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Restrained business at Berlinale

The story of the Berlin International Film Festival and the European Film Market (EFM) in 2011 needs to be told in the context of this year's Sundance Film Festival. In January, the market in Park City saw an incredible 38 deals done, which had Hollywood journalists like Nikki Finke speculating that the industry was back on its feet again after the sluggish 18 months or so that had preceded it. Certainly the number of Sundance sales indicated that the glut of films created pre-GFC has evaporated and buyers now needed new product for their territories.

Despite the buoyant mood in the week leading up to EFM, sales companies at the market were pragmatic about the likelihood of the Sundance effect flowing on into Berlin. We were regularly reminded that Sundance, being an American market, was predominantly for English speaking audiences, therefore the films that had sold, reflected that. We were also reminded that despite the fervour at Sundance, most offers were still much lower than sales agents were hoping for.

Berlin is a more diverse market, so the mood was restrained and, almost as predicted, the business was restrained too. Complaints over low prices were a regular refrain. Despite uniform rises in box office revenue in 2010, the offers that sales companies received were lower than their take prices and buyers seemed in no rush to commit. It also didn't help that the bottom has fallen out of the Japanese film market. Previously a territory that sales agents could count on for healthy prices, Japan has now become a territory where filmgoers are mostly interested in home-grown and Hollywood pictures. The consistent complaint that this year's market was slow, came from almost all the sales agents we met.

The films that attracted a lot of attention in Berlin were unsurprising. Looking at the sales done on *Margin Call* (a GFC-inspired thriller with a big name cast) and *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark* (a **Guillermo del Toro** written and produced horror film shot in Melbourne) might have given the impression that the mood at Sundance continued, but the reality is that while the big, saleable titles attracted consistent attention, the weaker projects on every slate struggled.

Interest in Australian films and filmmakers

On a positive note, a consistent theme of our meetings in Berlin was a strong interest in Australian films and filmmakers. There was widespread interest in recent titles such as *The Loved Ones* and *Animal Kingdom*. And while executives were tracking emerging directors, it was also encouraging to see a genuine hunger to discover other filmmakers with interesting projects, who might be relatively unknown outside of Australia. A couple of the mid-range sales companies and distributors who had been outbid on *Animal Kingdom* for their territories, expressed a strong desire to have the opportunity to be across projects early – saying they would put up a distribution guarantee to do so, particularly if the project was commercial – or (to use the buzz saying of the market) could be described as “elevated genre”. This term describes a film like *Animal Kingdom*, where generic elements are cleverly used to tell a less-than-generic story; or in some cases where elements from several genres like sci-fi, horror and thriller are combined in innovative ways.

There were a number of completed Australian films on sale at EFM, including *Wasted on the Young*, *Oranges and Sunshine*, *"X"*, *Blame*, *Mad Bastards*, *Red Dog*, *Griff the Invisible* and *Swerve*. The Screen Australia stand in the European Film Market received several buyer enquiries before the first market screening for *Red Dog*, which were directed to the Sales Agent. In addition, there were regular daily comments, questions and dog lover cries of delight from market attendees about the *Red Dog* artwork (two posters on the stand and the front cover of the *Australia Berlinale 2011* booklet detailing the Australian films at Berlin).

Australian line-up in Official Selection

All five Australian films that were officially selected for the Berlinale appeared in the Generation programme, which is the section that caters for young audiences. ***Griff the Invisible* opened Generation** at the magnificent House of World Cultures (Haus der Kulturen der Welt), with director **Leon Ford** and producer **Nicole O'Donohue** in attendance along with cast members **Ryan Kwanten** and **Maeve Dermody**. The predominantly teenage audience were delighted by the film and gave the filmmakers an emphatic ovation as the credits rolled up the screen. It was positive to see too that Nicole and Leon's next project was getting strong interest in the market, following its market debut at Cinemart in Rotterdam earlier this year.

Two days later, ***Red Dog* had its world premiere** in the same venue, with director **Kriv Stenders** and producers **Nelson Woss** and **Julie Ryan** among the team present for the event. Again audiences were rapt, despite the language barriers and without the help of subtitles, which was an interesting footnote to the English language films in the Generation programme – they all screened without subtitles for the almost entirely German audiences. Back in the market, *Red Dog* was tracking well according to Essential Entertainment.

Three Australian short films were part of the Generation programme, **Kasimir Burgess' *Lily***, **Andy** and **Matt Mullins' *Minnie Loves Junior*** and brothers **Sam** and **Tom McKeith's *Pig***. *Lily* took the **Crystal Bear** (1st prize) and *Minnie Loves Junior* received a **Special Mention**. The *Lily* and *Minnie Loves Junior* teams were provided with Screen Australia travel grants to attend, while *Pig* received travel funding from AFTRS.

Screen Australia reception

A highlight of the Berlin social calendar was the Screen Australia reception held on the first Saturday of the festival at the elegant Palmenhof-Silbersaal on Potsdamer Platz in conjunction with the Australian Embassy. The Australian Ambassador to Germany, **Mr Peter Tesch**, formally welcomed the 150 plus guests. Special guests included **Jan Chapman**, Australian producer and EP of *Griff the Invisible*, who was this year a member of the Berlinale International Jury, and **Rachel Perkins**, whose film *Bran Nue Dae* screened at the 2010 Berlinale, and who this year was a member of the Generation International Jury. The selected Australian films' filmmakers and cast attended, as did the sales agents of the Australian films, the other Australians in Berlin (distributors, film festivals, filmmakers) plus invited guests with whom Screen Australia has relationships and the Australian industry does business.

Meetings and awards at the Co-pro Market

Berlin's Co-production Market was held over two and a half days at the Berlin State Parliament House. According to participants, it was an intense two days of meetings for the Australian contingent and included a number of public lectures. These included a case study on **Miranda July's *The Future*** (the film, which was in Competition at the festival, is a German-American co-production), and another on literary adaptation. Australian **Kristina Ceyton** was among three producers awarded the **Berlinale Talent Highlight Pitch Award** for her pitch at the Co-production Market for ***Babadook***, a psychological-horror project, written and to be directed by **Jennifer Kent**. The project was also named by *Variety* in their wrap-up of the Co-pro Market as one of the standout projects there. Kristina had her first financing meeting

with Screen Australia's Production Investment Department about the project on 4 April.

Stand and attendance wrap-up

This year was notable for the attendance of Chinese companies and at the same time there were some perceived gaps in the European or US presence. Visits to the Screen Australia stand were up on last year with some 200 meetings and guests taking our brochures and enquiring about films, filmmakers and doing business with Australia. To assist with the enquiries, the stand carried an updated version of the *Doing Business with Australia* booklet, plus the *Australia Berlinale 2011* booklet.

