



# THE AUSTRALIAN

Printed September 10, 2008 01:58am AEST

## Clouds hang over local silver screen

REEL TIME: Michael Bodey | September 10, 2008

**IT is a brave soul who distributes an Australian film in this market. There's been much gnashing of teeth about the two most recent Australian releases, *The Square* and *Not Quite Hollywood*.**

The drama directed by Nash Edgerton dropped off the box office charts with about \$240,000, while the documentary about 1970s Australian cinema made less than \$100,000. If that wasn't bad enough, the Australian International Movie Convention on the Gold Coast last week named *The Black Balloon* the highest grossing Australian film of the past 12 months. Its \$2.2 million take would not have made it the highest grossing local film in any calendar year since 1988, when records began. Which is not necessarily a reflection of the film. Even so, brave souls enter this territory. But that is what Dungog Film Festival founders Allannah Zitserman and Stavros Kazantzidis and former Triple J film critic Peter Castaldi will do this week when launching a new local film distribution business, Australian Film Syndicate. The company begins with next week's release of *Bitter & Twisted*, Christopher Weekes's self-funded drama starring Nomi Hazlehurst, Steve Rodgers and Leeanna Walsman. Zitserman says the company aims to build on the success the couple have had screening Australian films at Dungog, a festival that has become a welcome hub for new films and their makers in just two years.

LIFE isn't so bad for US films, with Roadshow the box office beneficiary at last week's Australian International Movie Convention. Roadshow won the most awards for films grossing more than \$10 million, and the gold award for the highest-grossing film of the past 12 months, *The Dark Knight*, which has passed \$44 million. Interestingly, Roadshow thanked the industry for containing piracy. Despite opening the film here before anywhere else in the world, no pirate versions found of *The Dark Knight* had been sourced from Australia in the first week. Roadshow's Brett Rosengarten even noted that one punter nabbed in the first weekend was setting up a tripod to record the film in a cinema. All up, 28 films grossed more than \$10million, leading some to think the gold barrier may be extended to \$15million. Roadshow had seven of the \$10 million hits, 20th Century Fox six, four each for Paramount, Walt Disney and Universal, Sony Pictures Releasing two and Icon one. Behind *The Dark Knight* were *Mamma Mia* (\$29 million), *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (\$29.3million), *Sex and the City* (\$26.9 million) and *Kung Fu Panda* (\$25.7 million). The award for highest-grossing foreign language film went to Paramount's *The Kite Runner*, which earned more than the highest-grossing Australian film. Another box office tidbit: *Death at a Funeral*'s \$15.9 million take here has pipped Icon's previous best, *The Passion of the Christ*. The boss will be happy. Or maybe not, considering Mel Gibson heads Icon.

THE year ahead looks particularly enticing for cinemagoers, if the presentations at the AIMC are anything to go by. Roadshow delivered a noteworthy presentation to cinema exhibitors, distributors and media, anchored as it was by a beautiful introduction by the author and subject of Mao's *Last Dancer*, Li Cunxin. Bruce Beresford and Jan Sardi's adaptation promised a sweeping and authentic look at the former ballet dancer's extraordinary life. Universal's line-up appeared particularly strong too, anchored by a sneak preview of Sacha Baron Cohen's follow-up character to Borat, gay fashion reporter Bruno (released here in May) and a video presentation from Richard Curtis. The writer of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Notting Hill* looks set for another smash here with his next film after *Love Actually*, *The Boat That Rocked*. Curtis's last six films as a writer or director have all earned \$18 million to \$22 million here. That's consistency. Linguists will enjoy the year ahead: Eddie Murphy stars in a film where his character has only 1000 more words to speak before he dies (*A Thousand Words*), Jim Carrey challenges himself to say yes to everything for a year (*Yes Man*) and Ricky Gervais stars in a comedy set in a place where nobody has ever lied (*This Side of the Truth*).

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