

BRITWEEK

SPRINGBOARD FOR BRITS IN LA

The three-year-old BritWeek (from April 21) introduces UK talent to the Los Angeles film industry. **JOHN HAZELTON** looks at how UK film actors, producers and directors can benefit

It was three years ago that UK TV executive Nigel Lythgoe had the idea for an event "to celebrate everything British" in the US. *American Idol*, which Lythgoe was at the time executive producing after having developed the original British format for creator Simon Fuller, was at the peak of its ratings power, he recalls, "and then all of a sudden the British stars started coming over".

The British presence in US TV — and, as evidenced by the recent *Slumdog Millionaire*-dominated Oscars, in US film — is as strong as ever. And BritWeek, the Los Angeles event that sprang from Lythgoe's idea, has grown into a three-week programme spotlighting British film, TV, music, sport, fashion and even science.

The marketing purpose behind the celebration, explains Bob Peirce, the British consul-general in Los Angeles who worked with Lythgoe to get the idea off the ground, is to provide "a ready-made focus on Britain. It's basically a platform that will now exist every spring in Los Angeles for British companies, British individuals and others with British connections."

Packed programme

With Peirce acting as board chairman and Lythgoe as president, BritWeek organises

some of its 20-odd events itself and, in Peirce's phrase, "co-brands" others with outside companies or groups. Leading sponsors for 2009 include Fuller's 19 Entertainment, British Airways, Fox Broadcasting, Mini, Virgin Atlantic, UK Trade & Investment and the Saban Family Foundation (*Screen International* is also a sponsor).

This year's programme starts formally on April 21, when former UK prime minister Tony Blair will be guest of honour at a gala dinner benefiting the Malaria No More non-profit NGO. Also scheduled are concerts by Jeff Beck and The Sweet, a music industry conference, a fashion industry event, a reception with the British American Business Council as well as darts, football, cricket and golf matches.

The programme's film and TV events include a one-day film-makers' forum on April 24, a comedy festival on May 8 and a UK Film Council-organised April 26 screening, with a reception to follow, of the 2007 British feature *St Trinian's*.

Titled 'Over There', the forum will have sessions on directing, pitching, producing and acting, with participants including directors Michael Apted, Jim Sheridan and Kenneth Branagh, producers Nigel Sinclair and Andy Harries, former HBO Films head Colin Callender (who is also

a BritWeek committee member) and *Fantastic Four* star Ioan Gruffudd.

Peirce suggests the forum will cater to US producers considering a shoot in the UK, and to UK industry members looking to work in the US.

"People have told me we need to find a way of doing more for the independent film-makers, both US and UK," he says. "What we're trying to do here is help people take advantage of what's available on the other side of the pond. Hopefully we'll come out with some fairly clear messages about why it makes sense to do something across the pond and how you can do it in a way that means not having to make mistakes that everybody else has made before you."

Selling British experience

That aim, he adds, has become all the more relevant with the recent strengthening of the dollar against the pound and the squeeze on film finance sources: "There are things about how the industry has worked over the years in the UK, where money has always been more of a struggle, that might now be more relevant to US producers," he points out.

The BAFTA/LA British Comedy Festival offers an opportunity to expose UK comedy talent to US industry players.

Working with British Comedy Awards producer Michael Hurll, BritWeek selects British comedy TV shows and movies to put before a panel of US judges, which picks its winners from a US perspective. Last year's panel included one-man comedy factory Judd Apatow and the UK group included Harry Hill and Ricky Gervais.

"We can bring comedy over here and ask American executives to judge it, to say what they think is funny here," Lythgoe explains.

The festival, which stages its awards dinner at the end of BritWeek, also recognises lifetime achievement and this year the newly christened Charlie Chaplin Award for a career's worth of comedy will go to Tracey Ullman.

This year's BritWeek line-up, Peirce hopes, will consolidate the event's position and further broaden its scope. He is hoping that future events will involve more British fashion designers and help new British bands break into the US market.

"My five-year programme is to have BritWeek firmly established as an annual period in the LA calendar where there is a focus on Britain," says the consul-general. "And I want it to be as broad as possible."

For his part, Lythgoe is keen to see outside organisations such as the UK Film Council more involved in conceiving and staging BritWeek events. "They're the ones that know what they need to do here," he says. ■



From top: BritWeek organiser Nigel Lythgoe and participants Michael Apted, Nigel Sinclair, Andy Harries, Kenneth Branagh and Bob Peirce



The UK Film Council will screen *St Trinian's* during BritWeek