jeff Gilmore of Tribeca as well as our own Jenny Neighbour from the Sydney Film Festival. As you can see it would be possible to go to a documentary festival somewhere in the world almost every week of the year.

In transit to Amsterdam I had meetings in London with the UK Film Council (Emma Clarke and Himesh Kar) with regards to their theatrical documentary program, one of which they are justifiably proud having supported the hugely acclaimed, Academy Award Winner, *Man on Wire*. They do not support broadcast documentary in any way. Himesh and Emma have subsequently left UK Film Council. I met with the very successful producer Phil Craig of

Furnace who works often with Andrew Ogilvie of Electric Pictures to create successful international documentaries (*A Royal Romance*, *Terror in Mumbai*) and Nikki Parrott of Tiger Lilly Films. They produce a number of outstanding documentaries each year, often for Storyville, and are looking at ways to co produce. The same could of course be said for Brian Hill and his company Century Films with whom I also met. Brian has a long relationship with Australia stretching as far back as *Sylvania Waters*. I also caught up with Iain Canning of See Saw Films/Transmission who was extremely busy in the middle of *The Kings' Voice* the new feature film about King George VI and his speech therapist (played by Colin Firth and Geoffrey Rush respectively).

## Final thoughts

It was wonderful to be able to attend IDFA this year, particularly in the company of the rich crop of Australian projects invited. It was such a strong year for Australian documentary at IDFA this year. It may be worthwhile for Australia to reflect and consider how best to build on this success. The raft of films invited, as indeed the filmmakers themselves, constituted an interesting variety, there was terrific diversity, but also a core consistency. Many of the films had an Australian public broadcaster attached, but few originated as television projects. Of the seven feature-length projects probably only *Indonesia Calling: Joris Ivens in Australia*, will go to air at its feature length, in the form available to audiences in Amsterdam. Four of 13 invited films had their first support from Screen Australia's minority fund the Special Documentary Fund that considers projects without a broadcaster attachment. Another two films were less than 30 minutes. The films invited are not necessarily of the kind Australian public television currently supports, yet there is a place and an audience for these films.

As for the filmmakers themselves they were a very lively and interesting group. They were generous and supportive of each other at all times. Ian Walker (*I Psychopath*) said he 'loved being a doc star for a day'. He had a great response to his screenings. Most importantly he realised the scope of the film world regarding documentary. Although none of the Australian films won awards, three of them made it into the top twenty audience favourites – *A Good Man*, *Strange Birds of Paradise* and *Miscreants of Taliwood*.

It was an auspicious moment for the filmmakers and Australian documentary as there was a critical mass of films and filmmakers and they were a visible presence on the world stage. It is something that we must capitalise on. The tyranny of distance should not be allowed to dull the view the rest of the world has of Australian documentary. The combination of the visibility at IDFA, the holding of World Congress of Science and Factual Producers in Australia in December and the annual AIDC in February all point to keeping Australia visible as an international player in the sector. Plans are in train for another international conference – Input – to be held in Australia in 2012 which will further cement Australia's position as a serious and mature participant in all forms of non fiction film.

**Julia Overton**

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