

## **Report From The East European Forum Jihlava, The Czech Republic and The Sheffield Doc Fest & Meet Market, U.K.**

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Fall is always a busy festival time for those of us in the business of buying, selling, making and funding documentary films. Choosing where to go can present a dilemma for a first time filmmaker who has a project to pitch or for a buyer/acquisitions person on a limited budget. Combining some sort of industry conference and pitching session within the context of a film festival is a great two-for-one that provides distributors like me the best opportunity to both see great finished films that are looking for distribution as well as talking to filmmakers who are looking to raise funds for works in progress.

If you had to pick only one event/festival a year to attend I have always recommended that North American filmmakers go to HOT DOCS in Toronto, in the spring, first as an “observer” in their two day industry forum, to get the lay of the land and figure out who is who in the international documentary world. Then, when you actually have a project to pitch, you’ll be more confident and you’ll have an idea of who might be interested in talking to you. It’s cheaper than going to IDFA (International Documentary Film Festival/Forum Amsterdam – generally regarded as THE go to event for doc makers) and you’ll generally meet the same folks in Toronto as you would in Amsterdam.

This year I was pleased to be invited to attend two venues that were new to me; the East European Forum and East Silver doc market in Jihlava, a city north of Prague in the Czech Republic (10/21-10/31/2010) and The Sheffield Doc Fest and Meet Market (11/3-11/7/2010) in the U.K. The Jihlava event is supported by the IDF (Institute of Documentary Film based in Prague) and it includes a yearlong boot camp (Ex Oriente Film) and international workshop environment that supports the development and funding of creative documentary films in Central and Eastern Europe. Filmmakers are nurtured in this system that includes development funding, seminars, case studies, editing workshops, and individual consultations. Completed films get further distribution support from IDF through the East Silver Market and are promoted on line at [www.DOKweb.net](http://www.DOKweb.net) - It is a portal providing comprehensive information on the East European documentary industry, with over 9,000 documentary films, a festival directory, industry contacts and news.

I had no idea what to expect in Jihlava as I chatted with my driver on the nearly two-hour drive from the airport in Prague to the city that has hosted this event for the last 10 years. Jihlava has a distinctly medieval feel with its all cobblestone streets and sidewalks, surrounded by an ancient stonewall. There was not much vehicular traffic

nor were there many pedestrians except for the beehive of activity surrounding each of the festival's venues. It was as though the city existed to host this annual event. A comment that my driver alluded to suggested that not much happens in Jihlava the rest of the year. After dropping my luggage off in my room at the charming pension booked for me by the program organizers, I wandered around the city, checking on the locations for each of the events that were on my schedule. By accident I happened into the practice session for the projects that were selected to be pitched at the forum starting the following day. The atmosphere was welcoming and collegial, and there was a distinctly collaborative and supportive approach that set the tone for all the events that followed over the next few days. This for me is what made Jihlava unique from all the other festivals and industry markets that I have attended in my 20 years in the business. There was a quality of intimacy – in part because there were no other distractions – if you came to Jihlava it was pretty much for this event, so you stayed focused on the business at hand, to meet and talk to filmmakers about their work. I met producers as well as broadcasters from Bulgaria, Poland, Austria, Slovakia, Croatia, Latvia, Romania, Estonia and of course the Czech Republic. The organizers were innovative in the way they structured the pitching sessions, which were followed up by roundtables with buyers, distributors and broadcasters. This format encouraged more open dialogue and meaningful discussions with producers than what we've come to expect at most pitching forums.

On the drive back to Prague, I reflected on the unique and rich experience I had had in Jihlava and would gladly return in the future. After a quick stint back in my Massachusetts office, I left for the Sheffield Doc Fest and Meet Market, held every fall in the industrial town north of London and another, almost 2 hour drive, from Manchester airport. It was also my first time to Sheffield and I was enchanted by the rolling green hills, dotted with sheep and small country homes that accented the roadside. Suddenly, the bustling city of Sheffield seemed to spring-up out of nowhere. Quite a different environment than Jihlava. This was indeed a much larger, and more frenetic event – but that is not to imply that it wasn't well organized. I had been invited to attend the two day Meet Market that was embedded in the week long, prestigious, Sheffield Film Festival, where one of the films we distribute, *Secrets of the Tribe*, was being shown. Several weeks prior to the market, Charlie Phillips, the Marketplace Producer, sent me copies of the 65 project treatments with their budgets that were selected to participate in the event. This gave me, along with the other industry reps, an opportunity to see ahead of time what we were really interested in. Once we had our list of projects selected, Charlie and his hardworking staff scheduled one on one meetings with the producers that spanned the two-day period. The meetings are held in what appeared to be a space ship from a 1950's Flash Gordon movie called "The Hubs" – located right across the street from the main screening venue and delegate registration/hang out area. There was an intensity to the Sheffield market where you felt there was more at stake and more potential for making connections that would lead to cutting an actual deal than at most other marketplace events I've attended. While the pressure was on during the day to make the most of every encounter, there was plenty of relief in the evenings with VIP social/networking events and gala parties - all within easy walking distance.

I've left so much out about the wonderful people I'd met in both Jihlava and Sheffield, the great films I'd seen and the promising works-in-progress I had the privilege to discuss. As of this writing, Sheffield has been shifted from a fall to a spring event, so now's the time to plan if you intend to go in 2011. Perhaps I'll see you there.

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