

Interest in Russian sci-fi epic builds

Contributed by Joseph B. Mauceri
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BY Nick Holdsworth

{Variety} - Producers of Russia's most expensive ever film, Fedor Bondarchuk's \$40 million adaptation of cult Soviet sci-fi novel "The Inhabited Island" are holding back from international sales, despite intense interest from Berlinale market buyers.

At a packed industry-only 10 minute promo screening at the European Film Market Thursday producer Alexander Rodnyansky said he wanted to build international interest before committing to selling either world rights to a Hollywood major or territory by territory to individual buyers.

Sales agent Raisa Fomina said buyers from key territories, including the U.K. were champing at the bit to do deals.

But Rodnyansky, who also runs Russia's top TV entertainment network CTC, is in no rush.

"We want to build interest first and see the possibilities of exploring different options to understand the potential of the movie," Rodnyansky, who is also serving on the Berlinale's international competition jury, told Variety.

A full two hours and 10 minutes long early cut of the film was due to be shown to Sony Pictures executives in Moscow. That version also would be sent back to Los Angeles for viewing by composer Hans Zimmer, who is creating a score for a film that blends Gulag and "Blade Runner" in the story of a 22nd century astronaut who crash lands on a planet run by a sinister totalitarian military order.

Other studios chiefs will also get the opportunity to see the film before sales start, Rodnyansky said.

"If a major player comes up with a good enough offer, I would definitely consider one international rights sale, otherwise we may do it on a territory by territory basis," Rodnyansky added.

The film, which stars newcomer Vasily Stepanov as the young astronaut Maxim whose destiny is to find love and save the planet, also features Bondarchuk.

Due for release across Russia on 1,000 copies probably January 1, 2009 and internationally within six months of that, the film is Bondarchuk's second as a director.

Rodnyansky plans a two picture release for Russia but one edited version for international.

Bondarchuk, whose father Sergei won an Oscar for "War and Peace" in 1969, had been due in Berlin for the promo screening but illness and editing demands in Moscow forced him to cancel.

Based on a novel of the same name written in 1971 — when Arkady and Boris Strugatsky found a way to write critically about Soviet society by setting their stories on far distant planets in other galaxies — its backers believe “The Inhabited Island” remains relevant today in the post 9/11 world of Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, Iraq and Afghanistan.