

Cannes: thanks for the memory
by: [Ruby Boukabou](#)

Screen Hub
Thursday 28 May, 2009

Back in Paris, pining for glamour, and the wondrous spectacle of Australian filmmakers at their most sophisticated, Ruby Boukabou tapped out one last article for her Screen Hub admirers..

Everyone's been talking about the global economic 'crisis' in France as much as Australia and worrying about the repercussions in the film industry. On an apparently superficial level (if you don't know much about French culture), a horrid rumour did the rounds pre-Cannes. Was it true that party organisers had switched their orders of champagne to cheaper rosé from Provence, foie gras to onion tart and that hair stylists had slashed staff?

It may sound like fluff, but the resonance for the French (where a piece of smelly cheese can reverse a suicidal desire and you're not seriously human unless you have nice hair and nails) is deeper than the Riviera. But what was the take for the Australian industry professionals who were as happy to sip a rosé or chew on an onion tart while networking?

Tony Ginnane (president of SPAA) said: "It's a tough market, buyers are even more selective. But when you've been around a very long time, the buyers will support you if they have had success with you in the past. So it is easier for people who have companies and history that have some longevity compared to people who are newbies who have just dropped into the pot. Everyone is having to find new ways to engage, new ways to make it work and new ways to be more cost effective. That component is tricky but it's just a fact as part of the 'boring boring' economic crisis and the film industry is not exempt."

In his other role as distributor, Ginnane had been scoping films and while interested admits that "I never buy in Cannes because the prices are inflated and we don't want to get into a bidding war, so we'll scope them out, sniff around and about a month or so later, the prices will inevitably drop." So any lack of immediate

sales for the other Australian films is not new and not to be immediately worried about.

Natalie Miller (Cinema Nova and Sharmill Films) said "Cannes was definitely in a quieter mood this year, but when I rushed down bleary eyed every morning at 8am to a screening in the Lumiere theatre and saw 2,300 other film lovers in the same screening, I thought, how quiet?"

"I think sales to Australia were probably among the best in the world from what I heard about countries such as UK where sales were weaker.

"Yes the financial crisis is evident in the financing of films and it seems buyers are very choosy, only wanting top critically acclaimed product. That leaves a lot of product on the shelf. It is good for the buyers, but they will not just buy any film because the price is cheaper.

"I was proud that Australia had two films in a main section *Bright Star* and *Samson and Delilah*. I think it is a good year for Australian films.

For Sue Marray (Fandango), the financial strains "started to come into the scenario for our sorts of budgets last year but it is was exacerbated this year and that is that sales agents really do not want to advance money against future sales and that aspect is a little different (than) in the past. And we were putting the finances of our films together assuming that some of the money would be provided by the international sales agents. They're cautious because they can't pre-sell to the distributors who are cautious- so there's caution all round."

Though she agreed that it depends on your position (film maker or buyer etc) that changes the experience entirely and she pointed out various ups and downs: "If you're trying to find finance, then the market is a bit more difficult, no question and the gap funds are not as available etcetera, but if you're selling, it can result in a settling down on the number of people in the industry. But on the other hand, some good projects can be casualties of that. Then the sales agents do need their product to keep their business going, the distributors need product, films have to keep being made...

"Numbers are down, it's much quieter"... But...

"its not as depressed as I thought it would be in terms of esprit.

"But no question, it's a challenge. That's evidence by sales agents packing up shop earlier, people coming for a shorter amount of time and I know a lot of producers who haven't come this time because its expensive and its speculative, (though there's been no lack of Australians!)"

Tanya Chambers from NSW FTO is amongst those who saw a positive side of the reduction in numbers: "At this stage, I'm finding it an extremely positive market," she said on the terrace of the Screen Australia office. "I think there would be 5-10 projects in the next 6 months for NSW that I've heard about or seen here that I think have a real chance of going into production. So I'm not seeing any major downturn in policy projects, of all different sizes of budgets, all different genres.

"There's definitely about half the number of people here, it is astounding the difference. We are not finding that negative at all. Normally a lot of people come and a lot of people who don't understand the industry very well who believe you can come and talk to anyone about a film if you've not made a film; people who have made a film but don't understand about doing their homework beforehand - the majority of those people are not here. There are some Australian producers who would have liked to have been here and can't afford it - that's quite real, and that's a shame, but also many are in stages of production right now so can't come over.

"I think from the point of view of the major sales agents and the major financiers, it's still very strong. A lot less money being thrown around - people are not doing as many major parties or events and its less showy when they do and there's less gifts. Restaurants are a third or half more empty; the streets even though it gets crazy are that much quieter; but from an actual serious business point of view of the people who're here, I'm not finding it to be a major issue."

Richard Harris (CEO South Australian Film Commission), also saw the general mood as far more positive than he'd expected. "I came thinking it would be very downbeat," he said on the grassy terrace of the Grand Hotel. "It has

been quieter than other Cannes markets but there's a sense that for the right product, people are still buying and there are still pre-sales being done if not big ones.

"The interesting thing is there's been a lot of shaking out of the industry because of the financial crisis and I think what it's meaning is that people are having to bring budgets down and things are being re-considered so that there's not so many projects floating around with lots of money but really going nowhere; people are being much more realistic on both sides; it's actually good." So, and I'm quoting my father, a sort of 'shaking off of dead leaves'?

"Yes, a pruning," says Cheryl Bart, (Chair of South Australian Film Corporation), "I think there is a great optimism for Australian film."

For people like Adelaide Festival Director Katrina Sedgewick, there's much less effect for people whose approach is curatorial. "We're very protected, given that we have a very secure base of state government funding," she said. "Things are more risky as we do rely on some sponsorship which is an increasingly difficult thing to nail down but everyone is facing that."

And it's true that a restriction of budget has not been an excuse for a halt in creativity or progress (or fun) for Australians. A prime example: while the French were covering up the lack of foie gras in their fairy lighted, swimming pooled Villa parties, the Screen Australia organisers invested in a cheap cardboard cut out surfer and shark on the terrace. People could stick their heads through and take home a Polaroid of them looking ridiculous alongside a head of film financing or some south American entrepreneur they couldn't remember the name of but made them laugh and gave them a good idea. Was less business done or fun had? Most definitely not.

Screen Australia also provided a base where we could gather information, host functions, and hold meetings. In a town where a round of coffees and waters can cost close to fifty Australian dollars, this both signalled a support of industry members and a coming together of resources to focus back to business." It's an incredibly valuable space," said Sue Murray.

And also, it must be noted, it is easier to be optimistic when you're by the sunny, salty Mediterranean in 25 plus temperatures and beautifully dressed people are inviting you to have enthusiastic encounters and sumptuous (albeit foie gras less) soirees all day and all night during a ten day festival.

Ruby Boukabou

Ruby is a dancer, journalist, documentary maker and entrepreneur who is but a physical avatar of www.rubytv.net