

MARKET PREPS FOR THE NEW NORMAL

■ By DAVE MCNARY

THE INDEPENDENT FILM AND TELEVISION

Alliance is forging ahead on Nov. 9 with the 41st edition of the American Film Market with a full slate of 300 exhibitors and 200 speakers for conferences, panels, conversations, workshops and podcasts.

John Cena, SAG-AFTRA president Gabrielle Carteris, John Sloss, Jeffrey Greenstein and Megan Colligan are among the high-profile participants. But the glamour is gone along with the glitzy parties and the impromptu meetings at restaurants and bars, and get-togethers by the pool and in the hallways of the Loews Santa Monica, Le Merigot and the Casa Del Mar hotels.

Karinne Behr, CEO of MSR Intl., puts it bluntly: "I'm going to miss the pier party."

That sentiment is echoed by David Garrett, CEO of Mister Smith Entertainment: "I'm very much going to miss the conviviality. I'm not missing the travel and the exhaustion that come with it, but it is incredibly important to stay in touch. You have to work very hard to do that."

AFM is one of the independent film industry's key sales markets along with the European Film Market at the Berlin Film Festival in February and Marché du Film at the Cannes Film Festival in May. The Cannes Market shifted to a virtual platform in June due to the coronavirus pandemic.

AFM 2020 Online is touting an interactive market experience featuring eight dedicated areas — including a networking pavilion experience for attendees where they can explore and join more than 100 video discussions with small groups every hour offering "face-to-face" meetings and connections that happen organically on the AFM floor.

IFTA announced in mid-July that it was abandoning a physical AFM and following in the footsteps of the Cannes Virtual Market. It also shifted its schedule so as not to overlap with Election Day on Nov. 3 in the United States. It announced in August that accredited buyers will receive complimentary credentials — buyers usually pay \$495 for a credential.

Jonathan Wolf, AFM managing director, says one lesson learned from Cannes was that participants were flummoxed by the festival's proprietary system for screenings — leading to the decision to let sellers use their own technology.

"We asked other trade fairs in other industries what was working," he says.

Brian O'Shea, CEO of the Exchange, says AFM has been hugely important for independent films because sellers have been able to



GETTING IT DONE

Family film "Father Christmas Is Back" (top) and horror pic "A Banquet" both shot during the pandemic and will be for sale at the American Film Market.

use the event to create focus during the market for a title with competitive bidding.

"That process creates value and awareness for independent films," he notes. "It is a challenge now, but you can still do business and you save a lot of money by not having to rent space at the Loews and not taking people to dinner."

Delphine Perrier, co-founder of Highland Film Group, admits that going through the virtual Cannes was "eye-opening" in that she was able to conduct business effectively if not quite as efficiently. "I miss the glamour," she adds.

Highland's other co-founder, Arianne Fraser, says the pandemic has forced everyone to be far more attentive to coordinating schedules. "And there's no drink time," she notes.

Tatyana Joffe, president of international sales and distribution for XYZ Films, says the new normal at AFM doesn't seem that novel any more.

"The good news is that we already had Cannes and Toronto so we kind of know what to expect," she says. "So it's not as scary in this environment. We learned that a lot of buyers are more cautious and selective."

Amid the ongoing uncertainty over production in an era of extensive safety protocols, a heightened focus on completed films has emerged, Joffe notes.

"If you have high-quality footage, there is business to be done," she adds.

Behr agrees, noting that MSR has a pair of recently completed films shot in the U.K. — "Miss Willoughby and the Haunted Bookstore" with Nathalie Cox and "Father Christmas Is Back" with Kelsey Grammer, John Cleese and Elizabeth Hurley.

"We're not going to be in beautiful Santa Monica, but we've been very lucky to stay busy during the pandemic," she adds. "There's a big appetite for content."

Jean Prewitt, IFTA president and CEO, says the indie business has remained resilient. "It's been an unending series of hard knocks at every level. It's difficult to produce, distribute and get insurance amid all this uncertainty.

"Cannes provided a strong signal that people in the business can still sell and pitch 12 hours a day," she says. "It shows that the people in this business have outstanding flexibility and are fleet of foot."

Mister Smith's Garrett concurs that being able to offer finished films such as thriller "Lakewood," directed by Phillip Noyce and starring Naomi Watts, which began filming Sept. 16 in Ontario under strict COVID-19 protocols, when getting productions insured is difficult will be a plus at AFM. "People are focusing on things that are real," he adds. 