

Melbourne reveals pitch winners as industry head Mark Woods steps down

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New Zealand producer Morgan Leigh Stewart has won the best pitch award at Melbourne International Film Festival's industry market, which closed with confirmation that MIFF Industry director Mark Woods is to step down after 16 years.

Stewart secured the prize for her efforts pitching relationship horror *So Lonely I Could Die* at 37thSouth Market, MIFF's film co-financing event, which ran from August 3-6. This year, 37thSouth hosted 4,000 meetings and 26 international financiers, not including those attending virtually.

The film, written and directed by Andrew Todd and Johnny Hall (*Ghost Shark 2: Urban Jaws*), is produced by Auckland-based The Hot House and was seeking a local distributor and international sales agent.

"It's about an unhappy couple stranded in the bush, who must suffer the help of a desperately cheerful recluse hellbent on salvaging their relationship before their misery awakens something beastly," Stewart told *Screen*. The underlying theme is how toxic relationships can destroy people.

The award includes a place at the UK's Production Finance Market (PFM), set to take place in London this October, along with \$2,000 (A\$3,000) toward her trip. Two Australian producers that were also awarded places at PFM included Jess Parker of Perth-based No Labels and Dan Lake of Melbourne-based Orange Entertainment. Parker pitched thrillers *He Ain't Heavy* and *The Jesus Machine*, both by writer/director David Vincent, while Lake presented Liselle Mei's *Seeing Red*, set to star Joan Chen, and Christmas comedy *Katie Tries To Die*, of which the latter has yet to attach a director.

On the final night of the market, MIFF chair Teresa Zolnierkiewicz publicly confirmed that it was the last for MIFF Industry founder and director Woods, who has run the industry side of the festival since 2007. Praising the work of the long-standing director, Zolnierkiewicz told market participants: "He has a fierce intellect, a strategic mind, an entrepreneurial mindset, deep and broad networks, an enviable memory, and the drive to work incredibly hard and put in 100% as a minimum."

Woods was first appointed by former MIFF chair Claire Dobbin, who charged him with building a film financing market, the Accelerator Lab talent platform and local film pipeline through the Premiere Fund. Around 100 films have since been supported by the Premiere Fund, which have won more than 200 awards.

Recent titles supported by the fund include Noora Niasari's Sundance audience award winner *Shayda*, which opened MIFF on August 3, and actor Mark Leonard Winter's debut feature *The Rooster*, which received its world premiere at the festival on Saturday. At a panel discussion yesterday, producer MahVeen Shahraki said Woods "saved" *The Rooster* by pulling financial strings after other funders could not contract in time to accommodate actor Hugo Weaving's available dates.

Woods is a former CEO of both Screen Ireland and Ausfilm as well as having served as head of content investment and international acquisitions at Showtime Australia. Prior to MIFF, Woods co-invested in or executive produced productions including *Rabbit Proof Fence*, Cannes Palme d'Or winner *The Wind that Shakes The Barley* and Martin McDonagh's Oscar-winning short *Six Shooter*.