

Ivan Velisavljević

Initiating regional talents – 2013 Sarajevo Film Festival

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About the author

Lydia Papadimitriou (Liverpool John Moores University)



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Initiating regional talents

2013 Sarajevo Film Festival

Ivan Velisavljević

Initiated in the mid-1990s by a group of enthusiasts during the siege of Sarajevo and the war in Bosnia & Herzegovina, Sarajevo Film Festival (SFF)¹ has developed into one of the biggest Southeast European film festivals along with the Thessaloniki International Film Festival in Greece.² Although one could hear some of the locals complaining about how the festival has become too big and fancy for the city and how nothing much actually happens during the rest of the year, an informed and occasional visitor will know Sarajevo offers a lot of other interesting cultural initiatives, while a newcomer will certainly enjoy crowded streets, clubs, and film events during the festival week.

The 19th edition of Sarajevo Film Festival screened 214 films from 59 countries and welcomed more than 100,000 visitors.³ The films competing for the Heart of Sarajevo award were organised in three sections (feature, short, and documentary) while many other films were screened in different venues all around the city and nominated for various partners' awards. Among these prizes are the CineLink awards for co-production development and work in progress, the Human Rights Award for films dealing with human rights issues, the Katrin Cartlidge Award for young filmmakers, and the Cineuropa Prize given to a film 'that besides having indisputable artistic qualities also promotes the idea of European dialogue and integration'.⁴ Therefore it is clear that the organisers, while advancing the industry segment of the festival, still adhere to the initial aim of 'helping to reconstruct civil society and retain the cosmopolitan spirit of the city'.⁵ By looking at the films chosen for the main programme and also at the way the industry section

was arranged we can add two more aims: favouring socially-engaged (European) art films and developing the festival as the most important annual gathering of professionals and cinephiles from the Balkans.

Events such as the Regional Forum and Talent Campus are good examples of the latter; both are made with an assumption that the Balkan region shares a historical heritage and economic interest and can profit from cultural exchange and cross-border cooperation. The Regional Forum engages film professionals from Southeast Europe in discussions on film financing and distribution, cultural policy, the importance of co-productions, and the usage of new technologies in film marketing, thus making an effort not only to promote the films from the region but also to develop new business strategies and create opportunities for prospective production deals. The Talent Campus applies this general festival strategy to training young talents in order to develop new professionals from the region and connect them more closely with the festival and its main goals.

The Berlin connection

Marijke de Valck (2013) recognises three main strategies that festivals use when modelling their talent programmes: prestige, mass, and the mogul strategy. The first one is based on the selection of candidates, hence the festivals that use it strive to be 'cultural gatekeepers', underlining their power status; the second one is usually without a rigid selection process and oriented towards cinephiles while underlining size, openness, and enthusiasm for cinema and learning; the third, unique for the Berlinale Talent Campus (BTC),⁶ combines prestige and mass strategy while trying to expand the network of linked festivals and programmes, underlining the affiliation of their alumni and their willingness to return and choose the Berlinale for the premiere of their films.⁷

Sarajevo Talent Campus (STC) was founded in 2007 in cooperation with the Berlinale Talent Campus.⁸ It is no wonder that the mogul strategy of BTC was chosen for the training programme in Sarajevo, combining the selection process with a fairly large number of talents (around 70). Being a site for training and the education of aspiring young filmmakers it certainly shares the general characteristics of other talent training programmes. De Valck describes the benefits that can be expected:

[t]he benefits for festivals are clear: by investing in young talent early on, they improve the quality of future film production, on which they depend for their core business of programming, while nurturing a relation to the stars of tomorrow. For young filmmakers, the leading initiatives among the many existing film festival training programs have clearly developed into sites of initiation.⁹

What distinguishes STC is the application of the BTC model to the regional context. The candidates come from Southeast Europe (understood as spreading across the Balkans and to Turkey, Georgia, and Armenia) and are expected not only to actively engage with the festival and the talent campus programme but to get to know each other by participating in the networking activities such as speed matching, briefings, and presentations. By stressing the interaction of talents, the value of contacts, and knowledge about the ways of the European film industry, while at the same time insisting on the regional profile of the campus, STC evidently wants to position itself as the main gateway to the European film industry for upcoming filmmakers from the region. Of course, it makes sense to see many Sarajevo talents apply for and enter the Berlinale Talent Campus, but the Sarajevo Film Festival probably counts this as a win-win situation – if their alumni choose the Berlinale for the premiere of their films then SFF gets credit as being the springboard for emerging filmmakers in the region and gains prestige as a result.

Sarajevo Talents: ‘Mind the gap, engage with cinema’

In the 2013 edition of STC talents were grouped according to their occupation (19 directors, 14 screenwriters, 15 actors, 13 producers, 5 film critics) and sessions were tailored to meet the professional concerns of each group. As a film critic selected for the newly-established Talent Press, an STC training programme for critics and journalists, I had many reasons to believe this training programme would be a constructive and beneficial experience. Before the campus started Talent Press participants had been asked to write their expectations about the programme for one of the partner’s websites. My expectations included the following: to watch a number of films relevant for contemporary European art cinema; to be involved in active discussions with filmmakers and fellow critics; to exchange ideas, correct hypotheses, and critically reassess some of my own presumptions and criteria.¹⁰ I was also interested to check whether the expectations of talents in other groups would be met. The comments regarding what other participants hoped for were not made public, so I had to rely on a combination of personal experience, observation, and (small) talk with fellow participants. Since my remarks are based on these sources I suggest they should only be taken as a starting point for eventual discussion, hopefully enriched with other sources the STC management certainly has, such as the programme evaluations.

All sessions were arranged under the title ‘Mind the Gap: Engage with Cinema’. This notion of a ‘gap’ was used as a broad term, covering everything from differences between fiction films and documentaries to gaps in budgets and ambiguities in narration, yet trying to keep the main concept in sight: how films create gaps that call viewers to engage in bridging them. Since the need for filling in the gaps by an engaged audience suggests a certain type of movie it comes as no surprise

that right from the start STC focused on art films and its models in the cinema of Southeast Europe, as clearly stated by STC manager Asja Makarević:

[c]ontemporary Southeast European cinema has a lot to offer. Either surfing the Greek absurdist or slow Romanian wave, or absorbing Bosnian socially shaped cinema, demand has never been greater on the part of the viewer. Many questions are being posed, leaving gaps to be filled in by the audience. There is a dire need for an engaged, curious and imaginative viewer – the one who enjoys being affected and moved by the power of images. The one who dares to inhabit empty spaces of art-house cinema and turns films into actual experiences.¹¹

Most of the general interest training came under the label 'Recommended screenings' with the projections of films accompanied by presentations, lectures and interviews, probably picked up for their presumed relevance to novice filmmakers and critics. In addition to watching selected features as well as shorts produced by the Sarajevo City of Film project and the ones from Cannes' *Semaine de la critique* selection, talents had a chance to attend the opening conversation with Leos Carax, a career interview with Cristi Puiu, a lecture by Jean-Michel Frodon, two presentations of the Berlinale Talent Campus and one for the Robert Bosch Stiftung Prize.

The general interest section had some flaws. For example, Frodon's lecture on the importance of protecting and enlarging the gap when writing film reviews was very useful to film critics but of far less importance to actors. Considering the recommended screenings it was not always clear why certain films were chosen. Some of them did not have any general interest relevance (many films from the main programme did, but talents could not easily enter regular screenings). The conversation with Carax was scheduled late on the first and hardest day of the campus, and it was not followed by his film but rather by three other titles which in less tiring circumstances might have interested the audience more. Around midnight the audience exhaustion was so visible in the theatre that one of the directors gave up on screening her film.

Industry training was probably the strongest card of STC, set through events for combined groups and designed mostly for directors and producers. Lectures were industry-oriented: the first, by successful documentary director Srđan Šarenac, was about the relationship of producers and directors; the second was by Philippe Bober about his Coproduction Office and its involvement in the production of Ulrich Seidl's *Paradise* trilogy; the third by Briony Hanson was about UK cinema and its focus on an international audience. Conversations on micro-budgets with filmmaker Danis Tanović and on documentaries with filmmaker Rebecca Cam-

misa and festival selector Rada Šešić, as well as presentations on film marketing and the 'target audience' by producer Peter Belsito, also on short films by Curtas Vila do Conde festival director Miguel Dias, had the same general agenda of discussing some of the advantages and obstacles young filmmakers face in preparing their films.

The most important sessions were those that enabled students to grow their circle of business contacts and get acquainted with experienced professionals, also those that highlighted available opportunities for financing and distributing films from Southeast Europe, usually in cooperation with producers and funds from the EU. In one of those sessions Jovan Marjanović, head of industry of the SFF, introduced talents to CineLink, a development and financing platform for films from Southeast Europe. In two other sessions talents met with ten upcoming German producers and presented their projects. Furthermore, selected projects participated in Pack & Pitch, a pitching session mentored by consultant Gabriele Brunnenmeyer and script editor Selina Ukwuoma.

Creative training was reserved mainly for critics, screenwriters, and to a lesser degree for actors. Writers attended Intensive Story Coaching, a combination of workshops with one-on-one sessions guided by script advisor Licia Eminent, director Gyula Gazdag, screenwriter Olivia Hetreed, and director Ula Stöckl. In addition lectures were given on how to become the director of your own script (Gazdag), how to advance from shorts to features (Kate Leys), and on the connection between Deleuze, cinema, and the brain (Prof. Patricia Pisters), which was a lecture for both scriptwriters and film critics. In terms of the creative training's final output the five film critics probably profited the most. Mentored by writers Jurica Pavičić and Dain Fainaru, they attended various recommended and special screenings, went through three drafts of two pieces of film criticism, and came out with finalised reviews that were published on respectable websites. Nevertheless, because of the writing assignments, for the most part critics were separated from other participants and from the regular festival's programme, thus being deprived of seeing the bigger picture of the festival. Actors had only one conversation with the actor Uliks Fehmiu and two well-intended workshops with actors Danny Glover and Leon Lučev. Considering the celebrity status of all three mentors, their busy schedule at the festival, and the high number of talents, some of the actors were not very satisfied with the result since they expected a more personal, practical relationship with their mentors.

This is something to be thought about in the future. A compromise between prestige and mass strategy reflects on the choice to offer various types of training. However, according to my experience with STC, sometimes the sessions do not live up to the expectations of talents, or the compromise causes less educational efficiency, especially in the combined groups with various personalities and profes-

sional interests. In general, directors were interested in promoting their projects, actors wanted hands-on experience, and producers expected to make as many contacts as possible, while they were all offered sit-down lectures. While indeed most of the talents understood their primary concern was the campus education programme they still expected to be able to follow the programme of the festival as well and not to stay confined to the campus environment. This tension was a source of constant frustration for some of the participants. Maybe those problems can be overcome by tying the campus and festival programme more closely together and by getting to know talents' interest and expectations in advance through surveys and application forms.

Next step: Sarajevo Talents

It was certainly an exertion to assemble different types of training under the same (rather theoretical) concept. An even bigger challenge was to efficiently coordinate a fairly large group of participants and enable them to gain some meaningful experience from the campus. All things considered, STC successfully completed those tasks, initiating many new contacts among the young directors, actors, writers, producers, and journalists while educating them about the state of affairs in the European art film industry and festival circuits, thus justifying itself as a valuable platform for developing new filmmakers in the region. The next edition of STC will go under a different name and logo: Sarajevo Talents, in accordance with Berlinale Talents.

I will end this review on a personal note. I expected networking to be the most valuable thing I would get from the campus and that was the case. The discussions with mentors and fellow critics about movies we saw at the festival were excellent and thought-provoking, as were the lectures. What I did not expect, and it came as a great surprise, was to have an actual product of the educational work in the campus, and a very good one indeed. Individual sessions with Fainaru as mentor, with in-depth analysis and harsh editing of the texts I wrote, were helpful and practical. These sessions produced two published reviews in English that can serve as a good showcase of my work. Of course, this NECSUS review is also an effect of the STC week. I hope it serves as further proof that starting the Talent Press section made sense and also as encouragement to the STC management for further good work in the field.

Notes

1. www.sff.ba (accessed on 29 November 2013)
2. See the review by Lydia Papadimitriou on the Thessaloniki International Film Festival in this section.
3. <http://www.sff.ba/en/page/festival-in-numbers> (accessed on 29 November 2013)
4. <http://www.sff.ba/en/page/partners-awards2#> (accessed on 22 December 2013)

5. <http://www.sff.ba/en/page/about-the-festival> (accessed on 22 December 2013)
6. With the 2014 edition the Berlinale Talent Campus changed its name to Berlinale Talents. <http://www.berlinale-talents.de/story/78/4378.html> (accessed 28 February 2014).
7. De Valck 2013, pp. 135-137.
8. <http://www.sff.ba/en/page/talents-sarajevo3> (accessed on 22 December 2013)
9. De Valck 2013, pp. 142.
10. http://www.fipresci.org/festivals/archive/2013/sarajevo/sarajevo_talentpress_13.htm (accessed on 22 December 2013)
11. *Sarajevo Talent Campus #7 Notebook* 2013, pp. 5.

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About the author

Ivan Velisavljević (Faculty of Dramatic Arts, Belgrade)



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Past memories for a new future

The 70th Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica di Venezia

Enrico Vannucci

From 28 August-7 September 2013 the Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica di Venezia celebrated its 70th edition.¹ It is the oldest film festival in the world and the first 'international cinematographic art exhibition'² to reach that milestone. The 'Mostra' certainly does not need an introduction since it is a very well-known event to which several monographic studies have been dedicated.³ Therefore, I will focus on two main issues that have been brought forth during this recent festival edition: the celebration of the 70th anniversary and the innovations introduced by Alberto Barbera in his second tenure directing the Venice Film Festival.