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NZ film makers attracting overseas funding

New Zealand's \$2.6 billion screen industry has been given another financial boost with the gathering of some of the world's top documentary and film buyers in Auckland.

Buyers from China, Japan, Taiwan, the Middle East, the Netherlands, Canada, Australia and New Zealand took part in the highly successful inaugural 2006 DOCNZ Forum led by Ewa Bigio, Chairperson of DOCNZ Forum, the latest industry initiative to have emerged from the DOCNZ Trust. The DOCNZ Forum ran in association with DOCNZ documentary film festival screening in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. According to Ewa who curated the Forum programme and format, "The DOCNZ Forum consists of a combination of market and educational opportunities encouraging New Zealand film-makers to look beyond the local landscape for documentary financing and distribution and for the international market to focus on local talent".

Debra Zimmerman, one of the panellists who heard 12 pre-selected teams pitch for funding, says the idea to have a training day on how to make the best pitch, prior to the forum, was such a success that she is going to introduce it to New York festivals.

Zimmerman is executive director of Woman Make Movies, the largest distributor of films about women in the United States. She is also on the Boston, Long Island, Northhampton, New York Children's, Frameline, San Francisco and Asian Cine-Vision (MY) film festival boards.

Asked about the likelihood of any New Zealand projects being funded, Zimmerman says some will definitely get their money. Negotiations with buyers from ABC in Australia, NHK Japan, Al Jazeera from Dubai and a variety of other international networks are continuing.

Muriwai film maker James Frankham and his project "Waka Moana" won the DOCNZ Forum/AIDC Award which includes a guaranteed place at the highly contested Australian International Documentary Conference in February in Brisbane attended by leading commissioners from all over Europe and North America, while Chris White and Echo di Zhu of Auckland, with their project "Healing Nation" won the Best Pitch Award.

Alex Lee, DOCNZ Chairman, highlighted DOCNZ's commitment to bringing the widest range of the very best documentaries from around the world and to create new opportunities for documentary film-makers in New Zealand and challenged everyone to continue promoting the genre and its value.

Zimmerman's view is supported by Sean Farnel, director of HOTDOCS, the premier documentary film festival in Canada. The pair says DOCNZ's programme is impressive in that it covers some of the best documentaries showing and winning awards at documentary festivals throughout the world, mixed with some impressive New Zealand stories.

"We started in the same way in Canada," Farnel says. "There is no reason this New Zealand festival can not become one of the most prestigious in this part of the world."

Broadcasting Minister Steve Maharey lent his support, presenting the Best Emerging NZ Documentary Film-maker award to Kirsty MacDonald. She also won the best NZ Short Film award for her profile of Mani Mitchell in "Black & White".

Mr Maharey says DOCNZ is a significant development on the cultural calendar and it is likely to benefit from government support of documentary making through the Screen Innovation Production Fund and NZ On Air and from the development of regional TV, Sky's new documentary channel and the recently announced digital platform "Freeview".

Research by NZ On Air in 2005 found NZ documentaries continued to be the most frequently watched programmes in NZ households. In the 04/05 year NZ on Air spent \$9 million on documentaries and \$9.6 million is budgeted for 05/06.

Mr Maharey says the Screen Innovation Production Fund tends to support low-budget and experimental documentaries.

"Since January 2000 nearly a quarter of the completed low-budget documentaries it has supported have appeared on TV," he says.

The winner of the Best NZ Medium Documentary, Luke Wheeler for his study of a family entitled "4 Geese in a Flock" was made with the help of \$7,000 from the fund.

Dan Shanan, DOCNZ's festival director, says the festival which moves on from Auckland to Wellington from September 25, has attracted strong audiences to films which explore parts of the world that are culturally very different to New Zealand, films about triumphs over adversity and those about New Zealanders made by New Zealanders.

The list of award winners can be viewed on www.docnz.org.nz and they will screen at the Academy Theatre in Auckland September 18-20.

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