

San Sebastian Posts a Vibrant Edition, Studded by Stars, Breakouts, New Talent Discoveries

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Ten takeaways from what looks like San Sebastian's biggest edition ever in star wattage, the caliber of Spanish filmmaking, and the number of deals reported by Variety, set in the context of vertiginous change in international independent film and TV landscape.

San Sebastian 2024: The Stars Align

Never before have so many stars descended on San Sebastian. Why? "I think two factors are at play," San Sebastian Film Festival director José Luis Rebordinos told Variety. "The Festival has gained in strength and importance over years, which makes it more attractive to stars. Their attendance depends, however, very much on luck, related to their availability. Many times they want to come but during our dates have commitments," he added. Maybe, one could venture, when less movies and series are getting made in Hollywood, especially on its challenged indie scene, more talent is currently available.

Buzz Titles

San Sebastian is also about new talent and Spanish-speaking movies. This year, these factors converged. Packing feminism, sharp and polished, *The Wailing* had more industry-minded pundits talking about its director, Pedro Martín-Calero, as yet another great genre auteur from Spain, with crossover international potential. *La guitarra flamenca de Yera* Cortés, from Antón Álvarez, better known as singer-songwriter C. Tangana, was hailed as a dazzling and powerful debut. As San Sebastian wound down Friday, Alauda Ruiz de Azúa's four-part *Querer*, a Movistar Plus+ original, was being acclaimed as the Spanish series of the year.

The World's Film, TV Industry: All Change

If there was one takeaway from the 3rd Creative Investor's Conference, orga-



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nized by San Sebastian and CAA Media Finance, it is that the same younger demos driving the post-COVID box office rebound in general are driving numbers for independent industry. That pivot is playing out worldwide. AMC Networks' Scott Schoorman drilled down on the U.S. specialty pic genre surge. In France, Charades' Yohann Conte noted there's now a larger audience for first-time directors. In Italy, "Rai Cinema's Italian film slate used to be bourgeois drama. Now that class doesn't go to the cinema almost anymore. You make movies where the drama has been moved – to lower classes," said Lorenzo Gangarosa, at Our Films.

More Buzz Titles

In main competition, substantial doc-feature *Afternoons of Solitude* looks set to confirm *Pacific* director Albert Serra's status as a major filmmaker. Pilar Palomero's *The Glimmers* scored the highest rating on a Diario Vasco Spanish critics poll, followed by Laura Carreira's *On Falling* and Mike Leigh's already Toronto-consecrated *Hard Truths*.

Xin Huo's *Bound in Heaven* was a large audience favorite. Out of competition, *The Red Virgin* was praised for its across-the-board values. In New Directors, there was good word on Swiss film *Bagger Drama* while critics were asking if Pedro Almodovar's *The Room Next Door* could mean his first Best Picture nomination....

Argentina Fights Back

Filmmakers from around Latin America and beyond met to protest at Javier Milei's cuts to Argentine subsidies. With which Milei is shooting himself in the foot, curbing an industry identified by Europe and U.S. states as an economic growth driver. Argentine cinema is not quite dead. Pampa Films announced a corker: *Homo Argentum*, and producers around Europe and Latin America rallied to launch Lisandro Alonso's next. Most crucially, however, the abandonment of an exhibition quota, is already decimating Argentine movies' theatrical runs.

Promoting Big Talent With Large Style

You can't fault Spain's ICEX with a lack of originality. As other governmental orgs run trad ads, Spain's export board has backed a seven-minute short, unveiled at San Sebastian, *La causa del accidente que provocó el incendio*. Playing in part like Carlos Saura's *El Amor Brujo* on speed, but more meta and modernist cool, it turns on a young director caught in a panic attack that her short makes no sense at all. Featuring cameos from Cannes best actress winner Karla Sofía Gascón, J.A Bayona, Serra, Elite's Omar Ayuso, ICEX's short does make large sense, forefronting Spain's large talent. The short is now bound for Mipcom, AFM and the Busan festival.

Spain, More Recognition At Last

Just days after a Netflix data dump recognized Spain as leading the surge in popularity in non-English film and series viewing, the Investors Conference underscored the dramatic contrast in the U.K. and Spain as filmmaking nations as the latter's muscular tax incentives become a byword for Europe's fulsome soft moneys. This,

however, is not throwing good money after bad, said an Olsberg-SPI report unveiling that these productions generated an estimated minimum of €1.8 billion (\$2.4 billion) in Gross Value Added (GVA) contributions to the national economy. Little wonder the Spanish government views audio-visual as a priority growth sector.

Let's Hear It for Animation

2023 was the best year for Goodfellas' Vincent Maraval, in the last 25 years, thanks to animated feature *The Boy and the Heron* which grossed \$47 million in the U.S. The film may have made the money less due to being animation and more to being Hayao Miyazaki latest and most probable last. Yet, "when it comes to animation, for some reason we never lost €1 on animation," Yohann Conte at Charades, a doyen of European animation sales agents, said at the Creative Investors' Conference. If adult, the key to animation is its potent potential value in second and third windows, especially streamers. Some international family animation indie movies do break out, however, such as this week *Buffalo Kids*.

The Long Shadow of AI

Every pitch, roundtable and watercooler discussion at San Sebastián's 5th high tech Startup Challenge competition seemed to center on AI. Many included assurances that their software was developed within an ethical and legal framework. When it wasn't addressed during a pitch, the first question from the event's panels of judges was often about the legality of the product being promoted. Nearly half of the pitches were designed not only for large media companies but included B2C business plans for solo digital-first content creators such as YouTubers, influencers and independent animators.

And the Deals

For over 30 San Sebastian deals, including multiple news exclusives, see Variety.

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