

Resurgent German cinema comes out of doldrums

By Otto Pohl

BERLIN

For the German film industry, the spell of Cannes has been broken. After 11 years of getting shut out of the festival, a German film has been accepted for this year's competition.

Never mind that the film, "The Edukators," is directed by an Austrian, Hans Weingartner, and has not yet actually received a prize. For an industry that was in a deep slump just a few years ago, this already represents victory.

With a series of recent successes, the German film industry is attracting more international productions to Germany and finding increased interest for its domestic productions abroad.

With international successes like "Good Bye Lenin!," "Head-On," and "Nowhere in Africa," for which the director Caroline Link won an Oscar last year, industry players are suddenly optimistic again.

"Interest from buyers is back," says Andreas Rothbauer, head of theatrical sales at Beta Cinema, one of the biggest brokers of international rights to German films and German co-productions. It started a few years ago, he said, with international successes like "Bella Martha" and "Manitou's Shoe."

"The contribution of Cannes is the next step," he says. "The Edukators," called "Die Fetten Jahre Sind Vorbei" in German, stars Daniel Brühl, the leading man in "Good Bye Lenin!," and tells the story of three youths rebelling against capitalist excess.

A new German focus at the Berlin film festival has also helped raise the profile of young German directors by launching a special film series that showcases their films. This year, the film "Head-On" by the young German

director Fatih Akin was shown at the festival and an international jury awarded it the Golden Bear, the festival's top prize.

The Berlinale, considered one of the three most important festivals in the world, received good news of its own last year when a rival industry conference rescheduled its annual meeting and no longer conflicts with the Berlinale on the industry's annual event calendar. The American Film Market, the world's largest market for buying and selling films, traditionally overshadowed the European Film Market, as the business side of the Berlinale is known.

With the American Film Market moving to November for the first time this year, instead of taking place immediately after the Berlinale in February, the Berlinale has the opportunity to become a more important event for film buyers and sellers.

The Berlinale director Dieter Kosslick intends to make the most of it and to expand significantly the Berlinale's film market. "Demand is huge," he said, with exhibit space for film distributors sold out last year.

He is currently negotiating to secure an additional location to make more room for industry dealmakers. "We want to get the people with a lot of money," he said.

The German movie industry has had a difficult time matching the international profile it enjoyed 20 years ago, when Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Wim Wenders and Volker Schlöndorff were regularly winning international awards. The last time Germany competed in Cannes was in 1993 with Wenders's "Faraway, So Close!"

Even with the surge of talent and award-winning films, the German movie industry is mired in financial difficulties. The stock market crash of 2000 bankrupted many high-flying movie producers. One of the few large independent film producers left, Constantin Films, is trading down more than 90 percent from its boom-year highs. Even successful films have not saved some German film producers from financial collapse. Senator Film, co-producer and distributor of last year's hit, "The Miracle of Bern," is in bankruptcy proceedings.

This year is shaping up well so far.

Last week, Constantin announced its first-quarter results, posting sales up 154 percent over the same quarter last year. The company is hoping to continue a strong year with a sequel to "Manitou's Shoe," the film that holds the record for domestic tickets sold, as well as the sequel to the hit "Resident Evil."

However, since German films have small budgets — rarely more than €8 million, compared to hundreds of millions for a Hollywood blockbuster — the vibrancy of the domestic film production industry depends to a great deal on attracting big U.S. productions.

Berlin, together with the legendary film studio located just outside of Berlin, Babelsberg, have been increasingly successful in attracting these projects. "Enemy at the Gates" was recently filmed here, as was Jackie Chan's "Around the World in 80 Days," Matt Damon's "The Bourne Supremacy," and Kevin Spacey's "Beyond the Sea."

Directors say that Berlin's eagerness to attract the business has made the city an excellent partner for movie projects.

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