

Reeling and Dealing in CANNES

Cannes is a very busy place come film festival time. **SIMON RUMLEY** found it especially so trying to see what the Antipodeans were trying to sell while doing likewise with his own debut feature, *Strong Language*.

THE CANNES Film Festival's 50th birthday was celebrated by everyone from Bruce Willis to the Spice Girls, but it wasn't as manic as it could have been, unless you're trying to flog your first feature.

Featuring 17 characters aged between 21 and 31, *Strong Language* explores what it's like to be young and living in London.

Having finished my "vox-pop-art docu-drama movie for an MTV generation" at 10 on Sunday night, the only possible option was to shoot up to Luton and catch a plane down to the French Riviera to indulge in my own boozing and schmoozing.

The first thing you notice about the festival is that almost everybody speaks English, not due to the linguistic dexterity of the host nation but the fact that the majority of festival goers are American or English. Add a healthy smattering of Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders, and the result is that the French know the least about what's going on.

My first Antipodean experience, strangely enough, started in a low-budget, and thus extremely popular, watering hole called Le Petit Majestic. I passed a woman on the stairs whose face seemed familiar. She obviously thought likewise since we both turned around simultaneously. After a quick mental rewind, I remembered having met her over dinner with a mutual friend back in Blighty.

Unlike London, everyone in Cannes is extremely friendly so we ended up chatting.

She had a ticket for a party to which she didn't want to go but I did; very generously she gave me the ticket. It was an Australian film about to be released in the UK, *Welcome To Woop Woop*. Directed by Stephan Elliott (who brought the world the first singing transvestite road movie, *Priscilla Queen Of The Desert*), it stars Jonathon Schaech, Rod Taylor, Susie Porter and Barry Humphries.

Schaech plays Teddy, a charming American conman whose karma has caught up with him. Fleeing for his life into the Australian Outback, he is waylaid by hitch-hiking seductress Angie

(Susie Porter), who kidnaps him into a drugged-up shotgun wedding and a warped but supposedly "happy ever after" existence in the town of Woop Woop.

The party took place on the beach and by the time I arrived, at midnight, there was a rugby scrum of desperadoes and drunkards trying to maul their way in. After about 15 minutes of pushing, shoving and manoeuvring, I eventually succeeded.

Inside, picture a lone transvestite, a dance floor, 300 people and about 3000 empty tins of XXXX. The little known relative theory of inverse proportional reality in Cannes — the more people there are, the less drink there is — holds until the booze dries up. So when the XXXX ran out, so did the party guests, none of whom — as far as I could ascertain — had seen the film, which is fairly typical of Cannes.

With free parties, free food and especially free drink, the most difficult exercise is moderation. When here in 1995, I had an extremely good time which resulted in extremely large hangovers and very little business. This time had to be different, so, instead of falling over blind-drunk, I went for the more professional approach and stopped at the slurred word stage.

It was a crazy plan but it sure paid off. Everyone in Cannes is extremely approachable assuming you can find them in the first place. Even if you can't, you'll bump into them if you keep your eyes open. This meant I was able to meet people from US independent giant Miramax through to Australian and English companies specialising in niche market product.

You hear stories about film executives signing million-dollar cheques after watching a film in a screening room, but as I only had a handful of VHSS, this scenario was an improbable fantasy. Nonetheless, for the first Antipodeans I bumped into, it wasn't.

Writer-director Harry Sinclair and lead actress Danielle Cormack collaborated on a film which a lot of people were talking about if not exactly by name, *Topless Women Talk About Their Lives*, then by a breast/tit/mammary

variation thereof. "It's a drama about a bunch of young Aucklanders, and the title's completely misleading — it has very little to do with topless women," Sinclair told me.

The New Zealand film was shot mainly in friends' flats, with decor au naturel, over six months with actors wearing whatever clothes they turned up in and working without rehearsal from scripts written only hours before. One of the more unusual aspects about the production is that Cormack became pregnant shortly before filming.

Sinclair explained, "Danielle was worried that she was going to be fired, but I thought, why don't we make use of it?" so they did.

At the first screening in Cannes, the cinema was full and no-one walked out, which is rare. Whether anyone fell asleep (which is not rare), Sinclair could not comment, however distributors from Italy, Germany, Austria and Switzerland picked the film up, although

