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Hollywood coin in hot pursuit

Eye on the Oscars: Foreign Language 2012

By TODD LONGWELL

It took Belgian writer-director Michael Roskam five years to get his feature film debut, "Bullhead," in front of the cameras. But as soon as the trailer for the film hit the Internet, the phone calls from Hollywood started coming.

One of the first was from Ramses Ishak and Michael Sherefsky at United Talent Agency. They said all the right things, but Roskam was wary.

"I said, 'How can I know you're the guys you pretend to be?'" recalls Roskam, whose film is Belgium's entry for the foreign-language film Oscar.

But after confirming they were real Hollywood players with his best intentions at heart, Roskam was free to ponder his good fortune.

Like many other non-U.S. filmmakers, "I do have this ambition to work in the tradition of the big auteurs of American cinema," Roskam says. "I was like, 'Wow. The first step into the world of moviemaking on the other side of the ocean.'"

For U.S. producers and studios, the attraction is mutual.

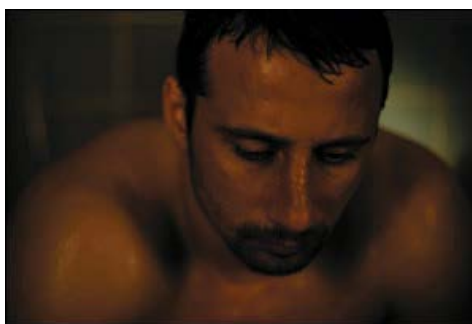
"There's no question that there is a chic-ness sometimes equated with the foreign filmmaker, especially one who has a hot film coming out," Ishak says. "It's similar to years ago ... with the musicvideo and commercial directors, but it's a little more substantive. With the commercial and musicvideo directors, a lot of that had to do with the look and the sizzle of their reels."

In spite of all the good intentions, the journey to Hollywood can be treacherous for both the foreign language auteurs and the studios that employ them.

"The biggest difference is that (the filmmakers) are used to more creative latitude and more financial constraints," says Keith Redmon, who signed on to manage Roskam with Anonymous Content colleague Luke Rivett last month.

In many foreign countries, filmmakers get their funding from government bodies more interested in promoting culture than turning a profit. The exploration of controversial social issues, like the long-term effects of violent sexual abuse depicted in "Bullhead," is not only accepted but encouraged.

"You see those movies being made in Europe that nobody is going to watch, but they are so well



'Bullhead'

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meaning," says Danish director Susanne Bier, whose film "In a Better World" won last year's foreign-language film Oscar. "Ten years ago, you got so much government funding (through the Danish Film Institute), you didn't have to do any business at the theaters. Now the funding is much more limited, so you have to actually target an audience for it to be reasonably sound financially."

Hollywood executives are undoubtedly committed to capitalism, but when Polish director Agnieszka Holland came to the U.S. to make her first studio film, "The Secret Garden" (1993), they reminded her of the central committee of the Communist Party in her homeland back in the 1970s when she started making movies.

"Maybe it's why I was able to deal with it," says Holland, whose film "In Darkness" is Poland's entry for the foreign-language film Oscar this year. "They were bureaucrats afraid of making mistakes and losing their position. I was always surprised that any movies got made. But, saying that, I should mention that several studio executives, especially a woman who was the main executive on 'The Secret Garden,' were highly intelligent and very good people to deal with."

To help ease the transition, overseas filmmakers may want to make their first U.S. film for a mini-major, "where there's not as much bureaucracy," says Redmon, whose clients also include Norwegian directors Nicolas Winding Refn ("Drive") and Morten Tyldum, who signed to make his U.S. debut with "What Happened to Monday?" for Vendome Pictures. "They may not win all of their battles, but at least when they have differences, they get to have actual conversations with the decisionmakers as opposed to being told that somebody's boss told them that they can't do it."

With Roskam spending most of the year in Belgium, he felt it was important to have management repping his interests in L.A. along with his agents, but he has yet to retain a U.S. attorney.

"We don't really need an attorney because the first-time filmmaker deal for an American studio is a cookie-cutter deal," Sherefsky explains. "If we're putting together a film independently and we need to stitch together financing, he may need to have the expertise of an attorney for it, but it's a little early for us to know."

A good command of English is not necessary, but it certainly helps. "It's important when talking to people and having the meetings," says Ole Christian Madsen, whose film "SuperClasico" is the foreign-language Oscar entry from Denmark, where students begin studying English in the third grade. "But even if you don't understand everything, you can direct, because it's about a lot of things other than what the words mean -- acting, rhythm and music."

Madsen has been taking Hollywood meetings since the success of his 2001 film "Kira's Reason," but it wasn't until this past September that he finally signed on for his U.S. debut, the film noir "Paper Trail," scheduled to shoot next spring for Sidney Kimmel Entertainment.

In the case of Italian writer-director Emanuele Crialese, the big Hollywood deal has yet to be consummated. Following the success of his 2002 film "Respiro," he picked up U.S. rep (agent, management, attorney), but as he continued to work in Italy on Italian subjects -- first with the 2006's "Golden Door" and then "Terraferma," Italy's 2011 foreign-language Oscar entry -- he found it was pointless to keep them.

Today, Crialese takes a do-it-yourself approach, developing scripts and packaging them with actors on his own before partnering with a production company to raise the money. ("In Europe, I can get financing even if the film has no stars, as long as the price is below €10 million," he explains.) His only rep is an Italian attorney who helps draw up the contracts.

"Tomorrow, someone could up and propose something like a 'Harry Potter,' " Crialese says. "In that case, I would structure myself and my work in a more traditional way, so to speak. But in that moment it was important to go back to my country and to tell some stories that I felt I knew deeply."

But for filmmakers like Roskam who are determined to have a Hollywood happy ending, Redmon believes the key is finding the right partners.

"You could come here and have a fantastic experience with one set of producers or at one studio," he says, "and the same project at a different studio with a different producer could be a nightmare for you."

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