



INTERVIEW / FILM

Sales Agent's profile: Andreas Rothbauer - Picture Tree International

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ANDREAS ROTHBAUER / PHOTO: PTI H

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— ANDREAS ROTHBAUER

Before heading off to Haugesund and Venice, Picture Tree International founder Andreas Rothbauer spoke to us about his outfit's DNA and today's market for foreign-language film.

Berlin-based Picture Tree International, has been beefing up its Nordic acquisitions over recent years. Co-founded in 2012 by seasoned sales and distribution exec Andreas Rothbauer who helped build Beta Cinema's theatrical sales arm, the company is now jointly run by Yuanyuan Rothbauer, former head of international at China's Star Image Media Group. A key staff member and Nordic scout is Swedish-born Rickard Olsson, international acquisitions' executive.

Picture Tree International's core business is worldwide licensing of a dozen films per year across all platforms, but the company is also planning to ramp up its activities by setting up a production operation within the next few months.

Heading the company's Haugesund slate are Venice Days' entry *Beware of Children* by Dag Johan Haugerud, screening at a closed market screening at New Nordic Films, and the Swedish musical *A Piece of My Heart* by Edward Af Sillén, this year's big Christmas bet in Sweden for Nordisk Film.

Both films were supported by Nordisk Film & TV Fond.

Previous Nordic titles handled by Picture Tree International include the Swedish family film *Monky* by Maria Blom, sold to more than 15 territories including Germany, North America, Italy and Spain, Antti Jokinen's *The Midwife*, licensed to Turkey; Southeast Asia; China; USA; South Korea; Eastern Europe, the UK, Germany; Austria, Poland and Japan.

One of the company's very first pick-ups, *Metalhead* by Iceland's Ragnar Bragason, was sold to more than 20 territories including China, the US, Spain, Latin America, Eastern Europe, Australia/New Zealand, German-speaking countries, Spain, France and Japan.

What makes you stand out on the sales market?

Andreas Rothbauer: What makes us perhaps different is that we are a boutique company, handling small to medium arthouse films, but we sometimes behave as a bigger operation by taking on mainstream films. We're therefore very eclectic and the two brand new Nordic films on our slate reflect this: *A Piece of My Heart* is a mainstream comedy, while *Beware of Children* is an arthouse drama by a second-time director. By being eclectic, we avoid having several films in the same genre, that would end up cannibalising each other. We also take risks by picking up films at a very early stage, before a festival selection. We need time as international sales agent to put a film on people's radar and it does help to be on board early. We want to give a perspective to a film and help distributors get accustomed to a film.

At what stage did you come on board *Beware of Children* and *A Piece of My Heart*?

AR: Rickard made us aware of *Beware of Children*. We liked the project. We knew it would need a major festival exposure, as it's a second film by a relatively unknown director, with a medium budget film. We knew all that, but believed in its ability to cross over and get the buzz going because of its topic [parents' difficulty to take responsibility when confronted with a drama involving their child]. The film is also produced by Motlys in Norway, which has an excellent track record.

Having the film selected at Venice Days has obviously fuelled people's interest and put the film on the map. We're having a private screening in Haugesund to give it a testing ground.

Regarding *A Piece of My Heart*, we had worked previously with Patrick Ryborn on the film *Monky*. He is a fantastic producer. We liked the fact that it's a musical, straight in line with *Mamma Mia*, with a great score from Tomas Ledin, and Hollywood/Swedish actress Malin Åkerman among the heavyweight cast including as well Jonas Karlsson and Johan Rheborg.

Financially, what do you bring to the table?

AR: Before starting Picture Tree, I worked at Beta Cinema for 12 years.

I know all about licensing deals, distribution. My partner Yuen comes from a big Chinese distribution company [Star Image Media Group]. We both bring our experience, know-how and contacts and of course, we offer the classic MGs against sales.

On our publicly-funded level, it's not about brokering deals and packaging, like for bigger structures or with the Anglo-Saxon approach. But what we are planning to do is to open a production outfit, later this year, as a daughter company of Picture Tree. We are already looking at projects as potential German-co-producer and sales agent.

What we've noticed is that often, producers don't always know what they need in terms of financing. It's too much up in the air. Therefore, by coming on board as German co-producer; we will be able to take informed decisions, and those decisions will be driven not only by the artistic merit of a film but also on its international potential.

Would you agree with LevelK's Tine Klint who said that 'selling films today is about knowing how to navigate through the rights puzzle'?

AR: Yes definitely. Our main function today is to be on top of rights management and market trends. Producers often do not have very defined expectations beyond the wish for a festival premiere. They are also not so close to the international market. We jointly need to develop a pragmatic approach with producers that goes beyond the prospect of a festival premiere as a main or sometimes single hook.

Generally speaking, how is the international arthouse market these days? Are indie arthouse distributors definitely more risk-averse?

AR: There is no more middle ground. Fifteen years ago, we could tell a producer: hey I give you X amount of money as MG because TV was buying, people were still going to the movies, there was a safety net. But now, you can't make your investment back. Distributors are under pressure. Sub-licensing to TV is tougher, home entertainment has died, SVOD is not giving an immediate return - besides a Netflix or Amazon deal. Most arthouse distributors therefore rely on theatrical and today theatrical has become extremely tough. Therefore, distributors are very picky and even the topnotch films provide no guarantees. Without the various domestic and European support schemes for theatrical distribution, the picture would not get much nicer.

The German case whereby the majority of films (more than 200 per year) often do not pass 5,000 admissions at home and half of them do not have a sales agent, is not an exception in Europe. It also shows the dramatic change in the market and how much film policies need to adjust and clarify the reasons why so many films are being funded.

How do you work with producers on the international marketing campaign? Could you give an example with *A Piece of my Heart*?

AR: We picked up the film before AFM 2018 and first launched it there, as we felt it is a more mainstream film with pre-sale potential. We showed a first short promo that Patrick created. The response was great. Along the way, we looked at what Nordisk Film is doing on a local level, adjusting our strategy. We're looking at the final theatrical trailer to see if we can use it or have a different approach.

Regarding the film itself, we decided with the producers to do an English-language version of the songs, using the same cast, but leaving the dialogue part in the original version. The original songs in Swedish are almost part of the Swedes' DNA, but that's not the case internationally and not all distributors have the time and money to do a dubbing of the songs. The English-language version, recorded by the cast itself, will be ready around October. We will show it in private screenings at some autumn markets before the wide Swedish release on December 25.

What tips do you have for producers?

AR: I can only recommend for them to think out of the box. Do some research before approaching a sales agent to check which one would be best for your films, and make innovative decisions that go beyond brand emotions. Finding the right partner and the earliest possible increases the chances of every film in an international context.

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