

Cairo Industry Days wraps with prizes to top Arabic projects

LOS ANGELES, Nov 28, (RTRS): The Cairo Film Festival's Industry Days wrapped Tuesday on a high note, with several Arabic film projects emerging as standouts of its co-production platform.

The informal market component of the rebooted Cairo fest entailed five days of networking, deal-making, and mentoring, and had a greater focus on TV. Attending were such high-level execs as AGC Studios topper Stuart Ford, AMC Networks' VP of productions Kristin Jones, and Netflix director of international originals Ahmed Sharkawi. There was also a clutch of CAA agents, plenty of European buyers, and producers and financiers from India and China.

They came to mingle with the Middle East industry at a time when the region's market is increasingly perceived as having potential that can be unlocked despite turbulence in territories such as Lebanon, an Arabic film industry hotbed, where banks have currently blocked money transfers outside the country until unrest subsides.

"We are just dipping our toes into the Arabic market," Ford said during the opening panel, noting that "there is so much growth to be had here." AGC is handling international sales on young Saudi director Shahad Ameen's feminist fable "Scales", which had its Middle East launch in Cairo after world-premiering in Venice.

The panels focused on such topics as gender-based violence in Egyptian film and TV, moderated by Sandra De Castro Buffington, founding director of UCLA's Global Media Center for Social Impact, and the

more nuts-and-bolts question "Is There Life After Co-production?", moderated by Egyptian-American producer Dina Eman.

"The feedback has been very encouraging," said Cairo Industry Days chief Aliaa Zaki. Zaki said that the informal market's Cairo Film Connection (CFC) co-production platform for Arabic film projects, which this year almost doubled its prize pot to \$200,000, served up the best in the region and "secured filmmakers the international recognition they deserve."

The lion's share of the CFC pot went to "Europa", a drama by Iraqi-Italian director Haider Rashid about a young Iraqi man who is caught by police after entering Europe through the border between Turkey and Bulgaria. He manages to escape into a wild forest underworld, only to become wounded by Bulgarian "migrant hunters," according to the film's synopsis.

Award

"Europa", which is produced by Rashid's Radical Plans shingle and is now in post-production, won the \$50,000 OSN Award in Cairo just as it was also scoring a prize at the Milano Industry Days in Italy. Rashid's previous films include "It's About to Rain" and VR short "No Borders", which went to Venice in 2016.

The developing documentary "The Life and Times of Omar Sharif", to be directed by Axel Petersen and Mark Lofly, was another major CFC prizewinner. The documentary looks at the Egyptian-born movie

star's life against the changing political backdrops of Egypt and Hollywood. "Sharif" won the MAD-Ergo award of a \$30,000 minimum guarantee towards distribution across the Arab world via local arthouse distributor MAD Solutions and the CFC's Leyth Production award providing sound mixing services.

Another CFC multiple prizewinner was "Under Construction", an elevated horror film by Lebanese helmer Nadim Tabet ("One of These Days"), also in development. It turns on the mysterious disappearance of Syrian workers on a construction site near a Lebanese village that used to be occupied by the Syrian army.

Also:

LOS ANGELES: Films from Africa and the Middle East have enjoyed significant festival presence this year – such as **Mati Diop's** French-Senegalese pic "Atlantics", which won the Grand Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival. "In 2019 we saw a new generation of filmmakers emerging on the scene," says **Remi Bonhomme** program manager of Critics' Week in Cannes and the coordinator of the Atlas Workshops, which ran Dec 3-6 at the Marrakech Film Festival.

At Cannes, in addition to Diop's prize, Palestinian filmmaker **Elia Suleiman** won a Jury Special Mention award for his satire "It Must Be Heaven", and seven African and Arab films screened in the different competitive sections.

Film

Variety



This image released by Netflix shows Jonathan Pryce as Cardinal Bergoglio (right), and Anthony Hopkins as Pope Benedict in a scene from 'The Two Popes'. (AP)

Film

A fantasy of impossible intimacy

'2 Popes' a buddy movie in vestments

By Jake Coyle

Believers of all religions can agree on one thing: The Vatican is an unlikely place for a bromance.

The novelty of Fernando Meirelles' "The Two Popes" is right there in its title. There has only been one leader of the Roman Catholic Church going back centuries except in trying times of, you know, schism. But Meirelles' film, from a script by Anthony McCarten ("Darkest Hour", "The Theory of Everything") concerns a real moment in recent history during an unusual Vatican transition.

In 2013, Pope Benedict XVI, formerly Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (played by Anthony Hopkins in the film), resigned from the papacy, the first to do so since the 15th century. "The Two Popes" takes place just before this momentous decision, as Pope Benedict is mulling it over. In the film, he summons the Argentinian Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio (Jonathan Pryce), his eventual successor as Pope Francis, from Buenos Aires to Rome for a tête-à-tête, or, if you will, a pope-à-pope.

The whole scenario is a work of imagination. There are few institutions with more private inner-workings than the Vatican. Usually, we get little more than a puff of white smoke. "The Two Popes" aims to go not just inside the Church but imagine a deep dialogue between the two pontiffs. "The Two Popes" is a fantasy of impossible intimacy.

It's also a riveting two-hander paced by two fabulous actors in ping-ponging conversation. They are opposites: Pope Benedict is a conservative, a German and a loner who eats dinner in solitude. Bergoglio is a reformer, an Argentine, an avid soccer watcher and, gasp, an ABBA listener. When they meet at the papal summer retreat, their conversation quickly turns into a theological volley on matters of sacrament, homosexuality and footwear.

"We are no longer part of this world," Bergoglio says of the Church. "Change is compromise," retorts

Benedict. "Nothing is static in nature," replies Bergoglio.

Meirelles, the Brazilian filmmaker of "City of ..." and "The Constant Gardener", captures their first meeting while walking the estate's grounds with amplified bird song all around them. They may disagree on nearly everything, but their dichotomy is a kind of harmony.

Their divisions, of course, reflect those nearly everywhere else today, between progress and retreat. And there is considerable comfort in exploring opposite perspectives not through Congressional or Parliamentary rivals but between two kindly old men in a garden. It's nice to think that such barriers can be broken down amicably – as they are in "The Two Popes" – over pizza and Fanta.

For that to happen, "The Two Popes" pushes some darker concerns to the side while magnifying others. Sexual abuse among the clergy is briefly discussed before it largely recedes, though you could argue the subject hovers just beneath their talks as the unspoken impetus for Benedict's retirement.

Representations

Who's side we should be on is never in doubt. All of the life force is with Bergoglio, an almost saintly figure in the film, as he is in many other representations, too. But it's the lively, stimulating interplay between Pryce (radiant) and Hopkins (exquisitely crafty) that gives "The Two Popes" its forward movement, propelling the film less by intellectual debate than by the thrall of an unfolding friendship.

As their conversation continues in the Sistine Chapel (recreated at Italy's Cinecitta Studios), "The Two Popes" turns into a movie not about a power struggle, at all, but a grappling of faith. Benedict and Bergoglio dispense with their divisions and turn inward in self-reflection, revealing their own wrestling with doubt, fallibility and faith.

This section of soul searching includes a lengthy flashback to Bergoglio's potentially complicit inaction during the junta rule of late '70s, early '80s Argentina. The look backward adds greater dimension to Bergoglio's character, but it hampers the film's locked-in double act. Benedict's reflections – including an achingly tender confession he gives to Bergoglio – come without flashback and are all the more powerful because of it.

"The Two Popes" might promulgate an optimistic portrait of the Catholic Church and its leaders. But in these sweetly sincere scenes, you forget Benedict and Bergoglio are pontiff and pontiff-to-be. And the moment of respite from the world's arguments and divisions feels like a benediction.

"When I started the project I never had this expectation," Meirelles told Variety. "Because it is a film about two men talking about a very specific issue, religion. I thought it would be a nice film for a specific niche, which would be great at Netflix, because the niche at Netflix is very big, right? If it went just to a Catholic audience from Netflix, it is huge. But it worked well and now there is this buzz and I'm happy to embrace it."

The film was made without the participation of the Vatican. "What we wanted from the Vatican was the possibility of shooting at St Peter's Square and using some of their facilities, but we couldn't," says Meirelles. "They never allow cinema to use their facilities. And I understand the Vatican. If they allowed us to shoot inside their property, they are supporting the film. If they say no, they are rejecting the film, or censoring the film. What they did is they never really replied to us. They said: 'we'll talk later' and they never did."

"The Two Popes", a Netflix release, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association of America for thematic content and some disturbing violent images. Running time: 126 minutes. Three stars out of four. (Agencies)

LOS ANGELES: Disney's "Frozen 2" is heading for a record of at least \$140 million over the five-day Thanksgiving holiday in North America, early estimates showed Wednesday.

The animated adventure will easily top the \$109.9 million record set by "The Hunger Games: Catching Fire" in 2013 during the five-day period. "Frozen 2", which opened on Nov 22, should go past the \$300 million mark by the end of the weekend. The sequel is coming in well above forecasts of \$100 million to \$120 million during the Thanksgiving holiday.

Lionsgate's opening of mystery comedy "Knives Out" is showing plenty of traction with early estimates of \$40 million for the five-day holiday, which includes \$3.7 million from previews. "Knives Out" opens in 3,391 sites Wednesday amid strong reviews with a stellar 96% score on Rotten Tomatoes.

"Knives Out" had been forecast to open in the \$20 million to \$25 million range. The studio raised its guidance Wednesday to the \$28 million to \$33 million range but other tracking was significantly higher. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: "Vikings" star Gaia Weiss has joined the cast of the sci-fi thriller "Meander" directed by Mathieu Turi, whose post-apocalyptic debut, "Hostile", was a genre film hit. WTFilms, a co-producer on the film, is handling worldwide sales and has unveiled the first still from the movie.

Written and directed by Turi, the English-language film stars Weiss as a woman who wakes up in a labyrinth of strange tubes full of deadly traps. Her only option is to keep moving forward, but it is not clear how far she can get. Peter Franzen, who also starred in "Vikings", plays a man whose intentions are mysterious.

"Meander" is produced by Eric Gendarme, Thomas Lubeau, Marc Olla and Jordan Sarralie at Fulltime Studio, and Sandra Karim, Julien Deris and David Gauque at Cinefrance Studios.

"With Mathieu's vision added to Gaia's talent, we have no doubt this will be a breathless film which will keep the audience on the edge of their seats," the producers said in a statement.

Gregory Chambet from WTFilms said that the film's "contained concept" reminded him of the film "Cube," which "to this day has rarely been equaled." (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Elizabeth Banks is set to direct and star in "Invisible Woman" for Univer-



Banks



Weiss

sal, which is based on her own original pitch.

"The Girl on the Train" scribe Erin Cressida Wilson penned the script with Banks and Max Handelman producing for their Brownstone Productions. Brownstone's Alison Small will executive produce.

Plot details are being kept under wraps, but sources say Banks'

pitch is very different from the "Invisible Man" film coming out in February that stars Elisabeth Moss, and there is no crossover potential on either film.

The news follows the announcement that "Rocketman" director Dexter Fletcher is helming "Renfield", which is a new take on Dracula's henchman and, like "Invisible Woman", fits into a new

strategy Universal is taking when it comes to its IP. The studio had originally planned on creating an interconnected universe with its vast catalog of monster IP. However, the studio reassessed, and decided to move forward with filmmaker-driven projects based on the monsters' legacies, focusing on what made the characters endure over time. (RTRS)