

UNITED KINGDOM

FRESH BLOOD

The iconic UK production outfit Hammer Films is back (again) as part of the ambitious UK-US production, sales and financing label, Exclusive Media Group. Co-chairmen Simon Oakes and Nigel Sinclair reveal their plans to **GEOFFREY MACNAB**

Is Hammer really “rising from the dead” again? The UK company that made *Dracula*, *Prince Of Darkness*, the *Quatermass* movies and *The Devil Rides Out* has often seemed on the verge of resurrection. As 2009 begins, it is clear the long-predicted revamp is happening for real. And in its new incarnation, Hammer promises to be even more powerful than in its Christopher Lee prime.

Hammer is now part of Exclusive Media Group (EMG), a highly ambitious new outfit backed by Dutch investment company Cyrt. EMG (previously known as HS Media) is the holding company for two production brands: Hammer and Spitfire. **Simon Oakes** and **Nigel Sinclair** are co-chairmen and co-CEOs, while **Guy East** is president and chairman of the executive board of the sales and distribution operation.

Spitfire is now in production in Bulgaria on **Peter Weir's** *The Way Back*, to which **Colin Farrell** and **Ed Harris** are attached. Other projects on its slate include *Young Caesar* scripted by **Bill Broyles**, *No Man's Land* written by **Chris McQuarrie** and *Snitch* scripted by **Justin Haythe**, who recently adapted *Revolutionary Road* for **Sam Mendes**.

Spitfire also has a documentary arm which has produced titles such as **Martin Scorsese's** 2005 Bob Dylan film *No Direction Home*, and Scorsese's forth-

coming George Harrison documentary.

Meanwhile, Hammer is cooking up new horror films, the genre with which it is synonymous. Having announced its return last year with *Beyond The Rave*, an online horror serial made with Myspace TV, it is now preparing *The Resident*, which will star **Hilary Swank** and is due to shoot in late spring, and *The Wake Wood*, which is now in post-production and will be the first completed Hammer movie in almost 30 years. The company has also recruited *Cloverfield* director **Matt Reeves** to write and direct a remake of Swedish horror picture *Let The Right One In*, to be made in partnership with Overture Films.

“Contrary to what people thought we would do, we haven't concentrated on the re-imaginings or remakes of the back catalogue,” says Oakes of Hammer's strategy. “We've focused in on the high-end thriller-chiller area.” However, Oakes and Sinclair acknowledge the company is “very interested” in reviving the *Quatermass* franchise, a series of films about a scientist who battles alien forces.

EMG also has a new sales and distribution company, Exclusive Films Distribution (EFD) under former Capital Films executive **Peter Naish**. As well as handling Hammer and Spitfire films, it will also acquire some third-party product.

Further down the line, Oakes says,



Exclusive's Spitfire arm is working with **Peter Weir** (top) and **Martin Scorsese**



Simon Oakes



‘Independent film budgets rarely go above \$50m or \$60m. Would we make a \$100m movie? Yes — we'd do it with a studio’

Nigel Sinclair

“There is a more-than-even chance that we will have [our own] distribution in the UK under the Hammer label.”

With a development team in both London and Los Angeles, Exclusive is on the lookout for horror properties to filter on to Hammer, and dramas, thrillers and comedies for Spitfire. Naish and his team aim to provide distribution and financing for films that are already packaged.

As Sinclair says: “Genre movies are starting to cannibalise themselves. What Hammer aims to do to stand apart from the mass is produce upscale genre titles with stars and A-list directors.”

With Spitfire, projects will always be driven by ‘signature’ directors or writers, talents such as Weir or McQuarrie, says Oakes, and films in the same vein as the movies Sinclair and East oversaw in their time at Intermedia (for example, *Iris* and *Hilary And Jackie*). “In a difficult time like this, you end up with a rush to quality,” suggests Sinclair of what distributors now crave.

“Independent film budgets rarely go above \$50m or \$60m but would we make a \$100m movie? Yes, we would — we would do it with a studio,” says Sinclair. “At Intermedia, we made *K-11* for \$90m but generally speaking, our budget range is probably \$15m-\$40m.”

At last November's AFM, Exclusive was one of the few companies to leave Santa Monica in a relatively upbeat mood, despite it being the company's first official market.

“We were extraordinarily fortunate because just at the end of the market, we secured Hilary Swank's commitment to *The Resident* and so were able to snap up a couple of good deals,” Sinclair says.

The Exclusive principals will not reveal quite how large their war chest is but reported estimates suggest that between production and development financing and operational capital, the company has approximately \$100m at its disposal. “Having raised our capital is a blessing for us. It would be a difficult time to raise fresh money,” says Sinclair.

Oakes, meanwhile, insists the company will respect “the Hammer legacy”. Previous attempts at reviving Hammer have often been thwarted by the complex rights situation surrounding its old titles, many of which are co-owned. The aim now, says Oakes, is to prove to co-owners and potential partners that the company has the will and the resources to “re-imagine” old classics such as *Quatermass*.

“The heyday of Hammer was the late '50s and '60s when it made not only the great genre films like *Dracula* but also films like *The Nanny* and *Taste Of Fear*. We've tried to go back and say, ‘What is the DNA of Hammer?’ We're trying to reposition it for a modern audience.”



The Wake Wood (left) is the first completed Hammer film in 30 years. Hammer is also remaking Swedish horror picture *Let The Right One In*

