Producing and distributing independent animated features for the global market is not for everyone. You have to know the business, be able to evaluate a project’s commercial potential and prepare a movie for a global audience. Just ask Fred deWysocki, the tenacious and seasoned producer whose company Fantastic Films International has brought titles such as Thru the Moebius Strip, The Living Forest, Spirit of the Forest and Agent Crush to numerous territories over the past few years.

deWysocki and Fantastic president Roxane Barbat will have a strong presence at the Cannes Film Market this year with two interesting and very different animated features.

The first pic is Delhi Safari, a stereoscopic 3-D feature from Krayon Pictures of Pune, India, directed by Nikhil Advani. It follows the adventures of a group of animals in a once-protected reserve in India, who are being threatened by urbanization. Sultan the leopard, Bagga the bear, Bajrangi the hot-tempered monkey and Alex an obstinate parrot are some of the colorful players in this road picture, which finds the animals on a trek to Delhi to plead their case in front of the government. The top-notch voice cast includes Cary Elwes, Brad Garrett, Christopher Lloyd, Jane Lynch, Vanessa Williams and Jason Alexander. Delhi Safari has also received special support from PETA for its environmental message and a storyline that centers on protecting animals in their natural habitat.

“We liked everything about this film,” says deWysocki. “It has a great heart and message, has some great music and great dancing in the classic Bollywood tradition. We also think the property can turn into a bigger franchise. In the sequel, animals in other countries ask for their help. We’re planning the sequel, which will be called Beijing Safari, with partners in China.”

Fantastic Films delivered the English adaptation of the film in Los Angeles last year and put the finishing touches to the project earlier in 2012. deWysocki believes that the film is able to really hit the core demographic of animated family film. “In many ways, it’s similar to movies like Madagascar or Rio. You look at the poster and you can really get it. It has some memorable animal characters and a really strong storyline. We are in discussion with major studios to bring it to the U.S. as well.”

After winning the Best Animated Feature award at the FICCI Frames confab in India, the movie will be ready to make a splash at the Cannes Film Market this month, and will also unspool at the Annecy Animation Festival in June. deWysocki sees a big future for the Delhi Safari gang. “We can really have these animals visit different countries and cities in every movie. Of course, we’ll introduce new characters for every chapter.”

Also on Fantastic Films’ slate this year is a stereoscopic CG-animated feature called Z-BAW, which is produced by Mexican studio Imagination Films. Set in a distant galaxy, the movie follows the adventures of a team of underdog heroes who plan to win a challenging intergalactic Z-BAW (a futuristic game which is a cross between hockey and soccer) tournament and save their planet from the evil ZAX and Nthurax Corporation. Directed by Ricardo Gómez, the film was release in Mexico last month through a new partnership with produc-
tion company Candy Box.

“You have an evil corporation that is trying to steal the trophies and a ragtag team that stands in their way of ruling the world,” says the producer. “It’s a really fun adventure. When it opened in Mexico, it was the top animated feature of the week.”

One of the important aspects of the global toon business is when to get involved with a project. As a rule, Fantastic Films likes to tackle a feature as early in the development game as possible. “The earlier we get involved the better,” says deWysocki. “Sometimes to get proper distribution comes down to what type of work we do with the voices and the adaptations. We can start our sales process with our distributors at those early stages. Script changes, voiceover cast, edit choices—you can address all these issues early on in the game and make it easier for distributors to pick up the title sooner.”

Since many countries provide government subsidies for animation production, many producers create films that are too regional for global audiences. “That has been one of our challenges in recent years,” says deWysocki. “These films are written to emphasize local folklore, culture and elements. We need storylines and characters that are universally appealing and transcend cultural and national borders—just like the best films of Pixar and DreamWorks. As it’s often been said, it all comes down to the story. We don’t just work with the companies to sell their films, we also exec produce. We can maximize the return and the sales cycle for these films.”

In addition to Delhi Safari and Z-Baw, Fantastic Films is also working on two more stereoscopic films with IMAGINATION: Alley of Dreams, a holiday-themed period movie which is slated to be completed by the end of 2012, and Papagio the Great, a circus animal feature which should ready in 2013. As all this activity seems to indicate, the next few years are going to be a busy period for the L.A.-based producer.

“Interest in animation has been growing ever year,” he points out. “It has always been a hot commodity, because in many ways, it’s a recession-proof business. Audiences continue to demand titles that the whole family can watch together. In many ways, these movies can be the additional babysitter at home.”

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