AMERICAN FILM MARKET

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AFM 2020 Opens with Keynote Conversations and Speakers from Solstice Studios and NEON

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

AFM Day 1 Opens



The 2020 Online American Film Market (AFM) kicked off its Day 1 morning session with Keynote Speakers, Mark Gill of *Solstice Studios*, and Elissa Federoff, President of Distribution. *Neon.* See below *for* highlighted topics from the moderated conversations follow*. The AFM* continues through December 13th. For more information visit the AmericanFilmMarket.com.

Keynote Conversation 1 / AFM Opening Session

Mark Gill, President & CEO, *Solstice Studios*

Moderated by Anthony Dâ??Alessandro, Managing Editor, *Deadline*

On releasing Unhinged into theatres:

â??Our idea was that we could be first and probably elevate a film of an otherwise modest budget of $33 Million Dollars against Tenet which is hundreds of millions of dollars or Mulan and that we might have an opportunity to elevate the movie. And that is actually what happened. But it wasnâ??t for the faint at heart because we had five release dates. Every time we thought it was done another outbreak would happen somewhere in the US or theatres wouldnâ??t open or Tenet would move. It was just the hardest thing Iâ??ve ever done and Iâ??ve been doing this for a long long time.â?•

On his perceptions of the theatrical landscape before releasing Unhinged and what he learned:

â??It looked like Asia was well ahead of the US and Europe certainly too so we allowed the international folks to release first which is not all that common and it worked out greatâ?¦.What we were looking at were three things you have to get to line up. There are three sets of planets: There are the theatre owners obviously. There were other distributors, notably Warner Bros. for Tenet and at that time Disney with Mulan. And then, of course, thereâ??s the public health situation. Our theory was if we waited until Fall things could easily get worse â?? which is what we see happening. Our thought was that in the Summer we had a chance. And going first was important since no one else wanted to do it. Iâ??m glad we did. It worked out well for us but it was also an important statement to make about why theatres matter and that people would go.â?•

Other Countries and Pandemic give hope.

â??Youâ??ve got more and more films pushing, FOX has just moved a couple of things. It just does not look good. So I was glad to see Pfizer released good news about a possible vaccine. Thatâ??s clearly going to be key. The other thing that is incredibly heartening in the long-run is if you look at Japan and China and Korea, where the public health situation is under control, theyâ??re breaking records. So, people like going to the movies. They just want to do it in a way that allows them to relax and enjoy and feel comfortable doing it and not enough of them are right now in the US.â?•

On what makes a film like Unhinged ripe right now for the current marketplace.

â??I have three theories about that. The first is the movie has to be good enough. The second is, for some reason men seem to be a little more willing to go to theatres than women. And third is that itâ??s a good way to blow off some steam. Weâ??re all living in a very very tense time. Unemployment is high. Everything is uncertain. Itâ??s tough for everybody. So if thereâ??s a chance to go and just enjoy some craziness on the screen as opposed to the craziness in our real lives, thatâ??s what the exit polls are telling us that people are liking about these kinds of movies.â?•

Why Solstice stuck to a full theatrical release for Unhinged.

â??Where possible, we want to be in theatres. Thatâ??s what weâ??re [Solstice Studios] all about so as others are running from it â?? youâ??ll see the majors making fewer movies for theatres which were coming anyway but are now just accelerated â?? that will create more opportunity in the long run for mid-sized films to run in the way that they used to. The impressive list of films that the AFM has been a part of for the last 40 years, those are precisely the kinds of films that are going to benefit from this once there is a vaccine.â?•

On the potential of having a shortage of films for the international markets by next year. Will we hit a dry spot?

â??What weâ??re starting to see from the production side is a number of movies gearing up for late winter or early spring starts. But that means theyâ??re delivered a year from then so by the time we get to Cannes or certainly Toronto I think there is going to be a shortage of films.â?•

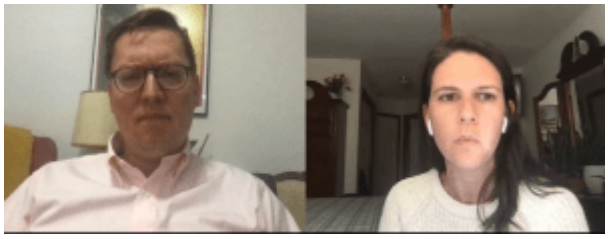
On Good Joe Bell

â??We bought Good Joe Bell for the world which means that we will sell it internationally after weâ??re done doing a little bit of work on the film. I thought it was very very strong but not quite where it needed to be in terms of hitting critical mass. It will be done in the next 2 Â½ â?? 3 weeks and then we need to probably take it to Berlin and weâ??re looking at releasing it for Academy Award consideration â?? which is by February 28th this year. Iâ??ve never seen that before. Itâ??s an emotionally compelling film. We all unanimously agreed on that which never happens.â?•

On Selling International

â??We have chosen so far to just sell the movies one at a time to independent distributors in all the key markets. Itâ??s worked out surprisingly well. It was fascinating working with all these distributors as they were facing what we were which was essentially â??Is our country going to be open? Are the cinemas going to be open? Is anybody going to go?â?? And what was just so impressive was how many of them â?? whether it was the UK or France or Australia or Italy, there are so many countries that did so well with the movie [Unhinged]. The reality is that on this movie we got out alive and getting out in a pandemic was quite an achievement. A huge part of that was the international distributors taking a lot of risk in trying to do what we did, and in some cases doing it even better than we did. Australia was blow out good for example and this was with 30% of their country closed.â?•

Keynote Conversation 2 / AFM Opening Session



Left to right, Brent Lang and Elissa Federoff

Elissa Federoff, President of Distribution, *NEON*

Moderated by Brent Lang, Executive Editor, Film & Media, *Variety*

On theatrical coming back.

â??We know that audiences will come back to the movie theatres. That the theatrical landscape will be vibrant again. This is very exciting news about the vaccine because potentially it makes the span of time a little shorterâ?¦â?•

â??Weâ??ve always projected we would be back and our movies would be in those theatres. We love the cinema so much. It is the best way to see a movie I truly believe there is no virtual offering, there is no streaming equivalent thereâ??s no digital equivalent to being in a movie theatre with an audience having a completely immersive experience in the dark, no phones, no talking, no distractions and of the audience being a character in that film. That really changes the whole dynamic.â?•

On how NEON has adapted a pandemic strategy in the short term.

â??Over the pandemic, weâ??ve released a ton of films. Weâ??ve released more films than probably the majority of our independent counterparts have. Weâ??ve been buying films, weâ??ve been producing films. Weâ??ve taken this opportunity to pivot our strategy and release our films digitally and with Hulu.â?•

â??Ammonite, we are releasing this Friday in theatres and then weâ??re putting it on PVOD on the 4th of December. This is the first PVOD release that weâ??ve done and weâ??re really excited about it. Inside this pandemic and inside this award season, this is a highly strategic way that we are releasing this film. LA is not open, New York is not open, San Francisco is not open so we donâ??t see the theatrical box office at this moment to be the same as it has been in the past and we believe it will be in the future. This has been previously very very successful for us when we released Bachelorette for example or Snowpiercer â?? the VOD was so robust that it actually made the film just as viable as if we had put it in theatres and spent the P&A. So this works great for Ammonite. We have several other movies on our slate and we would absolutely love them to see them in theatres. We have Gunda, we have The Killing of Two Lovers, we have several other films for next Spring that we have not yet slotted for our release calendar and fingers crossed theatres are back and everyone is going.â?•

On why theyâ??ve been so active releasing films during this time.

â??Independent film has always been a very very difficult business. Itâ??s always been hard to release these films. Weâ??ve always found challenges in the marketplace with theatres even when every screen was open. Weâ??ve always felt the competitive nature of the business. When tentpoles were there when other independent films were there and we were all vying for our spot. So weâ??ve always been up against something and itâ??s never stopped us. We truly want to bring films to people. We want to bring them out when people want to see them the most which are now when they want to be fulfilled by something. Our films and a lot of Independents are, in some cases, so much more important than the tentpoles because they reach so many different audiences and really specific niche audiences who may not find something in the digital space.â?•

â??We really wanted to stay relevant and bring, buy, and release films at a time when production is struggling, and the exhibition is struggling. We want to support artists. So much of this time period has been in doubt and we donâ??t know when we will â??get back to normalâ??. I donâ??t think we should wait to get â??back to normalâ??. We should pivot and figure out strategies that will help us now.â?•

View on Drive-in Theatres.

â??I think what has shifted is that they typically were seen as theatres that only play very commercial films. They havenâ??t been in the space of anything really different. And now theyâ??re playing the independent film for the first time. Theyâ??re playing art releases. Theyâ??re playing movies from smaller companies and not just the major studios and thatâ??s what has shifted so much about drive-ins. We love having them in our plans. People feel safe. I see them sticking around. I think weâ??ve opened up both the audiences for Drive-ins and the theatres themselves to think more about independent film.â?•

On Windows Shifting

â??The reality is that multiplatform releases have always been around. Weâ??ve always had then as part of our strategy for certain kinds of releases and many other companies have as well. Weâ??re no stranger to the short window or the multi-platform release. Whatâ??s exciting about right now is that the studios are kind of acknowledging it as a way to release a film. NEON is not a company that believes every film is one size fits all â?? there will always be films for us and for the entire world that will need a very long and thought out release in theatres for 180 days before they go to VOD. We love those. Films like Honeyland. We would have never released that in any other way than a long thought out release. Parasite the same thing. But then there have been other films like Snowpiercer that we did a compressed window and we put it on VOD and it was very very successful for us. It made in excess of $10 Million on VOD. And the fact that we can be flexible, I think just opens up many more avenues in our business.â?•

Stay tuned for the upcoming **â??Spotlight on Russiaâ?•** coverage!

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1. Neon
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