



SUCCESS STORY

## Cinémoi: Film promoters with star quality

CINÉMOI IS BRINGING FRENCH FILMS TO THE WIDER PUBLIC. ITS CEO AND FOUNDER, OLIVER BENGOUGH, TELLS *INFO* HOW HE SPOTTED A GAP IN THE MARKET. SINCE ITS LAUNCH, CINÉMOI HAS GONE FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH.

French films are loved and respected around the world. Their stars are easily as great and popular as those from Hollywood. But whereas American films are widely viewed on television and have numerous TV channels dedicated to showing them, the French film is barely visible. This gap was spotted by Oliver Bengough, a London businessman, and he has set about correcting it.

The result has been the launch of the Cinémoi television channel on Sky to great acclaim. Cinémoi is dedicated to showing exclusively French films and news about the French film market. The success of the launch of the channel has been recognised by the French Chamber of Commerce, which awarded Cinémoi its Annual Intercultural Trophy at its Gala dinner (see picture).

The channel's early authority was assured by the appointment of one of the world's connoisseurs of French cinema as its director and artistic supremo. Julien Planté, who's 31, has been instrumental in selecting films for display on Cinémoi, and for making contacts with the industry's key powerhouses in Paris, Cannes, Geneva and California.

Julien was a well-respected programmer for the French Institute and had attained a leading position in the British foreign film community. He explains how he made progress at the Institute. 'My job there was to choose all the themes, organise all the events and festivals. I transformed this cinema and made it one of the main art house cinemas in London, with a programme of not just French films but European cinema. I welcomed famous directors and actors including Jude Law and the director Abbas Kiarostami (the Iranian director of a Taste of Cherry and other films). At some point in mid July 2008 I met Olly (Oliver Bengough's universal nickname) and one month later



Julien Planté and Oliver Bengough at the French Chamber's Gala Dinner

I was part of his team.'

Olly, who's 34, remembers when Julien brought him the idea. 'Julien had this amazing vision of how to bring back French film. He came to me and said, "Olly, I want to buy these 250 films. And these are the reasons why I want to buy them. I want to do this type of films, involving such and such an actor.'

The idea landed on fertile ground as Olly was also a lover of French film. Just as importantly, Olly had a commercial vision. He had built up a very successful group of bars and music venues in London. The latest addition to his company, called Mint Group, was Koko, a Camden-based venue which has attracted some leading music stars including Madonna and Coldplay. Upmarket customers have been attracted to the venue by some sophisticated branding and marketing. These skills would be lavished on Cinémoi when it was

launched in 2009.

In fact branding and media were at the core of Olly's decision to approach Sky with the proposal to launch a French film channel. He says, 'Culturally the French are all across the world, as with Anglo-Saxon culture, so you have a huge French audience. But I looked online and discovered there was no brand representing French film and no TV channel. I thought, there's got to be a home for French film globally. The best way to do that was through a TV channel. We would launch it in the UK and play to our strengths because our company is based in the UK.'

The channel was branded with the help of Stefan Boublil, the French owner of The Apartment, a New York marketing agency. Olly recalls, "We talked to Stefan about the channel. We emphasised one key word - accessibility. We said we didn't want an elitist channel but something accessible that everyone could take part in. We needed to find a name and he came up with three names - Lux, Luminere and Cinémoi. We said we loved Cinémoi and he said 'that's great because that's the one we love too'." Boublil also proposed using different colours for different genres, so yellow would be used for family films and purple for thrillers.

With the brand identified and the team on board, Oliver and Julien approached Sky TV. The company had closed its timetable to new proposals, but was so impressed by the Cinémoi proposition that it admitted it to its list. Olly describes the early days, 'We launched in February 2009 for a period of three months free to air. We had two or three films every night. We became a subscription channel on May 10 2009, and we started showing 12 hours of programming every day, from 3pm-3am. Since that day we have showed nearly 140 films. That makes roughly 20/25 films a month. All are with English subtitles. I like to think we made a bit of British history - we showed we could make major programming with a small team.'

The launch was not all smooth-sailing. Cinémoi's insistence came up against a Sky rule that programmes carrying subtitles could only be included in the International section of its programme rolecall. Olly and Julien refused on the grounds of artistic integrity to have their films dubbed. Julien says, 'we took quite a leap of faith and we were protecting the integrity of what we were doing.' Sky relented, after Cinémoi consulted lawyers, and three months later allowed Cinémoi to move from the International programmes section to the Movies.

As a result the number of subscriptions quickly increased from around a thousand to 3,500. Olly says

some 6,000 subscriptions had been sold by the end of 2009 and he expects some 10,000 to have been sold by the end of 2010.

The significance of the move to the Movie section cannot be over-estimated, says Olly. 'Our single, biggest hurdle was to be recognized as a Movie channel, not as a foreign entertainment channel', he says. 'This has great significance outside the UK. We were the first ever foreign entertainment channel to be recognized in the Premium Movie section. Foreign films have never been presented to a mainstream audience. So we achieved our goal of this accessible mainstream entertainment channel. This is massive.'

Planté has made great efforts to differentiate Cinémoi films from those presented on other Sky channels. Olly says, 'The audience is realising, this isn't like Sky Movies, where you slap on a film like in a multiplex. On Cinémoi you are taken on a journey, there's a thinking behind it. It's not as simple as just turning on a channel and watching films. You're watching films like general entertainment like everyone else, but also, at the same time you're receiving an education.'

Olly Bengough has some ambitious plans for his groundbreaking channel. These include an expansion into US cable and a widening of the Cinémoi franchise to include Virgin. The company expects the inclusion of Virgin to increase subscriptions to 25,000. Cinémoi also plans to expand its live programme-making capacity. Its coverage of the Cannes film Festival played well with Cinémoi viewers and Planté says the range of films festivals it attends and covers on the channel will be widened. 'We created seven half-hour programmes every day from the Cannes festival. We pulled the film out of the competitions and showed clips from them so people in the UK could, for the first time, sit at home and see the films in the competition. We interviewed the directors, actors and showed the films. We had our position on the red carpet as a media company.'

He continues, 'Because we were a French film company in the UK, we could get access. We had a bit of a unique position. We also created seven web TV shows of the main show. So we had people in America watching Cannes on our website. That meant you could follow Cannes every day without having to be at Cannes, without having Virgin. We can represent Cannes as no one has ever done before. We want to expand it to Berlin, Venice and Sundance.'

The two men are an impressive partnership with an idea that has both cultural and commercial prospects. As you might say, 'watch this channel! ■ N.K