

All the right elements

Initial may have had a quiet Cannes, but now all the elements are in place, it's taken off, with successes such as HBO blockbuster If These Walls Could Talk. Christopher Pickard reports

If the walls in Milan could talk they would tell you that Graham King and Cindy Cowan's Initial Entertainment Group had a quieter than normal Cannes Film Festival. They could also tell you that a quiet Cannes was no bad thing for a company which since 1995 has, through its affiliations with major European banks, financial institutions and private investors, produced a number of well-received feature films, developed financing and development capital, and offered co-production facilities and international distribution services to independent filmmakers.

At Milan, Initial steps up a notch with a slate of projects that puts them ahead of many of their rivals who are still only talking and planning to make the jump to larger, theatrical pictures. Initial is one of the first companies to show that it is not all talk behind the walls.

"We couldn't find the right product," Initial's president of worldwide distribution, Graham King, honestly admits. "Today we are a lot more selective and picky in what we go after in order to get the mix right, it was tough in Cannes not having anything new, tough not only for us but for our buyers looking to Initial for between six and seven pictures a year. We will still give them six to seven pictures but they will be bigger pictures with household names. We are going to give our clients serious cast value. In Cannes, I said to my buyers 'Wait for Milan. We will be back to deliver with all the right elements.' I don't think they will be disappointed."

One project on the Initial slate is only available for television and video, but could easily have gone out theatrically in virtually every major territory. It is *If These Walls Could Talk*, the acclaimed trilogy of stories about three generations of women and how unplanned pregnancies touch their lives. Produced by Demi Moore and Suzanne Todd, *If These Walls Could Talk*, is directed by Cher and Nancy Savoca and stars Moore, Cher and Sissy Spacek and was the highest-rated film to premiere on HBO ever when it screened 13 October with an estimated 19.4 million viewers tuned in. Translate that at US\$7.50 a ticket and you have an "opening night" of



If These Walls Could Talk

over US\$145 million which compares favourable to the opening weekends of *Mission: Impossible* and *Independence Day* at around US\$56 million and US\$50 million respectively. The theatrical restrictions were placed on *If These Walls Could Talk* by the talent, but it is a project that should guarantee television buyers astronomical ratings and video buyers strong unit sales.

"The buzz created by HBO on *If These Walls Could Talk* is quite extraordinary. They supported it with a marketing campaign equal to any major studio theatrical release and obviously for an independent company to be able to offer a cast like this is very good," says King, who had sold out on

virtually every territory before arriving in Milan.

Milan has always been a good market for Initial. "It's the best market of the year for me," says King. "I have big expectations and hope to have a lot of fun at the same time." King has not waited for Milan to get the ball rolling. Like many others he attended the London screenings but to talk, not screen. He had been to London a month prior to Milan to show a select group of buyers what the company would be unveiling in Milan which also revealed what a step up Initial was making.

New for Milan, and a project King calls "the big one", is an action drama, *Savior*, the story of a mercenary hired

by the Serbs who finds his redemption when he is forced to protect a newborn Croatian baby during war time in Bosnia. Principal photography begins in Europe on 11 November. Peter Antonijevic will direct Robert Orr's screenplay — which, according to King has been extremely well-received by all his key buyers — with Dennis Quaid attached to play the mercenary. Initial is financing the project to the tune of some US\$10 million and has Oliver Stone as executive producer and Jane Yang and Naomi Despres' Ixtlan on board as producers.

"*Savior* is a theatrical picture, no doubt about it," says King, who is also allowing buyers in Milan the opportunity to see a trailer of Roberto Benabib's romantic comedy *Little City*, which wrapped just prior to the market, with Josh Charles, Annabella Sciorra and Jon Bon Jovi starring.

"This is exactly the type of film we want to make," says Cindy Cowan, president of production and acquisitions. "It's a witty, charming script that is also cutting edge and exceedingly progressive. We have talented filmmakers who are ready to break out, and a dream cast that is interesting, eclectic and exciting. *Little City* is a terrific and sexy project that will appeal to both a domestic and international marketplace."

Initial is also starting to promote the sequel to the company's popular and profitable television feature *Rent-A-Kid*, which starred Leslie Nielsen and Christopher Lloyd. The sequel, *Family Plan*, is firmly targeted at the theatrical market and King says should be seen as a "full-blown Leslie Nielsen theatrical feature." Scheduled to go into production in early January, King will not be actively selling *Family Plan* until all the elements are "set in stone."

King, however, is hoping that his buyers will get the same kick he did out of David Semel, Marin Kunert and Matt Copper's *Twilight Zone*-type of supernatural thriller, *Campfire Tales*, which Initial is screening in Milan and hoping to place theatrically in most of the major territories. The company acquired the film over the summer and King says it was one of the best films screened to sales companies over the period. "It is a well made, classy picture," King says. "Not run-of-the-mill in any sense of the word."