



Dreaming across cultures – Celluloid Dreams President Engameh Panahi

Celluloid Dreams – Diversity is good business

There is a common misconception about Celluloid Dreams.

After many years of bringing award-winning films to the market, the Paris-based company founded in 1992 is still referred to by many as a sales company, as if its core business consists solely in selling foreign rights to completed films in the international market. Take a closer look and you'll see a far more diverse and dynamic picture. Under the visionary leadership of Iranian born founder and President, Hengameh Panahi, the company seems to pick its projects according to its own vision and taste, and to take risks on the films it believes in by acting as a development, production and co-production partner.

“We were always a producer as well as a sales company,” says Gordon Spragg, Celluloid’s Head of Marketing. “As our company has evolved over time, we have moved into bigger projects. To survive in this business, you need to be aware of what works in a current market, hence we had to start making the move to larger budgeted English language films.”



Culture clash – Marajane Satrapi's *Persepolis*

Celluloid's track record in nurturing non-English language talent has made a big difference over the years to many directors whose body of work has enthused film buffs and festival juries all over the world. They include Jafar Panahi (Iran), Bruno Dumont (France), Otar Iosseliani (Turkey), Takeshi Kitano (Japan), Alexandre Sokurov (Russia), and Jean Pierre & Luc Dardenne (Belgium).

Even when they focus on the bigger English language projects, the Celluloid team manage to stay true to a sense of diversity and authorship that seems to lie at the heart of the company's editorial and business philosophy. In the past year alone, two of Celluloid's production headliners were Todd Haynes' very experimental Bob Dylan biopic *I am Not There* and the equally quirky and original *Son of Rambow*, a tender, poetic observation of two pre-adolescents obsessed with remaking the Sylvester Stallone actioner. This is hardly mainstream fare and it is a tribute to the company's enduring commitment to quality that it should consistently succeed in raising the profile of truly original filmmaking in the international marketplace.

Another strong feature of Celluloid's strategy is the engagement with new technology as an effective means of bringing the work of international directors to existing devotees and reaching out to new audiences. In 2007 the company became a partner of Jaman.com, a web community built around a site billed as the first year-round online film festival. Jarman has assembled one of the world's largest libraries of quality features and documentaries and provides a social network environment where users and filmmakers can interact and celebrate cinema. More recently, Celluloid announced a venture with The Auteurs to launch what the company describes as "a revolutionary new video-on-demand initiative," using the hugely popular Facebook social website as its conduit and offering easy downloads in high definition standards.

Gordon believes the revenue 'waterfall' in the video-on-demand model will eventually work far more to the advantage of companies like Celluloid Dreams than the current model, in which a small number of gatekeepers determine which films reach the public and with what degree of visibility. The business as a whole, however, is still behind the times. "We've had our head in the sand for a long while as an industry, but companies like ours are leading the way forward by really engaging with the medium and playing on the social networking effect that the online environment facilitates."

Gordon's background typifies Celluloid's unconventional approach to recruiting talent to its team. He cut his teeth in the film business working for London's Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), which exhibits cutting edge documentaries and feature films which break boldly with mainstream taste. This was followed by a stint at Hamish McAlpine's London-based specialist distributor Metro Tartan, focussing on quirky films from throughout the world and catering to a discerning market of genre *aficionados*.

A self-confessed genre buff, Gordon reluctantly admits to being partial to zombie movies. But the quirk is not out of place in a company which cultivates individual qualities and values a passion for film above anything else. At Celluloid, diversity is good business.