



## Zeitgeist's 'Africa' trip continues after Oscar

**N**EW YORK — “We definitely have had more calls from exhibitors,” Zeitgeist Films’ Nancy Gerstman said with a chuckle the morning after her company’s “Nowhere in Africa” took home the foreign-language film Oscar on Sunday. “We are adding theaters and really scrambling to make prints and do more advertising.”

For Zeitgeist, the New York-based outfit Gerstman co-runs with Emily Russo, the road to its first Oscar actually began more than a year ago.

“We saw ‘Africa’ at a trade screening in late 2001,” Gerstman recalled. “And we were particularly interested in the film at the time because it starred Juliane Kohler, who had starred in ‘Aimee & Jaguar,’ which we released. We were immediately knocked out by the film, and we made an offer right there.”

Written and directed by German filmmaker Caroline Link, “Africa” is based on Stefanie Zweig’s autobiographical novel describing the joys and deprivations of a German-Jewish family that escapes Nazi Germany in 1938 to live as caretakers on two desolate farms in Kenya.

But even though “Africa” would ultimately win five Golden Lola German film awards in 2002, in addition to its eventual Oscar nomination and win, other U.S. indie companies did not share Zeitgeist’s immediate enthusiasm — especially since, back then, it wasn’t guaranteed a nomination because Germany could have opted to submit as its candidate “Mostly Martha,” Sandra Nettelbeck’s comedy about food and love.

“Always with foreign-language movies, U.S. (companies) feel that if they get a nomination, everyone is quite eager that they can do something with it,” said Bavaria Films’ Michael Weber, who was a producer on “Africa” and oversaw the film’s foreign sales. “But when (Zeitgeist) bought this film, it had no showing in the U.S. at any festivals. None of the critics had seen it.”

“Africa” also faced some resistance among distributors who aren’t keen on German films. “German movies are a challenge,” said one prominent U.S. distribution executive who passed on “Africa.” (“Martha,” which Paramount Classics successfully released, was viewed as one of the exceptions to that rule.)

Weber figured Zeitgeist’s commitment might lead to a nomination. “We were convinced that we could get a nomination,” he said, “but we wanted somebody who could do the groundwork upfront, and Zeitgeist was a very good partner for that.” While publicist Steven Zeller oversaw the movie’s Los Angeles release, Fredell Pogodin watched over its Academy campaign.

While some other foreign film powerhouses at the Kodak Theatre on Sunday night — including Miramax Films and Sony Pictures Classics — had a stable of Oscar hopefuls on their hands, Weber said Zeitgeist’s ability to focus on just one release made a difference for “Africa,” Germany’s first Oscar-winning film in nearly 25 years.

“On the one hand, I think it is clear that Zeitgeist is not as strong on P&A,” Weber acknowledged. “But for them, this is the most important film of the year.”

“Africa” was a boxoffice hit in its native Germany and is now poised to open in most other European territories. In the United States, Zeitgeist has rolled out “Africa” in Los Angeles, Chicago and New York and will now target other major U.S. markets.

Getting back to those exhibitors’ frenzied phone calls in Zeitgeist’s downtown offices earlier this week, the company was living up to its name and seizing the moment. Gerstman mused: “This was really our shot. We’ve been in business for 15 years, and it does give the sales companies confidence in us. They now know we can really handle a film like this.”