Steve Tisch’s $10 million donation to Tel Aviv U. turns hard-scrabble overachiever into a flagship training ground

**GROWING PAINS, SOME GAINS AT BEIJING FEST**

Fifth edition shows promise, but falls short of world-class status

BY PATRICK FRATER

The Beijing Int’l Film Festival wrapped its fifth edition April 20, and despite its substantial resources — reportedly a budget of $15 million — and the recent appointment of festival veteran Marcus Mueller as a special adviser, it remains more of a work in progress than a film lover’s treasure trove, or a film executive’s essential destination.

The hiring of Mueller, a Mandarin-speaking intellectual, seemed to signal a shift from the festival’s bumptious first years toward something more film-focused and user-friendly. Working with his established programming team, Mueller, whose family endowed NYU’s Tisch College of Film and Media Studies, seemed to compete and overlap in the space of just 40 days, was able to put on a credible competition and gala section including Jean-Jacques Annaud’s “Wolf Totem” and Tigz Ellis’s “The Taking of Tiger Mountain.” Indeed, the festival opened with Paolo and Vittorio Taviani’s “Wondrous Boccaccio” (oddly, the film didn’t screen at the official opening-night gala, which featured plenty of spectacular stagecraft) and closed with upmarket Hong Kong action film “Helios,” from Luk Kin-ding and Leonard Yang. Louis Malle, who also landed the world premiere of Japanese veteran Hara Sogetsu’s “Love & Peace,” Mueller insisted he was troubled by unwanted directives or heavy-handed censorship in picking his 20 films. But the festival seems to remain more a platform for flashy grandstanding than for matters of cultural substance, with numerous deals between Chinese and foreign companies trumpeted at signing ceremonies.

Moreover, the festival and the marketplace — which sported an extensive program of industry-focused panels and events — seemed to compete and overlap in their conference and seminar sections. Co-productions and China’s international openness were often discussed, yet not much of substance was said.

The fest’s project and pitching events seem to hold long-term promise, promoting and rewarding creative skills such as script development and creative production, skills that are in short supply. It was regularly noted by industryists from China and elsewhere.

For all its current failings, the Beijing fest will continue to be significant, because China is a growing economic power that offers a financial lifeline to foreign filmmakers at a time when the traditional movie business model is under threat. It also provides an opportunity for delegations of U.S., Arab and European executives to visit Chinese regulators and connect with those mainland companies whose executives have not yet become international jet-setters.

Mueller says a purpose-built festival center may be in the cards, and he hopes for more integration between the festival and the marketplace. But judging by the fifth edition, he may do well to focus on films, filmmakers and film education.

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**ISRAELI FILM SCHOOL GRADUATES TO TOP OF CLASS**

Steve Tisch’s $10 million donation to Tel Aviv U. turns hard-scrabble overachiever into a flagship training ground

BY SUEZANNA KAHAN

Tel Aviv U’s Film and Television School, the highly regarded Sam Spiegel Film & Television School in Jerusalem, TAU’s is one of a number of educational institutions in Israel with a program that specializes in the cinematic arts, but unlike its competitors, including the highly regarded Sam Spiegel Film & Television School in Jerusalem, TAU’s is the one only integrated into nine-year academic curriculum, giving students a well-rounded education.

“It wasn’t just a film school,” says Levi, who earned his degree from the university in the 80s in part of a class of graduates that also included Folman and Etgar For. “Walking on Water,” “Yossi,” “The craft of filmmaking was not the main focus. The theoretical side was of course very important, but we studied a lot of literature and other topics. It was academic.”

Shachar Magen, a fellow alumn and creator of several successful Israeli television series, including “First Family” and “Sirens,” echoes Levi’s sentiments.

“I knew all about Sam Spiegel in Jerusalem, and it’s a very good school,” he says. “But I also wanted to study other things. This is the only place (in Israel) where it’s not only about television.”

As a result of Tisch’s gift, the department has been elevated to the status of a full-fledged film school. It is currently ranked among the top 15 international schools of film and television in the world, and the donation will allow for the purchase of new equipment, and boost the school’s ability to attract top faculty, offer scholarships and increase international collaborations.

For Reiss, equally important is the department’s new appointment: the Steve Tisch Chair of Film and Television at Tel Aviv U. “He really gave us a gift,” she says, “because he also gave us his name.”

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**GLOBAL**

YU, USC, UCLA – and now TAU!

Just like those well-regarded U.S. film schools, the Tel Aviv U. School of Film and Television has developed its own brand of excellence, with successful alumni such as Gideon Raff (“Homeland”), Hagai Levi (“Sirens”), Ari Folman (“Waltz With Bashir”) and Avi Nir (CEO of top shingle Keshet), all heavyweights of the Israeli film and television industry, and known for their crossover success into the American market.

And now Tel Aviv U. has something else that’s similar to its well-funded brethren – an endowment from a Hollywood benefactor.

Last month, producer Steve Tisch (“Forest Gump,” “The Equalizer”) and his wife, Ingrid Filip, endowed TAU’s Department of Film and Television with $10 million for a new endowment in honor of the school’s former CEO, Steve Tisch, which will include funding that will completely transform the campus and Tisch hopes, further position Israeli film and television projects in the international arena.

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The gift wasn’t a spur-of-the-moment decision. Last month, producer Steve Tisch traveled to Tel Aviv, having been invited to serve as honorary chair of the annual student film festival. Once there, he was inspired by the talent and commitment of the would-be filmmakers.

“Every student I met at Tel Aviv U., every class I sat in on — the passion, the desire and the creativity of those students was tangible,” Tisch says. “These are filmmakers who really have a vision, and to me that’s exciting.”

Gail Reiss, president and CEO of American Friends of Tel Aviv U., was among those who helped recruit Tisch to attend the film festival. At the time, the producer — whose family endowed NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts in the 1980s — had not been to Israel for several decades. But it was clear, Reiss says, that Tisch didn’t want to return as a sightseer.

“From the moment he landed, he was all ours,” she says. “He lectured and had conversations and sessions with students and faculty.”

The Israeli film and television industry is known for its relentless irreverence and ability to produce international hits with severely limited funds. TAU’s Dept. of Film and Television is something of a microcosm of this ferocious creativity — and it was that rawness, Reiss says, that Tisch liked.

“It was a rough cut,” she says. “It’s not a polished school. What he fell in love with was the ability to see a department grow into a school.”

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