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Market Profile

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Strand Releasing Market Profile

In 1989 Jon Gerrans and Marcus Hu founded Strand Releasing, launching with Lino Brocka's film *Macho Dancer* from the Phillipines. They had initially procured this film to show at the Strand Theater specifically in San Francisco, where Hu was working part-time.¹ Since then, they have been featured in two decade retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art, in addition to having been honored at a multitude of festivals including Los Angeles's Outfest.² The fact that an independent film distribution company outlasted the 1990s, an era marked by larger studios buying up indie studios, is impressive in itself, but cultivating a respectable reputation within such a large commercial system relies on a steady and loyal audience.³

When considering Strand Releasing's target audience, it is important to note its counter-programming approach. Strand Releasing is not known for heavy profit, rather remains to operate at a profit level due to their strategic buying.⁴ Historically, Strand Releasing made a name for themselves through foreign films, American independents, and LGBT films, so their biggest box office hit (a German-Israeli LGBT film, entitled *The Cakemaker*) pales in comparison to other major studios,⁵ but their commitment to promoting and producing these films exclusively have created a loyal audience, and an honorable place within the film community. In their most recent retrospective at the MoMA, director of the Sundance Film

Festival John Cooper, proclaimed that the film community “owe[s] a huge debt to [Strand Releasing]” and that they are first and foremost “survivors” within the commercial industry. The CEO of Focus Features praised Hu and Gerrans for “always go[ing] to the voices that nobody else will listen to and make them appear in the culture, often on the margins.”⁶ Taking this, it is more appropriate to discuss Strand Releasing’s success outside of the confines of commercial system, as they serve a niche market as opposed to a mass market audience.

Strand Releasing has definitely had many successful art films, such as *Before I Forget* (2007) and *The Headless Woman* (2008), both of which maintain above 70% with critics on Rotten Tomatoes.⁷ They continue to pick up art films at festivals such as Cannes Film Festival, Berlin Film Festival, and Outfest, focusing on artistic foreign films (such as *The Golden Glove*, SR’s upcoming film from critically acclaimed Turkish-German director Fatih Akin), LGBT films (such as American director James Sweeney’s film *Straight Up*), or a combination of the two (Italian film *Mom + Mom* from Karole Di Tommaso).⁸ In order to maintain a profit level, Strand Releasing has also endeavored in re-releasing films, such as *The Graduate* (1967; 1997 re-release) and *Contempt* (1963; 1997 re-release), associating themselves with distinguished auteurs such as Mike Nichols and Jean-Luc Godard, respectively.⁹

It is less accurate to say that Strand Releasing is outside of the commercial system, rather that they rely on maintaining their niche market instead of losing their audience in an attempt to appeal to a more mass market audience. They operate with one film at a time, distributing around six films a year and acquiring at max twenty, so they are able to be fiscally responsible with each new release.¹⁰ This instilled a sense of trust within the film community, but also within the audience they had already cultivated: it at least gives off the impression that Strand Releasing cares personally for every new release, and respects film as an art form.

Their best chance going forward, which is what has allowed them to be the “survivors” for almost three decades, is to stay true to their audience, meaning those marginalized or underserved by the big distribution companies. This could mean those belonging to the LGBT community, or those otherwise unseen in more traditional, commercial blockbusters. Success for a Strand Releasing film is then based on social and cultural relevance, and its resonance among those who see LGBT films, art films, and foreign films, which is much more difficult to measure. Their continued recognition among film festivals and art societies, however, only increases their name-brand recognition. This is the main aspect they have going for them now: their name meaning something to filmmakers trying to get their film distributed, and to the viewers who have turned to Strand Releasing to provide counter-programming to mass-market pictures for almost thirty years.

¹ Melissa Anderson, “20 Years in, Strand Still Releasing (Prudently) on the Edge” <https://www.villagevoice.com/2009/07/01/20-years-in-strand-still-releasing-prudently-on-the-edge/> (last accessed 11 September 2019)

² Indiewire, Distributor Profile: Strand Releasing. <https://www.indiewire.com/2010/08/distributor-profile-strand-releasing-245098/> (last accessed 11 September 2019)

³ AMC Filmsite, “The History of Film: The 1990s – The Era of Mainstream Films and “Indie” Cinema, the Rise of Computer-Generated Imagery, the Decade of Re-makes, Re-releases, and More Sequels” <https://www.filmsite.org/90sintro.html> (last accessed 11 September 2019)

⁴ Anderson’s *The Village Voice* article quotes Marcus Hu and Jon Gerrans as they discuss their approach to procuring films, explaining the balance of a few successful tentpole films supporting less successful films, and relying on low risk expenditures. <https://www.villagevoice.com/2009/07/01/20-years-in-strand-still-releasing-prudently-on-the-edge/>

⁵ *The Cakemaker* had a total lifetime gross of \$875,751, which in a chart of all-time domestic ranks at 8,133, but in a chart exclusively for foreign language, ranks at 507.

<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=thecakemaker.htm> (last accessed on September 11, 2019)

⁶ Eugene Hernandez, "Cinema First: Hu & Gerrans, Surviving and Thriving, for 20 Years" <https://www.indiewire.com/2009/07/cinema-first-hu-gerrans-surviving-and-thriving-for-20-years-70197/> (last accessed on September 11, 2019)

⁷ Rotten Tomatoes Critics Consensus – important to note, the audience score for both films is much lower than the critics (86% vs 39% for *Before I Forget* and 75% vs 56% for *The Headless Woman*) https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/headless_woman (last accessed on September 11, 2019)

⁸ <https://strandreleasing.com/coming-soon/> (last accessed on September 11, 2019)

⁹ BoxOffice Mojo: Strand <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/studio/chart/?view2=allmovies&view=company&studio=strand.htm> (last accessed on September 11, 2019)

¹⁰ *The Village Voice* interview with Jon Gerrans and Marcus Hu <https://www.villagevoice.com/2009/07/01/20-years-in-strand-still-releasing-prudently-on-the-edge/> (last accessed on September 11, 2019)