

Marrakech: Europa International, Cinando Ready Launch of Festival Submission Applet

Europa International, the European sales agents' organization, is advancing on the creation of a common entry form for sales agents aimed at streamlining festival submissions - achieved via an applet integrated on the Cannes Film Market's Cinando platform.

Tested at the Tribeca Film Festival and Luxembourg City Film Festival, the common entry form simplifies the workflow between sales agents and festivals. Up until now, the applet has worked as a closed system, only available to sales agents from Europa International, which has 45 members. The new common entry form includes all submission details, as well as items for a catalogue entry if a film is selected.

After Tribeca and Luxembourg City Fest trials, a second stage will be to test the digital entry form with ten festivals, which will be contacted in mid-December. The aim is to complete this test stage before Berlin in 2017. "Once we have all the feedback, we will improve the second version and then, in a third stage, contact more festivals," Be For Films' Claire Battistoni said at a Europa International one-day event at the Marrakech Film Festival that brought

together 16 sales agent members.

Participants at the Europa International work session emphasized that the aim isn't to replace personal contact between sales agents and festivals but rather make back-office work easier, so freeing up more time for other tasks. "Personal contact with the festivals is essential," EastWest's Octavia Peyrou said in Marrakech. She went on: "They explain what they are looking for, and that way when I get a new film I know who is looking for it. Festivals play a key role in discovering new talent. Without personal contact, our work would be impossible."

Vital role

Talking to Variety, Battistoni, Peyrou and Outlook Film Sales' Youn Ji underscored that festivals increasingly play a vital role as a window for many films that otherwise would never be screened theatrically. A more streamlined entry system will make it easier to reach a wider number of events. "It's often the smaller festivals, that aren't so famous but are getting more important, that enable you to go deeper into each country," Youn Ji noted.

Festival's industry initiatives are also increasing in importance, with ever more events inviting more representatives from sales companies to connect with local distributors and film producers. "By standardizing film submission information, we will have more time to focus on new festivals, and promoting and working on our films. From the festival side, there are only advantages since the system is provided for free," Battistoni added.

This was the third year that Europa International, founded in 2011 and managed by Daphne Kapfer, has held a work session at Marrakech. Other issues discussed included the Festival Box Office, a CineConductor delivery system and a new subtitling project. Attendees included Cinando project manager Camille Rousselet, Alexis Juncosa, programming head of the Luxembourg City Film Festival, plus execs at sales agencies taking in Belgium's Be For Films, Poland's New Europe Film Sales, Serbia-based Soul Food, TrustNordisk in Denmark, Austria's Outlook Filmsales and EastWest Film Distribution and Germany's Pluto Films.

The work session, which functions as an annual meeting for Europa International, also saw a large French contin-

gent, reflecting France's predominance in Europe's sales sector, including representatives from Doc & Film Intl., Films Distribution, Les Films du Losange, Luxbox, Premium Films, Pyramide Intl., Reel Suspects, UDI and Wide Management.

El members said they were particularly interested in seeing films and meeting filmmakers from Morocco, since Marrakech is one of biggest festivals in Africa and the Arab world. Youn Ji, at Outlook, which specializes in documentaries, is currently representing a Tunisian feature, "Zineb Hates the Snow," by Kaouther Ben Hania ("Challat of Tunis"), which premiered in Locarno.

"I'm very interested in upcoming talent from this region," she enthused. "I also loved the Tunisian film 'As I Open My Eyes,' by Leyla Bouzid. There is definitely something fresh and original growing here. And we don't have contact with this region on a daily basis. That's why these events are so important." — Reuters

21ST CENTURY FOX SETS \$23.2 BILLION PACT TO ACQUIRE ALL OF EUROPEAN PAY TV GIANT SKY

21st Century Fox has clinched a preliminary agreement to take over European pay-TV giant Sky in a cash deal valued at about \$23.2 billion. The acquisition has been a long time coming for the Murdoch clan, which has long sought full control of the platform in which it already holds a 39.1% stake.

Fox's effort to bring Sky into the fold reflects the newly ignited market for mega media mergers. AT&T in October set an \$85.4 billion takeover of Time Warner that is now wending its way through the federal approval process. Lionsgate this week closed on its \$4.4 billion acquisition of the Starz pay TV channels.

Sky is Europe's leading pay TV platform with 22 million subscribers across five countries: Italy, Germany, Austria, the UK and Ireland. The sat-caster is an MVPD that also offers its own proprietary news, sports and entertainment channels. It offers broadband and mobile service in the UK and Ireland. "In the past several years, 21st Century Fox has consistently stated that its existing 39.1% stake in Sky is not a natural end position," Fox said in a statement. "A proposed transaction between 21st Century Fox and Sky would bring together 21st Century Fox's global content business with Sky's world-class direct-to-consumer capabilities, which have made it the number one premium pay-TV provider in all its markets. It would also enhance Sky's leading position in entertainment and sport, and reinforce the UK's standing as a top global hub for content generation and technological innovation."

Sky first revealed the negotiations in a statement issued Friday. Sky said its independent directors have been in negotiations with Fox execs and accepted the offer price of \$13.51 per share, which represents a roughly 40% premium over the closing price of Sky shares on Dec. 6.

Appeal not clear

Sky's appeal to 21st Century Fox is clear. The company has solid growth prospects, and the consolidation Sky's earnings with 21st Century Fox would provide a boost to Fox's earnings. Moreover, focusing cash and resources on acquiring Sky will ease any lingering investor concerns about Fox mounting a run at costly acquisitions that might be more risky bets in technology or media. News of the deal sent Fox shares up by as much as \$1 in midday trading but the stock was down 2% to \$27.92 as the close of trading, despite the generally warm reception on Wall Street.

"We think investors were concerned that (Fox) would splash out into growthier/techier/riskier areas. Sky is well known to investors, generally liked, possibly highly synergistic and likely accretive to (earnings). This should help investors gain comfort in (Fox) longer-term," RBC Capital Markets Steven Cahall wrote in a research note Friday.

Sky's statement warned that deal terms are not complete and that there's no certainty of Fox making a formal binding offer. But the media biz has been waiting for years for Fox to pounce again on Sky after its previous effort to acquire the outstanding 59.9% founded five years ago amid Britain's phone-hacking scandal. The timing of the new bid is no surprise given the decline in Sky's share price in recent months and the steep fall in the value of the pound following June's Brexit vote, which has made the deal much cheaper in dollar terms for Fox.

The hacking scandal, in which some Murdoch-owned tabloids were found to have illegally intercepted voicemail messages on the cell phones of celebrities and even of a murdered teenager, badly damaged the Murdochs' standing in Britain and torpedoed their attempted takeover of Sky just as a deal was on the cusp of being done. Fox CEO James Murdoch was in the thick of the controversy as he was the exec in charge of the newspaper division at the time. Murdoch is also a former CEO of Sky and has made no secret of his interest in controlling the business.

"It's inevitable. You have AT&T buying Time Warner, you have Comcast-NBCUniversal. [And now] you have Fox combining itself with Sky. It's all these content companies making a bid as it relates to pay-TV assets," said Mary Ann Halford, media specialist and senior managing director with FTI Consulting in London.

Given that Fox has maintained a war-chest ever since the aborted 2011 takeover, media biz watchers have known that it was a matter of when, not if, Fox would make another run at Sky after the political smoke cleared. As of the most recent quarter, Fox has about \$4.7 billion in cash on its books.

"It's no longer as immediately toxic as it would've been had they tried to proceed at the time" of the hacking scandal, said Mathew Horsman, a media analyst in London and the author of "Sky High: The Inside Story of BSKYB." "The desire to do it and possibly the logic in doing so was always there."

Different corporate configuration

21st Century Fox has a different corporate configuration than its predecessor, News Corp., when the last run at buyout Sky was made. In 2012, in part because of the hacking scandal, chairman Rupert Murdoch decided to split his operations into two companies, 21st Century Fox for the media and entertainment assets and News Corp. for the newspaper and publishing assets including the Wall Street Journal, New York Post and UK newspapers.

That split should help smooth the regulatory approval process for the deal in the UK. Last time around in 2011, there were some hiccups regarding News Corp.'s cross-ownership of major TV and newspaper assets. But that conflict does not exist with 21st Century Fox as the acquiring vehicle. Horsman said that he sees no regulatory problems in Europe that would sink the deal.

Sky said it has formed a committee of independent directors to hammer out the acquisition deal. The committee comprises Sky's CEO Jeremy Darroch, Martin Gilbert, Andrew Sukawaty, Andrew Griffith, Tracy Clarke, Adine Grate, Matthieu Pigasse, and Katrin Wehr-Seiter.

Rupert Murdoch launched Sky, which had an initial four channels, including Sky News, as a UK satellite service in 1989. It added its sports service two years later, and exclusive sports rights become a primary means to enlist new subscribers. Sky was seen as a long-shot bid to inject new competition into the UK TV market. The success of the company against those odds, after enormous investment from News Corp. amid investor skepticism, greatly enhanced Murdoch's reputation as a visionary media mogul.—Reuters



A screenshot from Jung-woo's 'Pandora' movie. — AFP

Film Review: 'Pandora'

Clearly influenced by the Fukushima nuclear meltdown in March 2011, South Korean disaster blockbuster "Pandora" is the film no mainstream Japanese director dares to make. Imagining, with harrowing realism, a man-made disaster gone catastrophic, writer-director Park Jung-woo's uncensored depiction of political incompetence taps right into his compatriots' current mood of anger and mistrust toward their government in the midst of President Park Geun-hye's impeachment. Resisting the temptation to entertain or offer pat optimism, Park's commitment to a cause is what gives the yarn its stark power. The first Korean picture acquired by Netflix, it's sure to go gangbusters locally, as well as heat up niche overseas markets.

A genre that makes ample use of Korean cinema's leading edge in visual and special effects, disaster movies have always been safe bets at the domestic box office. While the first wave of such films, like "Haeundae" or "The Tower," have been pure action-entertainment, the genre has recently taken on an increasingly political edge with hits like "Train to Busan" and "The Tunnel" lambasting government indifference to citizens' suffering, in response to botched crisis management of the Sewol Ferry Accident.

South Korea is one of the world's major utilizers of nuclear power (24 plants in nine cities across 28 counties, according to closing titles), with most plants located in the southern part of the country, which has been prone to earthquakes. The fact that the government has announced no back-up measures post-Fukushima, and instead is pushing to build 10 more reactors, has sparked a strong anti-nuke movement. Due to the project's controversial nature, the production was in development for four years, and failed to gain access from any plant to shoot on site. Though set in an unnamed town in the southern province of Gyeongangnam-do, domestic audiences will easily relate the action to Wolseong and Kori power plants in Gyeongju and Busan, respectively.

Movie's plot

The film starts with a heavy allegorical ring as a couple of tykes gaze at a nearby nuclear reactor, calling it by turns a rice cooker, something that will make the country rich, and "a box that when opened will bring big trouble"—referring to the title's Greek origin. Opposing views about nuclear power are presented by a stand-off between anti-nuke protesters and workers at Hanbyul nuclear plant.

One of the workers is mechanic Kang Jae-hyuk (Kim Nam-gil), whose father and brother were employed at the plant and died due to accidents there. Neither his mother, Ms Seok (Kim Young-ae), who runs a diner with her widowed daughter-in-law Jung-hye (Moon Jeong-hee), nor his g.f., Yeon-ju (Kim Joo-hyeon), who's a PR officer for nuclear energy, want him to venture outside the city, yet job prospects are limited; according to one local's remarks, since the reactor has been built, the city has seen "no fishing, no farming, no tourists."

Soon enough, a 6.1 earthquake strikes, causing radiation to leak from a cracked cooling valve. As the workers, fearing for their own safety, hesitate to fix it, other valves burst, spraying radiated water everywhere and overheating to the point of explosion in parts of the plant. Every troubleshooting endeavor by maintenance engineer Chief Park (Jung Jin-young) is vetoed by the boss, for fear of the plant being decommissioned.

Unlike standard Korean disaster movies that pad out almost half the film with comic bantering among minor characters, "Pandora" gets straight to the point about the underlying risks of nuclear power. With thorough technical exposition, the film tracks how facilities can easily malfunction and inexorably devolve. Also atypical of Korean blockbusters, visual effects here are not employed to create pyrotechnics that are of tangential importance to the story. Instead, leading VFX company Digital Idea visualizes the full-metal anatomy of the nuclear reactor, from its looming outer form to the steampunk-like machinery inside with a grim real-

ism that makes the meltdown so galvanizing to watch.

Also certain to stoke emotions are scenes of staggering government inefficiency, especially the prime minister's overbearing control over president Kang Seok-ho (Kim Myung-min), which seem to have real life parallels. The cabinet's ploys to cover up the disaster by refusing to evacuate citizens in the vicinity and even locking them up to stop mass panic recall the captain and crew's self-preserving crimes in the Sewol Ferry tragedy.

Park's pandemic thriller "Deranged" already fused corporate conspiracy with government ineptitude, but "Pandora" goes further than any Korean film in disparaging a government or leader so thoroughly, and expressing such devastating collective helplessness. Not only does every move to contain the danger worsen it, the turning point culminates in a lame-duck speech by Kang begging for volunteers to "sacrifice themselves on behalf of this weak government." Comparing the scene with recent official apologies president Park made, Korean audiences will surely wonder how the lines between parody, fiction, and reality are blurred.

While reports of health issues caused by the Fukushima fallout have not publicly surfaced in Japan, the film almost revels in the grisly portrayal of suffering caused by radiation, at times risking descent into Gothic horror with close-ups of charred skin, pus-oozing boils, and spewing blood. While Jae-hyuk's romance and family drama are subsumed under the wider events, the final scenes indulge in a round of breast-beating, hysterical wailing, and thundering patriotism. Still, given the intense seriousness sustained earlier on, the film somehow must cater to the need of local audiences for cathartic melodrama. — Reuters



Actress Emmy Rossum. — AFP

EMMY ROSSUM HAS BEEN OFFERED PARITY WITH 'SHAMELESS' CO-STAR WILLIAM H MACY - BUT SHE WANTS MORE

The future of Showtime's long-running series "Shameless" is being held up, due to ongoing negotiations with star Emmy Rossum. Rossum, who's been a lead on "Shameless" since it debuted in 2011, is in the midst of re-negotiating her contract for a potential eighth season. Sources close to the show tell Variety that months ago, the actress was offered pay parity with her co-star William H. Macy—but she is asking to be paid more.

An insider says Showtime wants to renew the show for Season 8, but won't proceed until resolving Rossum's salary. The creative forces behind the dramedy have not even considered a plan for the show to continue without her, our source explains, as all parties involved are hopeful to close negotiations with the actress.

Rossum is demanding equal pay with Macy, after seven seasons of being paid less than him, according to a report published earlier today by the Hollywood Reporter. A source tells Variety she has in fact been offered equal pay. But she is holding out for a bigger salary than Macy to make up for the previous

seasons where she was making significantly less than him. Both Showtime and Warner Bros. TV, the studio behind "Shameless," declined to comment. Reps for Rossum didn't immediately respond to Variety's calls.

A source close to "Shameless" tells Variety that the network and studio take the income disparity very seriously, but insist that the offer for parity has been on the table for a while and is not being accepted by Rossum's team. By offering her the same salary as Macy, this person says the network and studio are "clearly acknowledging her importance to the show" and how her role has evolved into a crucial part over the years. "It hasn't even been contemplated doing the show without her," adds the source.

Rossum's salary dispute comes at a time when equal pay has become a prominent conversation in the industry, led by actresses like Patricia Arquette and Jennifer Lawrence. At the time "Shameless" premiered, Macy, 66, was arguably more well-known than Rossum, 30. Though the actress was coming off of films like

"The Day After Tomorrow" and "Phantom of the Opera" for which she was nominated for a Golden Globe, Macy had already won multiple Emmys, plus had an Oscar nomination, Golden Globe and SAG nominations.

For his work on "Shameless," Macy has been nominated for three Emmys, a Golden Globe, and won a SAG Award. Rossum has been nominated for two Critics Choice Awards, but never an Emmy, SAG Award or Golden Globe. Awards recognition typically helps actors to negotiate a pay raise.

Rossum has renegotiated her salary since "Shameless" debuted. An insider says she got a significant increase from her original deal several seasons ago, as did Macy. Macy recently closed a new deal for the potential eighth season—the same deal that is now being offered to Rossum. — Reuters