

World News

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French fare share up

By ALISON JAMES PARIS

French films' market share was neck-and-neck with Hollywood fare at the French box office in 2006, 45% compared to 45.8%, according to official figures released Tuesday.

Admissions for French films rose 32.2% to 84.8 million or €501.7 million (\$651.8 million), while the box office for U.S. films grew by a more modest 6.8% to \$663.7 million, repping 86.3 million ticket sales.

Seven French films, led by the "Les Bronzes" megahit sequel "Friends Forever," earned more than \$23 million, repping 3 million admissions.

Only three American films crossed that mark, the Centre National de la Cinematographie said. They were "The Da Vinci Code," "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest" and "Ice Age: The Meltdown."

S. Korea wickets clicking

By DARCY PAQUET SEOUL

South Korean admissions rose a hefty 14.6% in 2006 to 166.7 million tickets sold, according to a report by leading exhibitor CJ CGV. This reps the industry's 10th consecutive year of growth and ranks as the third-highest admissions total in history, behind 1969 (173 million) and 1968 (171 million).

Although the report did not provide estimates of box office revenues, the total is expected to top \$1.1 billion, up from \$900 million in 2005.

Local films enjoyed an especially strong year, with market share reaching 64.7% and 20 films notching more than 2 million admissions (\$13.8 million). A total of 108 films were released in theaters, up from 84 the previous year.

A detailed country-of-origin breakdown of market share was provided only for Seoul, with Korea taking 60.0%, Hollywood 35.6%, Japan

2.3%, China 0.8% and others 1.4%.

Strong perf of Korean pics came despite the controversial reduction of the nation's Screen Quota system.

Local cinemas previously were obliged by law to screen local product for 30%-40% of the year. However, in July that figure was lowered to 20% — a level virtually all exhibitors voluntarily exceed.

Nonetheless, concern is growing in Korea about a production bubble, rising budgets (set to move even higher after the introduction of new labor laws in July), and a severe downturn in international sales revenues, particularly from Japan.

Top-grossing films were monster movie "The Host" (\$90 million), gay-themed period drama "King and the Clown" (\$84 million), gambling pic "Tazza: The High Rollers" (\$47 million), and comedy sequel "My Boss, My Teacher" (\$42 million). "Mission: Impossible III" was first among imports with \$40 million.

Dutch B.O. rebounds in '06

By MELANIE GOODFELLOW LONDON

Some clouds really do have a silver lining.

Holland's early exit from the World Cup soccer tournament in June and the wettest Dutch August on record helped the Netherlands box office back to life in '06 after a dismal '05.

Figures released Tuesday by Dutch exhib and distrib orgs NVB and NVF showed a 14.03% rise in B.O. takings in '06. The gross rose to €154 million (\$200 million) from \$175 million in 2005.

Admissions rose by 9.03% to 22.5 million from 20.6 million in 2005. The '05 figure was down 11.2% from the year before.

The jump was greater than key European territories such as France and Germany, where admissions rose 7.5% and 8%, respectively.

"This is our comeback year," said Wilco Wolfers, head of Warner Bros. Netherlands and chairman of the Netherlands Federation of

Cinema, which collated the data.

He said the transfer of an annual two-for-one ticket campaign from June to late August and the success of Paul Verhoeven's "Black Book" also had contributed to the rise.

With \$8.9 million at the B.O., Verhoeven's Dutch-language WWII drama was the third most popular pic of '06 after "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest" and "The Da Vinci Code."

However, there was little else to celebrate.

Admissions for Dutch fare fell 9.63% to 2.5 million. Market share slid to 10.9% vs. 13.15% in 2005.

Four Dutch pics — "Black Book," "Crusade in Jeans," "Aflbliven" and "Zoop in India" — accounted for more than 75% of the local B.O. take.

Wolfers noted 29 Dutch films were released in '06, vs. 39 in '05.

But with tax incentives phased out in '06 and a government-backed matching fund scheme still to launch, uncertainty about film finance has put a number of productions on hold.



Verhoeven

SPAIN'S IMAGINA BOWS SALES ARM

By EMILIANO DE PABLOS MADRID

Imagina Media Audiovisual, one of Spain's biggest film and TV holdings, has launched an international sales company.

Imagina Intl. Sales will make its market debut at NATPE in Las Vegas.

Vet TV exec Jose Huertas has been tapped as IIS' general manager. Geraldine Gonard, former G.M. at sales consortium Grupo Pi, is the commercial director.



Huertas

IIS' bow is another step in the merger of the Arbol Group, Spain's most successful drama series producer, and production and services giant Mediapro, which pooled their assets early last year in a holding now known as Imagina Media Audiovisual.

IIS' current catalog includes nearly 3,000 hours of TV programs, documentaries and feature films. For the moment, some 90% of its

library is made up of TV programs. But films "will carry a larger weight in the future," Huertas said.

The sales op also will handle formats from Arbol's powerful TV production arm Globomedia, including "The Serranos," "Family Doctor" and "A Step Forward."

The sales agency also reps content from affiliated Spanish production houses, including Drive Entertainment, Zip Films, Rodar & Rodar, Iskra and DG Prods. It's in advanced talks to incorporate titles from more film and TV companies.

Nearly 80% of Imagina's film and TV catalog will be presented at NATPE.

IIS films will mainly come from Barcelona-based Mediapro, which has produced some of Spain's most successful films of late, including Fernando Leon's "Mondays in the Sun" and "Princesses," and Isabel Coixet's "The Secret Life of Words."

Mediapro is producing Woody Allen's next pic, to lens in Spain this year. IIS declined to say whether it would handle sales on the film.

Imagina holds a controlling stake in terrestrial broadcaster La Sexta, launched in March, where it teams with Mexican giant Televisa.

Fox to ride 'El Bufalo'

By MICHAEL O'BOYLE MEXICO CITY

Twentieth Century Fox Film has picked up Latin American rights for the first producing effort from Mexican scribe Guillermo Arriaga, "El Bufalo de la noche" (The Night Buffalo), starring Diego Luna.

Helmed by tyro Venezuelan director Jorge Hernandez, the script was adapted from Arriaga's novel. Arriaga pal and broccoli baron Enrique Lopez backed the film and is executive producer.

Arriaga and Lopez's La Neta Films is holding onto U.S. and world rights until after the raw, sexually charged film bows in the world competition at Sundance.

Film darkly portrays a tragic love triangle between Mexico City betrays his schizophrenic best friend, played by frosh thesp Gabriel Gonzalez, with Liz Gallardo, another newcomer. Film is scored by rock act Mars Volta.

Fox is planning to launch "Bufalo" in Mexico with around 300 prints in April. That's a big opening for Mexican films, but a mid-sized launch compared with Hollywood blockbusters.

Arriaga scripted "Babel," the final part of his trilogy with Mexican helmer Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu.



Arriaga

Blighty rewrites music charts

By GORDON MASSON LONDON

New chart rules in the U.K., including the sale of download-only tracks, are forcing retailers to compile their own lists of the country's most popular songs.

From Jan. 1, the Official U.K. Charts Co. started allowing sales of downloads to compete in its Official Singles Chart.

But one of the U.K.'s biggest music retailers, HMV, has removed those charts in-store, as it faces the dilemma of gaps in its top-40 singles displays when there is no physical product to correspond to the chart.

Previously downloads were eligible only if physical product — a CD — also was released.

HMV said it will compile its own physical singles sales chart; other retailers are expected to do the same.

The new rules are expected to herald a return of the EP (Extended Play), as chart eligibility is extended for CD releases of up to four tracks lasting a total of 25 minutes, vs. the previous limit of three tracks and 20 minutes.

But the biggest change to the rules is the inclusion of album tracks and oldies, if they are available as downloads.

In 2006, download single sales in the U.K. accounted for more than 51 million tracks, vs. about 14 million physical unit sales.

CONSIDER... BORAT

THE BRAVEST PERFORMANCE OF THE YEAR

"Sacha Baron Cohen is a comic revolutionary, right up there with Lenny Bruce, Andy Kaufman and Dr. Strangelove. Cohen's total immersion in his character is a wonder to behold. His performance is a tour de force that sets off comic and cosmic explosions in your head."

Peter Travers, *Rolling Stone*