

Steady Climb Of Ticket Prices Helped Lift U.S. '78 Pix Rentals In Arg. To \$14,800,000, Up 59.5%

Buenos Aires.

Rentals for American film companies in Argentina showed a spectacular rise of 59.5% last year (from \$8,800,000 in 1977 to \$14,800,000 in 1978), according to the latest report of the Motion Picture Export Assn. of America.

Although no data has been released yet on the performance of foreign pix being handled by independent distributors, trade observers believe they have benefited at least in the same proportion. The number of U.S. and European films launched by independents roughly matches or surpasses that of American majors.

Of the 45 pix which sold over 100,000 tickets in Buenos Aires' firstruns during 1978 — according to National Film Institute's figures — 25 were distributed by American companies, 19 by independents and the remainder was a native pic.

Dollar-wise, the economic strength of Argentine film market is explained by the steady increase of ticket prices, from less than \$1 in early 1976 to as much as \$2.25 nowadays. Generally speaking, the film industry here chose to concentrate on the affluent sector of the population since the purchasing power of nonskilled workers began to deteriorate some three years ago. The result has been much better grosses with less attendance.

A contributing factor to this development was the virtual disappearance of Argentine pix as major competitors after 1975. If one looks back to 1972, it's seen that exhibi-

tors booked 91 local films for 46,934 dates and 1,066 foreign titles for 182,012. This means the ratio of screen time was one Argentine pic for every 3.83 foreign ones.

Censors' Crackdown

No official reports on the Argentine market were known after that year, but it was evident that the national product kept its b.o. appeal during 1973, 1974 and part of 1975. Tight censorship imposed after the banning of Leopoldo Torre Nilsson's "Piedra Libre" discouraged producers from tackling either mature or somewhat daring subjects, which alienated audiences almost overnight.

The consequence was that a large part of the dates being filled until then by native pix were open to other product. This situation encouraged independent distributors to step up their activities. The existing companies increased their purchases of foreign (mostly European) pix and several new ones jumped on the wagon in the following years.

So, a growing number of Argentine buyers was seen at Cannes and Milan from 1976 on. Competition among them and the growing economic potential of the Argentine market combined to heighten the prices they paid for product offered at those and other markets. This was especially noticeable during 1978 and at the 1979 Cannes Film Festival.

Of the 20 main hits at B.A.'s firstruns during the first half of this year, 12 were released by inde-

pendents and eight by American majors. But this result at the top doesn't give an accurate picture of the present situation, since it may mislead people to think that the balance of commercial success is still swinging toward the independents. It might be true only in the case of some of them.

Product Glut

In reality, the independents have purchased more pix than the market can absorb, especially in high season. Some managed to get good bookings for titles with drawing power, but others were shelved to make room for product handled by American companies.

Therefore, several of the buyers who were active in the latest editions of Cannes and Mifed still have in their vaults part of the pix they purchased there, with the prospect of having to release them off-season.

At presstime it was generally agreed in film circles here that at the Indian Summer Mifed may again be gathered the leading Argentine independents (Distrifilms, Aries, Gamo, Vigo, Transeuropa, CCN, Televersal, Centuria, Imperial, Orbe, Vanguardia, Artkino) as well as others (Maxifilms, Patagonia, Acuario, Central, etc.) but with an attitude far more conservative than in past film markets. The scarcity of good dates during the spring-summer period from October '79 to March '80 could mean very risky purchases for an already saturated market.

Other factors play a role in cooling the enthusiasm of the independents. Although the overall b.o. takes of 1979 are higher than in 1978, according to estimates, attendance in some areas of the country (notably Mendoza and Bahia Blanca) has fallen dramatically, to the point that this year nearly 70% of the Argentine film gross is ob-

tained in Buenos Aires and the surrounding area, while just 30% comes from the interior (against 50-50 in the past).

B.A. Tastes Rule Biz

This has reduced the number of b.o. hits to those that fit the tastes of B.A. viewers, with the result that no more than a dozen pix have sold over 150,000 tickets in firstruns during the first half of 1979. This, obviously, reduces the trade's willingness to gamble in high-priced product.

Furthermore, there has been a spectacular rise in the cost of advertising, printing and other promotion items. Albeit they have notably reduced the size of ads, distributors are spending much more than last year in the launching of each film.

Not all the pix distributed by independents in Argentina are bought by them. In no few cases they handle product purchased for all of Latin America by powerful buyers based in other countries, mainly Venezuela and Brazil. The same happens even with some top American imports, such as those of Dino De Laurentiis, being distributed here by Luis Scaella's Distrifilms.

Exhibs' Helping Hand

It has been evident of late, both at Cannes and Mifed, that representatives of top Argentine exhibitors lend a financial hand to distributors engaged in the buying spree. It is difficult to tell whether that means that some chains are the real owners (or at least main partners) of the independent companies they back.

Observers feel that might be true only in a very few cases, if at all. Most are inclined to believe that exhibitors just act as lenders, against the usual interest rate in terms of dollars and, of course, the assurance that the product acquired with

their money will be released in their theatres.

There has been a growing number of Argentine releases this year, but except for some aimed at specialized audiences (moppets, fans of comic stars Porcel and Olmedo) none was a blockbuster. So, there is still wide room for foreign offerings in the Argentina's theatres, but the market has a limit that was surpassed by the excessive imports of recent times.

A moderation in purchases is deemed unavoidable to reestablish a balance between offer and demand, as well as to avoid bankruptcy of the overoptimistic and the underfinanced. The realities of 1979 figures have already sobered more than one distributor.

Buenos Aires To Mifed

Hector Olivera
Hugo Vainikoff
Alejandro Sessa
Vicente Vigo
Alberto Bacchi

(plus some 20 other distribs and exhibs flying via charter directly to Italy.)

Barnouw Updates 'India'

"Indian Film" is due from printers next February as both hardcover and paperback, in revised version by Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy.

Barnouw is Chief, Division of Motion Pictures, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound, at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C.. Krishnaswamy is documentary producer in Madras.

The two updated their earlier collaboration on "Indian Film," published some years ago and now expanded per recent Barnouw scholarly trek to India on foundation grant. Publisher again is Oxford U. Press.

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and others

At MIFED: Mr. Hugo Vainikoff