

PIC DEVELOPMENT? MAIS OUI!

eQuinoxe, emergence push Euro effort

By LISA NESSELSON

A riddle for the future of French filmmaking: What was inspired by Sundance, founded by a woman, starts with a lower-case "e" and is dedicated to making sure films get made that audiences will want to see?

There are two correct answers:

■ The eQuinoxe screenwriting lab, a twice-annual workshop created in 1993 by Noelle Deschamps (wife of ace film editor Yves Deschamps) completed its 24th session June 3-10 in Paris with multihyphenate Paul Haggis ("Million Dollar Baby," "Crash") presiding.

■ From May 30 to June 17, emergence, an annual hands-on production boot camp begun in 1998 by Elisabeth Depardieu (ex-wife of Gerard Depardieu and mother to their two thesp children, Julie and Guillaume) gave eight first-time filmmakers the chance to test-direct a portion of their screenplays, emerg-

ing with an edited version complete with musical score.

Both enterprises are nonprofit organizations that rely on volunteers.

But the volunteers are so accomplished it'd be like having Thomas Edison show up to rewire your house.

Unpaid eQuinoxe facilitators ("I give them a bed and excellent food," says Deschamps) have included once-blacklisted vet Walter Bernstein, Whit Stillman, Martin ("Bent") Sherman, Mike Figgis, Agnieszka Holland and Randa Haines.

"Noelle approached me, and her enthusiasm was so infectious I found myself saying 'Yes' before I knew what I was getting into," Haggis tells *Variety*.

"In Hollywood, people can make a decent living as screenwriters, but that's rarely the case in the rest of the world," says Deschamps. "In France, there are relatively few scripts, but they're more or less all made. In the U.S., there are so many scripts that never get made. I always thought

that the two countries would meet in the middle."

Today, eQuinoxe maintains 11 offices that scout for scripts worldwide.

Thirty-five readers repping six languages assess 1,000 scripts a year. From these, 24 are selected and 40% of those become films. "Buffalo Boy," "Gilles' Wife" and "Final Cut" are the latest examples. Previous editions helped whip "Read My Lips" and "Claire Dolan" into shape.

Devoted exclusively to first films, emergence looks at roughly 100 scripts a year, sifting for eight, of which, on average, three make it to the screen. These range from local smash "Podium" by Yann Moix to international arthouse hits "Since Otar Left" by Julie Bertuccelli and "A Common Thread" by Eleonore Faucher.

"What people forget is that the crucial ingredient in successful filmmaking is affection — a genuine feeling for filmmaking," says Depardieu, an actress and acting teacher with a degree in



Writer-director-producer Paul Haggis led the recent eQuinoxe screenwriting lab run by Noelle Deschamps.

psychology. "This is one of the rare places in Europe where an aspiring director can try out visual ideas using real technicians and seasoned actors." How seasoned? Emmanuelle Beart volunteered her services for this session, as did 1999 Cannes best actress Emilie Dequenne.

Each novice director has a "godparent" whose style they admire — a role filled by the likes of Catherine Breillat, Alain Corneau or Olivier Assayas.

Depardieu's colleague Pierre Sayag sees emergence as a vital

link to cinema's healthy future. Here participants can learn in three weeks what used to take two years of scrambling for professional experience on the job.

Depardieu is on the lookout for raw talent year round, tirelessly attending film fests. If a short film grabs her, she asks the director if he or she has a feature script in mind.

"There's no way we can make a cent on this," Depardieu says. "Our sole satisfaction — and it's enough — is to give talent a chance to thrive."