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## Who's To Blame For Demise Of Auteurs?

By Charles Masters

Publication: The Hollywood Reporter

Date: Tuesday, January 9 2007

PARIS -- In 2001, three of France's most respected independent producers -- Humbert Balsan, Paolo Branco and Gilles Sandoz -- formed a distribution alliance called Pirates.

Five years later, Balsan tragically has committed suicide, his company's financial troubles believed to have contributed to his worries; Branco's company, Gemini Films, filed for bankruptcy protection last November; and Sandoz admits he's finding it increasingly tough to complete financing on projects.

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Branco and Sandoz are not the only auteur producers in France finding it tough going. "Producing auteur films is no longer viable," says Denis Freyd, who produced the Dardenne brothers' Palme d'Or-winning film "The Child" under his Archipel 35 banner. "It's a sad certainty that the financing and production of auteur films in France is becoming increasingly difficult," echoes Martine

Marignac, veteran producer of auteurs Jacques Rivette, Otar Iosseliani and Jean-Marie Straub.

So who is to blame for the demise of the art house producer in the country that invented the genre?

Branco, who has already launched a new company, Alma Films, is unequivocal: "Today it is channel chiefs and banks who decide which films get made," he said in a candid interview with film review Les Cahiers du Cinema.

Marignac concurs: "While fully respecting their legal obligations (to invest in local movies), the channels think quite logically not in terms of cinema but in terms of primetime. When they read a script, they don't think whether it's a good theatrical film but if it'll be good for their ratings at 8:30 p.m."

On top of this, pay channel Canal Plus has radically reduced the sums it puts into auteur pre-buys. Whereas in the past, the company might have put 15% into a Rivette film, Marignac says, its stake in the veteran

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helmer's latest offering, "Don't Touch the Ax," is about 5% of the budget.

As a result, France's mainstream networks are concentrating most of their annual film spend on a handful of comedies with well-known stars, leading many to bemoan the uniformization of current Gallic production.

"For a film to interest any channel other than Arte, you have to have a strong script, an attractive known cast and a director who's gained some recognition," says Bertrand Gore, co-chief of Sunday Morning Prods. alongside partner Nathalie Mesuret. "There's also a tendency for networks to put money into low-budget genre films, which takes the place of what could have been first or second auteur films," Sandoz adds.

But Marignac says exhibitors are also to blame in part for the auteur woes, thanks to their "infernal" policy of rapid turnover, which no longer allows word-of-mouth to build. "Even films making perfectly honorable scores are moved off screens where they would have stayed for another four to five weeks in the past," she observes.

"The biggest worry we have is the profound change in the way films are

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