

He Built a Film Company On a Movie Scrap Heap

By Alexander Auerbach
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A LOT OF people in Hollywood buy films. But when Ken Hartford buys films for distribution overseas, he buys them by the pound—sight unseen. And he sells them that way.

"One guy stormed out of our office, terribly insulted, because we had offered him only \$5,000 for his film, lock, stock and barrel. He didn't like the price, and he was horrified that we would buy the film without even taking a look at it."

"Well, he took it to another buyer. But he made the mistake of screening it for that guy."



Kenneth Hartford

It's no secret that a lot of the 500 or so films made in the U.S. each year are not merely bad, but are god-awful. And the rest of the world produces its share of cinema junk as well.

Ken Hartford is the junkman.

It started almost by accident. Hartford, who has a long list of credits for films he has written or produced, plus an Oscar earned in 1962 for an animated cartoon called "Ersatz," wanted to move his company, Cinevid, into

international sales. Having lived in South America, Asia and Europe, he felt he knew how to sell abroad.

What he didn't have was films to sell. So he put an ad in the Hollywood trade papers, offering to "Buy Your Picture Sight Unseen."

That's not the sort of ad likely to turn up a "Return of the Jedi," or even a "Megaforce." Nonetheless, his phone started ringing, and Howard was as good as his word. Within a short time he was the not very proud owner of 220 films, most of which he had never heard of, and none of which he was particularly eager to see.

That was in 1981, and Hartford headed off to MIFED, the international film market held each year in Milan. And while other distributors were proudly touting their latest artistic or commercial gem, Hartford was talking to distributors who just wanted something to fill some broadcast time or to put into videocassettes for product-hungry consumers.

"An Italian company came in and said they wanted some movies for TV, and walked out with 11. Cannon Films came in, asked me how many I had (for the foreign markets they were interested in) and when I said 71, they took them all—and did, for \$2 million," Hartford says, still with a trace of surprise in his voice.

There were a handful of good films among the dross; he got the foreign rights to two Simone Signoret films, for example, for \$25,000. And he's picked up films that have such stars as Sylvester Stallone, James Mason and Omar Sharif, though not necessarily in roles they or their fans might remember. But "most of them are horror films—and horrible films," he says.

"We only sell them in packages. Usually when you sell a motion picture, you do a press kit, hold a screening and so on. We sell them like potatoes, so many to a bag."

"What really sells these films is the artwork. We have a couple of artists on staff, turning out jackets for videocassettes. Tapes are like books; people browse in the store and if they like the

cover they'll buy it. We have one picture with seven stars in it. It's no better than one called 'Alien Dead,' with no stars in it. So it's the package that sells, not the film."

When Cinevid sells to a tape distributor in a country like England, the buyer may produce anywhere from 1,000 to 20,000 tapes for resell. Cinevid collects a flat fee, not a royalty. "We sell outright, so we don't have to lie awake at night, wondering who's screwing us," he says.

Where do films-by-the-pound come from? Producers who have long since given up any illusions of getting a conventional distribution deal for their turkey. Lenders who have called in a loan on a project. Print labs that have seized a film for unpaid fees.

"They're all over the place. My secretary has a friend with a film in Hawaii. Why Hawaii? Who knows. We were casting a film a few weeks ago and an actress told us about three pictures. There have been something like 40,000 films made. Do you know where they all are?"

Having gotten Cinevid launched with his unconventional strategy, Hartford is now moving closer to the mainstream by producing his own low-budget films.

In various pre-production stages are "Hell Squad," about Las Vegas showgirls who turn commandoes; "The Closet," a horror film; and "Jane," a female version of Tarzan.

None is likely to fetch Hartford a second Oscar, but he is fairly confident they will more than make back their very modest budgets. "I pick a story based on what I think will sell, but then I send a synopsis of the story to exhibitors and distributors I know and trust. If I get a good response from them, I go ahead."

Not always, however. Recently, he says, he started a picture and then "dumped it after three days of shooting and took my losses. It was clear that it was going to be a disaster." After buying 220 mistakes made by other people, Hartford is not about to add one of his own to the pile. ■



Multi-Talented
Kenneth Hartford

Academy Award winner, Kenneth Hartford, is the renowned producer, director, writer, and president of the rapidly expanding Beverly Hills based production company, Cinevid.

Cinevid is an established major supplier of films to the ancillary market world-wide, with a current inventory of over 160 films on hand, and for the first time this year, motion pictures will be made under the Cinevid banner.

Born in New York City, Hartford moved to California in 1934. He traveled extensively, pursuing his career in the entertainment industry. Whether as a writer, cartoonist, personal manager, director, or producer, the multi-faceted Hartford has experienced the film and television industry from all corners of the world, in his successful quest for artistic recognition and achievement. Al-

EXCLUSIVE:

KEN HARTFORD

**PRODUCER, DIRECTOR,
AND "OSCAR" WINNER ON —
FINDING A NEW STAR**

though he has lived in such countries as Peru, Japan, China and Italy he has for many years made his principal home in Beverly Hills, keeping a watchful eye over his production company. His insatiable appetite for work keeps Hartford busy eighteen hours a day, seven days a week . . . without a doubt his is a labor of love.

The first feature film, entitled "Jane," is already in pre-production and is scheduled to start filming later this year in Jamaica, Mexico, and other exotic locations. The media and public attention "Jane" has thus far attracted, is firmly establishing Cinevid as one of the most exciting independent forces amongst Hollywood film makers. Hartford has been actively searching for an "undiscovered" new talent to play the title role.

FACES: As far as viewing photos is concerned, what do you look for when a group of composites or headshots is sent to you?

KEN: Well, first of all, if we're looking for a specific person, like "Jane" or when we're looking for a girl to play the lead in our next feature film "Wonder Woman II" . . . if we're looking for a blonde, we go through hundreds of photos very quickly. We take out the blondes. Then we look at the

height. If we're looking for 5'10" and over, and this girl is 5'6", I don't care if she's the prettiest thing in the world. We just don't compromise.

Then, I grade them from 1 to 10. Most of them are 4s and 5s and the ones that are 6s, 7s and 8s, we ask for more pictures. At that time we specify to please send candid or location shots as opposed to professional studio shots.

FACES: So the photo will create the interest?

KEN: The initial interest. We're more interested in the beauty and the height initially, then the personality. If they have a good personality, which you eventually get when you interview them, you can then know whether you can work with them as an actress. As a typical example, I know a girl who was a Playboy centerfold. She photographed beautifully — with makeup and airbrushing — but after seeing her in person, we couldn't use her.

FACES: Let's say someone has sent you a half dozen pictures. What do you look for in that series of photos?

KEN: I look for the worst picture because that's what they are probably going to look like.

Cannes game: 'Blind' dealer shuffles films

Roger Ebert

CANNES, France — I went looking for the most honest man at the Cannes Film Festival, and I think I found him.

His name is Ken Hartford, and he runs an operation named Cinevid, out of Los Angeles. He sells movies by the pound.

"I've got about 140 movies here this year," he was explaining to me. "I'll sell a guy as many as he wants. For Greece, you want 80 movies? I got 'em. For Turkey, 112? Here they are. Back up your car, we'll load up the trunk. I own the rights to every one of these movies, lock, stock and barrel, and I give you a guarantee to prove it."

We are sitting in his booth, down in the basement of the Palais des Festivals. Upstairs, they show the new art films. Down here in the marketplace, Hartford sells titles like "Zombies of the Dead Unknown" and "Big Foot."

"Basically, I sell crap," he said cheerfully. If he seems a little detached about the quality of his wares, maybe that's because he doesn't actually look at most of the films he sells. He buys them blind. In most issues of Variety, the show-biz bible, you can see his little ads down in the corners of the back pages:

"Wanted: Complete feature films. I will buy your film unseen."

That makes Hartford the buyer of last resort for film producers who have a turkey on their hands and no place to unload it: Cinevid is the elephant's graveyard of bad movies.

"If it's an action movie, a thriller, a horror picture, we buy it sight unseen," Hartford said. "If

it's some kinda drama, some picture with a lot of dialogue, we might want to look at it first, to make sure it's not all talk. After we buy it, the first thing we do is, we give it a new title. I'm great at titles. How about 'Curse of the Doom Monsters'? How about 'Death Wish Club'? How do you like 'The Incredible Strange Creatures'? Then we commission an artist to do new artwork for the film. Basically we'll be selling these movies in cassette form to foreign markets. So the artist does a picture but he leaves off the title, so the local guy can put the title in his own language."

How many of these movies have you personally seen? I asked.

"Oh, I dunno. Not too many. Less than 10 percent."

So you have the artist see them, before he does the new artwork?

"You kidding? These artists are expensive. They get good money. I'm not going to pay them to sit around watching movies."

Then how do they know what to draw?

"They read the synopsis."

Aha! Then the person who writes the synopsis has to see the movie?

"Not necessarily," he said with a grin. "In some cases, perhaps."

"What difference does it make? The beauty is the guy buys his cassette, he takes it home, it's got adventure. If he doesn't like it, that's a problem. He bought it sight unseen. Just like did."

