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Nothing short of a revolution: A conversation with Frank Saptel of the Canadian Labour International Film Festival

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Film festivals cannot always claim to practice what they preach. Even some of the best-intentioned festivals often hit a wall: while attempting to exhibit politically subversive films, organisers also have to respond to diverse – and even conflicting – voices. Responding to the demands of local communities, audiences, filmmakers, and sponsors leads to compromises and balancing acts that detract from a festival's ideals and missions.

In an article about the 2011 HotDocs Festival, Ezra Winton writes that producing bigger and bigger editions of the festival required more money, resources, and compromises. 'Things can fall through the cracks that are disloyal to the spirit of documentary as a dissenting voice in the mainstream media margins,'[1] he writes, as he reminds us that Coca-Cola was an environmental film sponsor for the festival in 2010. Still, Winton believes in the potential of large film festivals like HotDocs because they bring public attention to the marginalised cinematic form of the documentary and bring creators and audiences together. Then, the work of politically-oriented film festivals and their organisers is to find a balance 'between community zest and commercial zeal'.

If running a film festival is an exercise in balance between community and commerce the Canadian Labour International Film Festival (CLiFF) lies heavily, if not entirely, on the side of the former. Founded in 2008 and funded by labour unions, CLiFF screens films about the world of 'work and those who do it'. And while CLiFF is not the only film festival to specialise in labour films, it is special in its efforts to reflect its egalitarian ideals in its own

structure. Reaching outside the hierarchical spaces of film festivals, the organisation brings the festival to the workplace and the factory, creating a community of workers and film lovers. In a world of compromised film festivals, CLiFF is an interesting lesson in the opportunities and limitations of a festival that does not compromise on its commitment to community and revolution.

I sat down with CLiFF founder Frank Saptel to talk about the challenges of running a specialised film festival, labour conditions in the film festival industry, and the importance of labour film festivals today.

Velásquez-Buriticá: Let's start with a bit of history. Can you tell me about how the festival came about and why you decided to start a festival that specialised in labour?

Saptel: Well, it was through my union, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers. I started my bachelor's degree in 1981 at Concordia University but I didn't complete the degree because I didn't have money. And then 27 years later my union was sponsoring members and staff to finish their degrees at the National Labour College in Silver Spring, Maryland. And when I was in my final semester, there was a screening through the DC LabourFest of the film *China Blue* (2005).[2] It's about a denim factory in China, and it showed the really horrendous working conditions of the workers, primarily women. And then they had a panel discussion on the issues around the film, and this just struck me as a very powerful medium; not only watching the film, but also discussing the issues afterwards. And there I was thinking, well, we should have this in Toronto. So I went back to my room and I started making some notes. And 23 pages later, it was not a Toronto-based labour film festival but a Canada-wide labour film festival.

Velásquez-Buriticá: So that screening of the DC Labour Fest obviously inspired you, but when you were writing those 23 pages of notes, were you thinking of any other film festivals that you could emulate or use as a model for CLiFF?

Saptel: Certainly, the DC LabourFest was right there, and that was the first time I'd heard of it. But previously there was something called the Travelling World [Community] Film Festival, based out of Peterborough, ON. And it was something to the effect of taking a group, a selection of films and taking it to various cities or towns and then showing the films. There was also the Regent Park Film Festival.[3] I lived in that neighbourhood, so I had gone to one screening. And it just struck me that a community-based film festival

around issues in the community, issues facing other communities, was a fabulous idea.

Velásquez-Buriticá: You mention that started as a Toronto festival but then became national. So, you show films all over Canada? How does this work logistically?

Saptel: Yes, we do. In fact, we could say all across North America because there have been some folks in the US, mostly from my own union, who have been interested and who have participated in the past. The way it normally works, the way it's worked for the last 12 years, is: we open up our call for submissions, we receive films, we vet them, we make our final selections. We then take those films to a mastering place where they master them into an individual DVD with the playlist in question. Those copies we send to locations, we call them location coordinators, the people who coordinate it.

Velásquez-Buriticá: Is that what you call the 'Festival-in-a-Box' and 'Lunch Special'?

Saptel: Yeah exactly. We used to only have a two-hour DVD, because we figured a lot of people aren't just going to hunker down for a whole day watching movies. So, we started out with the Festival-in-a-Box, meaning all people had to do was just order the package. It's a two-hour package. We send them notes about the films and maybe some discussion points that they can use to stimulate some discussion with their audience. And then people were asking: 'Do you have anything shorter? I can't organise a venue but I want to show it at my workplace.' So, that's how we came up with the Lunch Special. That one is just one hour, you know most people have an hour for lunch. And it's a series of short films where they're able to see issues faced by workers across the world.

Saptel: And then in Toronto, we generally tend to show all of the films that we select or almost all. It is a little bit expensive. For the last few years we have been using quite a well-known theatre in Toronto called Carlton.

Velásquez-Buriticá: That's very interesting. Do you know of any other festivals that operate in the same way?

Saptel: There are some traveling road shows, as I like to call them. So, for example, there was that World Traveling Film Festival, which doesn't exist anymore.[4] Cinema Politica has a series of screenings, but they're very ad-hoc. It usually depends on whoever can do it at whatever point in time and generally whatever film is available.[5]

Velásquez-Buriticá: And in your experience working with this model, what kinds of challenges does it usually pose? Because I imagine it's difficult to coordinate, but also what are the benefits?

Saptel: The biggest challenge is communications. Twelve years into it, there are still people in the labour movement who don't know about our film festival. So the challenge is always going to be getting the word out. And that's predicated on our finances. We're entirely dependent on donations while most festivals have some kind of, if I could use the term, corporate sponsorship. What I mean is: banks, large organisations, insurance companies, law firms, things of that nature. We don't do that because the very people we are trying to fight against are those folks, the very people that oppress workers are those folks, the venture capitalists, the capitalists in general. So, we're definitely non-capitalist. I'd like to say we're all socialists. Some of us are communists as well. And we see workers as a linchpin in society, but one that is not respected and constantly oppressed. And it's all for the lucre. It's all for money. And we oppose that. We say that [film festivals] shouldn't only be about profit. It should be about the value that people put into the work.

Velásquez-Buriticá: That actually leads to my other question, which you sort of answered already. But when you look at the CLiFF sponsor list, it's so different from other festivals. For the 2019 edition, the list of sponsors is mostly, if not all, labour unions. What do you think you can do at CLiFF that other festivals cannot do because of their corporate sponsorships?

Saptel: When I was doing that bachelors, I was doing my thesis paper on some really banal topic. Then I came across the [DC LabourFest] and that night I changed my paper topic [to focus] on how to organise a labour film festival. The title of it was 'Nothing Short of a Revolution'. And that's the crux of the answer to your question: those who buy into our concept of wanting to change the world are those who will donate to it. Banks are not interested in revolution. Insurance companies and capitalists are not interested in revolution. They're investing in the status quo. They're invested in making not only profits, but greater profits each year. And those people are not going to donate. And we don't want them to donate. We don't want to be held hostage in any way at all. It's the primary reason we didn't register as a charitable organisation. We registered as a not-for-profit because a charitable organisation cannot do advocacy. We are all about advocacy.

Velásquez-Buriticá: Now I want to ask you about programming. What sort of criteria does a film have to fulfill to be considered for CLiFF? Does it

have to be made by workers? Or made for workers? Or a combination of different things?

Saptel: It's a combination of everything. The tagline for our festival is 'the world of work and those who do it'. So, I think that captures the spirit of the content of the films. Right from the beginning, I always knew that documentaries would be the stock in trade of our festival, but I didn't only want documentaries. I wanted creative pieces. I wanted to show the creativity of workers. And you never think of artists as workers. You don't think of them as having working conditions, having challenges at work. You only think about the Michelangelos, the Da Vincis, and their trials and tribulations. You never think of them as workers. Imagine if we had a health and safety code when Michelangelo was painting the roof of the Sistine Chapel.

Velásquez-Buriticá: Do you find it hard to find people to submit because the festival is specialised?

Saptel: No, no. There are some amazing ones out there. There's so much content and that's the benefit of having our festival, as one of the few labour film festivals. People need a venue. And that was always one of our major mandates, is that you can make a film, you can tell a story, but someone has to listen to it. So, we wanted to be that venue.

Velásquez-Buriticá: Yeah, also having these sorts of festivals allows for people to make more of those kinds of films. I'm thinking, for example, there's many LGBTQ festivals out there, and I feel like the presence of those festivals helps creators make those movies because they know they'll have a venue to show them.

Saptel: Exactly. I actually talked with, I think, he was the executive director of the Inside Out Festival in Toronto very early on. That was part of my research when I was writing the paper. But, that being said, there are sometimes disagreements within the board of directors on the appropriateness of various films, but it's all consensus-based. And just because I founded the festival, just because I'm the president of the board doesn't mean anything. It's a very horizontal kind of decision-making process.

Velásquez-Buriticá: This idea of consensus-based decision-making in your programming is actually pretty relevant to what I was going to ask you next. How does Cliff organise its own labour? Is it different from traditional corporate film festivals?

Saptel: I can't speak to the traditional festivals. I've never been involved in any other festival. But I will say that the board of directors does not get

paid. So all of our work is volunteer. We do pay for the mastering and duplication services. We had a staff person in our first two years because we were able to raise enough money at that time, because I gave myself two years to mount the first festival. So we were able to raise more money than we usually do. But in terms of paying, we do not have paid staff, but any services we use from outside, we do pay for those.

Velásquez-Buriticá: What I think is interesting, though, from my own experience of volunteering and interning at more traditional film festivals, is that it seems to me like they also had unpaid workers, but they definitely had the means to pay those unpaid workers.

Saptel: Oh, hell yeah.

Velásquez-Buriticá: But also, what I find interesting about corporate film festivals is how vertical the organisation is. I mean, there's so many layers of hierarchy. So I was really interested in what you mentioned earlier. Were you specifically trying to organise it horizontally, and what did you do specifically to make sure that the festival still works in that way?

Saptel: It was never my intention to be the mover and shaker at CLiFF, even though I founded the festival. So it was always the plan that it would be a collective. It would be a horizontal process. That there would be a diversity on the board. And it always has been. From the linguistic diversity, gender, sexuality, racial, ethnic, cultural diversity, it's always been that way.

Velásquez-Buriticá: I know you just mentioned that you don't have that much experience with traditional film festivals, but from your personal perspective, since you run a labour film festival I imagine you have an opinion on the way that film festivals organise their own labour?

Saptel: I have an opinion, but again, it's not based on a whole lot of experience. I know tons of people who volunteer at TIFF and other film festivals. It seems to me that those festivals count on glamour and prestige in order not to pay for all those volunteers who work every single year. I think payment is a ticket for some movies, so there is some kind of remuneration, but I don't think any of those people encourage their volunteers to think about the films. To think about how to change the world. And that's exactly what we're all about. Again, nothing short of a revolution. It's not just that you participate in the festival, but that you participate in the movement.

Velásquez Buriticá: Are filmmakers given any form of remuneration for showing their films at CLiFF or for being a part of the festival in a box playlist?

Saptel: This year, we started charging submission fees and paying screening fees to films we select. Because we also screen in multiple locations, we felt it was appropriate to pay a different fee structure to those films.

Velásquez-Buriticá: Finally, I wanted to ask you why you think labour film festivals are necessary nowadays?

Saptel: I think that they are more important than ever. I think with this so-called gig economy, we have to come up with an alternative term. This gig economy business is encouraging everyone to think of themselves as an independent contractor. And what that really means is: independent, not aligned with, or not connected to any other worker doing the same work as they do. And our festival tries to show the collective how exactly we are all connected, not how we can divorce ourselves, but how we can connect ourselves. And I think that's a major, major thing for CLIFF.

Juan Velásquez-Buriticá (McGill University)

References

Winton, E. 'A Film Festival Grows Up', *Point of View Magazine*, 82, 2011: <http://povmagazine.com/articles/view/a-film-festival-grows-up>.

Notes

- [1] Winton 2011.
- [2] The DC Labour FilmFest is an annual film festival that screens new and classic films about work and workers. Founded in 2001, it is organised by the Metro Washington Council AFL-CIO and sponsored by the Debs Jones Douglass Institute and the American Film Institute (<http://www.dclabor.org/dc-laborfest.html>).
- [3] The Regent Park Film Festival is a non-profit cultural and educational organisation founded in 2003. It has an annual film festival and several educational events throughout the year dedicated to serve the residents of the Regent Park neighbourhood in Toronto (<http://regentparkfilmfestival.com/>).
- [4] The Travelling Community Film Festival is a mobile initiative by the World Community organisation that annually screens films related to social justice and fair trade in different Canadian cities (<https://worldcommunity.ca/travelling-film-festival/>).
- [5] Cinema Politica is a non-profit, media arts network that partners with community and campus groups to screen political documentaries throughout the year. Founded in 2003, Cinema Politica is based in Montreal, Quebec but it has chapters in Canada, the US, and Europe. The Canadian component of the network has nearly 70 active locals, most of which are located on high school, college, and university campuses, and the international component has nearly 30 active locals (<https://www.cinemapolitica.org/about-cinema-politica>).