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Distribution company to sweeten sour taste at box office

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Advertisement

"BITTER and twisted" might sum up the mood of several Australian filmmakers who have forlornly watched their films struggle at the box office.

Despite marketing campaigns and media coverage, *Not Quite Hollywood* and *The Square*, to name two recent Australian films in local release, have earned less than a mere \$500,000 combined after several weeks in cinemas; that's a fraction, roughly 1%, of what a US blockbuster can expect to earn in Australia.

Ironically, *Bitter & Twisted* is the title of a self-funded feature that marks the entry of a new company devoted to Australian films that have slipped through the distribution cracks.

Australian Film Syndicate has been established by filmmakers Stavros Kazantzidis and Allannah Zitserman (*Russian Doll*, *Horseplay*) and film critic Peter Castaldi.

Two years ago Kazantzidis and Zitserman set up a festival in rural Dungog, NSW, for films in digital formats without a distributor in place.

There they saw many good and marketable films, but what they realised is that unless a film has a distributor on board chances of finding one are next to nil. It is that hole in the distribution chain that Australian Film Syndicate wants to patch, says Castaldi, AFS's national distribution manager.

Before this, Castaldi spent two years managing a program designed to get new Australian films into regional cinemas for the former Australian Film Commission.

AFS's strategy is to deal primarily with independent and regional cinemas and to traffic only digital formats.

Unlike mainstream distributors, which usually put onerous and restrictive demands on cinemas, AFS will offer individual and flexible deals with exhibitors, Castaldi says.

"We will play the market any way we can, placing a film on three screens, five sessions per week if that's required. We are answering a demand that exists."

According to Castaldi, the bulk of independent cinemas have already installed digital projection equipment.

The potential is such that its films will be available to 100 regional cinemas by February.

Despite perceptions to the contrary, regional cinemas account for a good slice of earnings.

According to the Motion Picture Distributors Association, country cinemas provided almost 30% of box-office gross last year, compared with 16% in 1988.

Digital exhibition circumvents the problems that previously plagued regional cinemas — namely, the delay in getting costly 35mm film prints, which are often only available when a film has finished its city run, as well as freight expenses.

Another benefit of digital, says Castaldi, is the opportunity to make minor changes to a film after the distributor becomes involved, as happened with *Bitter & Twisted*, without having to strike new prints.

Bitter & Twisted is AFS's first film and the feature debut of 28-year-old Christopher Weekes. It is an ensemble film about a family's reaction to the untimely death of their son three years earlier. It received glowing reviews when it screened at the Tribeca Film Festival this year, but has had little exposure locally other than closing this year's Dungog Festival.

Its release next week at the Palace Dendy Brighton will be an exception to AFS's regional strategy. It was decided to get the film out early in anticipation of possible AFI Award nominations, which Castaldi believes may be forthcoming for lead actress Noni Hazlehurst and Weekes' screenplay.

Another Dungog "discovery" that AFS will handle is *Honeymoon in Kabul*. The film, directed and co-written by Ian Hamilton, is about a doctor and midwife couple who go to Kabul for their honeymoon with the intention of doing good deeds, but discover that delivering aid to Afghanistan can be as tricky as any second marriage.

Sneak previews of *Bitter & Twisted* will screen this weekend at Palace Brighton Bay.

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