

Cannes: Lotus Entertainment Blooms With Bustling Business (Q&A)



Jim Seibel and Bill Johnson

by Rebecca Ford
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After **Bill Johnson** and **Jim Seibel** met in 1998, they became fast friends, taking trips to exotic locales like Costa Rica and Bali, where they'd sit on their surfboards, waiting to catch a wave, and talk about what they'd do if one day they owned their own company.

Seventeen years later, the duo runs L.A.-based Lotus Entertainment, a busy international sales, production and financing firm that debuted two years ago at Cannes.

The former co-chairs of finance and production company Inferno, Johnson, 51, and Seibel, 42, started working together in 2003 and now have a slew of films in postproduction, including *A Hologram for the King*, starring **Tom Hanks**; *Kidnap* with **Halle Berry**; *Z for Zachariah* with **Chris Pine** and **Margot Robbie**; and *November Criminals* with **Chloe Grace Moretz** and **Ansel Elgort**.

Johnson, a married father of three, and the recently married Seibel, who have a knack for getting top stars and directors for interesting projects, also are selling some buzzy preproduction projects at Cannes, such as *The Kaiser's Last Kiss* with **Lily James** and *Replicas*, starring **Keanu Reeves**.

Fresh off celebrating Seibel's wedding in Bora Bora, the two sat down with THR as the festival kicked off to reveal what yoga has to do with their name, why they're so excited about *Hologram* and where they'll expand next.

How are you feeling about the market this year?

Johnson: In general there's a lot of money out there in the world right now, so I don't think we have much of a problem finding equity. As far as distribution goes, it seems like just in general, when the economy is doing well, people are in better spirits. But at the same time ancillaries are a problem, in Europe in particular, so that makes it tough with movies that don't have a clear theatrical target.

You officially launched Lotus two years ago in Cannes. How did you decide to go from a company with a name like Inferno to Lotus, which seems a bit more zen.

Seibel: Bill is Mr. Yoga, and I'm not so Mr. Yoga. But when I was a kid, I used to have these Lotus posters for the racing team. I remember when we were thinking up names, I ran into his office and said, 'What do you think about Lotus?' I was thinking of the racing team.

Johnson: But also with the Inferno name, we had people from Italy tell us, "By the way, your name literally means hell." And in China, they said the same thing. Lotus just felt more peaceful.

So does this naming discrepancy reflect how you are as executives?

Johnson: The funny thing is I'm the one who is always doing yoga and meditating, but he's more naturally zen than I am. [*Laughs.*] I think my personality is more outgoing than his in general, so I tend to be the outside guy and he's more the inside guy. It works pretty well for us.

Seibel: We were friends first and foremost, before doing business. We were just palling around as buddies for at least three or four years before we ever decided to work together.

What gets you excited about what you're doing at Lotus?

Johnson: It's all about the stories at the end of the day. It's really to get wrapped up with the models and the different strategies, but then there's the core question of: "Is this a story you want to put out in the world?"

Seibel: There's a handful of companies that are operating at this caliber of actors and directors, and that's where all the money flows. So it's easy for Bill and I to get swept up into managing all the investors and their equity, but we keep trying to balance our time by focusing on the story and the development of the story because you see a lot of money thrown at bad movies.

***A Hologram for the King* is a buzzy project, with Hanks starring as businessman who travels to Saudi Arabia to fix his life and career. What made you want to work on it?**

Johnson: It's a great story with this cross-cultural romance. I was talking to the director about it, and he was saying it's really like the opposite of *American Sniper*. I know it resonated with a lot of people, and I enjoyed it quite a bit, but when you look at that movie, all those characters from that part of the world were very one dimensional bad guys. This movie is doing the opposite, humanizing people from that part of the world. Here's a guy who is struggling with the challenges of the U.S. and goes over and finds a new life, and love.

You've gotten a lot of movies made, which isn't always easy to do. What's your secret?

Seibel: We're one of the only companies that's never taken on an investor. Just Bill and I run the company. So we've had to learn how to make the coffee, do the budgets and everything in between. That's part of the secret to getting these movies made. Any problem that can be thrown at us, we've been through it and figured it out.

Tell me about a recent hurdle you've overcome.

Johnson: We were a week away from production on a movie when our lead actress walked off the movie because there was a dispute over the order of the credits. So all of a sudden we didn't have a lead. We actually got a new lead who turned out to be an upgrade for us within 48 hours. It was pretty anxiety inducing.

How do you plan to expand Lotus in the future?

Johnson: We've been talking about getting into the TV business. And we've talked about getting into some aspect of distribution.

Seibel: I think TV is the natural crossover right now and that line is getting blurred. Every talented actor and director and writer is now happy to do both. We've actually been working on this for a while, we've been meeting with television executives. I think you'll see some news in the near future.