

Strong positioning on the international festival circuit: An interview with Diana Iljine of Filmfest München

By setting a new attendance record, showing remarkable growth in the number of film professionals and media representatives, as well as a significant increase in media coverage, the 33rd Filmfest München (25 June – 4 July 2015)¹ confirmed its growing relevance as the second largest film festival in Germany. In addition, the introduction of two new prizes (one by the German Association of Film Critics [VDFK] and one by the International Federation of Film Critics [FIPRESCI]) attests to the increased recognition of the festival across international borders. In a national landscape with approximately 350 quite heterogeneous² film festivals, as well as the continuous competition of high-profile festivals around the world, Filmfest München³ has been forced to rethink its positioning and design a new strategy. Diana Iljine, festival director since 2011, is responsible for the present course and a variety of far-reaching changes and renewals.⁴ When taking her position she had set herself the target of placing the festival on a solid foundation and to meet the challenges of an international stage.⁵ Convincing shareholders to agree to a near doubling of the budget⁶ was not only the necessary prerequisite for this objective but indeed her first major achievement.

Filmfest München's leading role as a hub for German film, especially for the New German Cinema, has its origin in the work of Eberhard Hauff, the first director of the festival (from 1983-2003). Although it was intended as an audience festival, the ongoing crisis of the German film industry⁷ combined with Hauff's personal background (as a director, producer, writer, and also chairman of the German Association of Film and TV Directors⁸) provided the impetus to establish a meeting point for the German film industry. This focus met the demands of the Munich region, as the most important German film centre of the time. Hauff, who was particularly committed to 'colleagues who have not yet made it',⁹ insured a welcoming and supporting atmosphere – an attitude which is cultivated to the present day.

When Hauff handed over the festival after 21 editions to Andreas Ströhl, Filmfest München had established itself as a fixed date on the calendar of cinephiles from Munich and in the German film industry. Even though the festival did not achieve the great international appeal it aspired to it enjoyed a good reputation and attracted attention for its trendsetting American Independents section.¹⁰ Under the leadership of Andreas Ströhl (from 2004-2011), previously the head of



Fig. 1: Filmfest München Poster 2013, 2014, 2015 (c) Filmfest München.

film at the Goethe Institute and a great film expert and cinephile, the quality of the festival as a treasure trove of cinematic gems¹¹ became the primary focus. Excluding mainstream cinema¹² and ‘programming much more independently’¹³ was the motto for Ströhl and his new, young, and engaged team of curators. The business perspective of the festival moved to the background. In contrast, initiatives were pursued that emphasised the value of film as a prominent instrument for (inter) cultural education. Under this spirit the festival gained a lot of appreciation and international recognition, visible by Ströhl’s numerous invitations to sit on panels and juries.

The viability, effectiveness, and long-term sustainability of a film festival is not simply tied to its tangible assets; it is influenced and resides in, and, above all, ‘legitimization plays a major role in framing the strategic response to environmental pressures’.¹⁴ Accordingly, to expand its relevance, a film festival ‘must be expert in developing a supportive network and in managing its many diverse stakeholder relationships’.¹⁵ Although all three directors shared the objective to meet the expectations of their main target groups – the audience, the filmmakers, and the film industry – the approaches differ substantially. Soon after joining the festival, Iljine, who had worked for television stations and an international sales company,¹⁶ shifted the strategy towards concepts aiming for visibility and public awareness by making use of the event qualities of Filmfest München. The most obvious signal of the change in direction was the new look of Filmfest München which was introduced at Iljine’s first edition, which was the 30th anniversary of the festival. The following interview with Iljine provides valuable insights into her strategy as well as current strategic objectives and emerging challenges.



Fig. 2: Diana Iljine at the opening ceremony (c) Filmfest München- Bernhard Schmidt.

Krainhöfer: You initiated major changes over the past few years. Do you think you are now seeing the fruits of this commitment?¹⁷

Iljine: Yes, you can definitely say that. Filmfest München had more visitors than ever before in its history. I'm not interested in breaking records, but it is significant, because this summer we had so much competition. There is a music and cultural festival parallel to ours, the opera festival, and countless open air events. Moreover, when the weather is good, people also go to beer gardens or head out of town to the many surrounding lakes. It takes some doing to attract attention to Filmfest München and draw new moviegoers despite all the various cultural and leisure options. We succeeded though. For a film festival to be successful these days you need a lot more than the core business that is screening films and inviting filmmakers. You have to offer a lot more that what young people can get by simply opening their laptops and watching a movie.

Krainhöfer: From your point of view which concrete features distinguish Filmfest München?

Iljine: Filmfest München is the second largest film festival in Germany and one of the big summer festivals in Europe. As opposed to the A-list festivals – the international festivals with competitions such as Cannes and Venice – we are first and

foremost a festival for the public. At the same time, Filmfest München also has appealing competitions, such as the German Cinema Young Talent Award with €70,000 in prize money, to name just one. Another feature of the festival is the relaxed, laid-back summer atmosphere, which both audiences and guests love. It is much easier to interact and get up close and personal with the filmmakers and stars in the theatres or events like Filmmakers Live than at bigger festivals. Industry insiders appreciate our efforts to emphasise their films within the program and with the press. Then there is the individual care they receive. Festivals larger than ours simply cannot provide that, and apparently the word gets around.

Krainhöfer: What position do you think Filmfest München has on the national as well as international festival circuit?

Iljine: Berlin and Munich are the most important festival platforms for German films. We are working hard to expand our relevance on the international festival circuit. That is succeeding partly because of the New German Cinema section, which is attracting more and more distributors and international sales companies. The unique position of this section is demonstrated by the new award presented by FIPRESCI, a great honor for Filmfest München. In addition to our film discoveries we offer highlights from Cannes and other international festivals to the public and film professionals.



Fig. 3: Viggo Mortensen, David Oelhoffen, and Diana Iljine at the opening ceremony (c) Filmfest München – Juri Reetz.

Krainhöfer: The press called Filmfest München one of the most exciting festival platforms for German movies. Is this development a result of your strategic focus?

Iljine: We strive to make it one of our significant attractions. Christoph Gröner, who heads the New German Cinema section, is an extremely competent programmer and committed member of the staff. However, crucial to this success is also the fact that our entire team is well-connected with the industry in Germany.

Krainhöfer: The number of admissions increased and so did the participation of film professionals from around the world. To what extent did Filmfest München actively contribute to those increases?

Iljine: Along with bolstering German cinema, expanding industry relations is something I feel is important. How can Filmfest München become a more attractive platform for sales companies, distributors, and filmmakers? We ask ourselves this question all the time in regards to our positioning. With the excellent markets in Berlin and Cannes it would make no sense for us to have one. Yet we have and are increasing our activities, such as our lunch get-togethers and our Industry Guide, to address market and business aspects.

Krainhöfer: Filmfest München is now widely considered a ‘fixed business date’. This is based very much on developments around the festival. Approximately 150 events such as panels, receptions, parties, dinners, and working meetings take place during the festival. What potential for the long-term development of Filmfest München do you see based on the recent developments?

Iljine: There have also been a lot of receptions during the festival. We are very pleased that more and more organisations and companies in the media industry use the festival as a platform. It demonstrates the festival's growing relevance. We do what we can in terms of advice and coordination. There is enormous potential in this, but one also needs the corresponding resources.

Krainhöfer: Dieter Kosslick, director of the Berlinale, considers Filmfest München the little sister of the Berlinale. Do you like that assumption or title, and if yes, does the little sister follow the bigger brother's footsteps in terms of its own development?

Iljine: I would put it this way. We are proud of our big brother, but the little sister is growing up and doing her own thing. We have our own image that we want to

continue to work on. But together we do a lot for Germany as a European media centre.

Krainhöfer: Over the past few years several German film festivals had to deal with their budgets being cut. You managed to negotiate a considerable budget increase with your shareholders. What were your strongest and most effective arguments?

Iljine: When I became the festival director I soon realised that the budget was not sufficient for two festivals¹⁸ per year. You cannot function – and that also applies to a cultural institution – if you are permanently on the brink of running out of funds. I did not take the job to manage an underfinanced company but rather to lead the festival into a bright future. So I asked the shareholders (primarily the City of Munich and the State of Bavaria) to make a decision: to strengthen the festival or slowly starve it to death. That the festival was and is a kind of flagship project for Bavaria as a media hub was something none of the shareholders disputed.

Krainhöfer: You are the managing and artistic director of Filmfest München as well as the director of the Filmschoolfest Munich. Are you planning closer cooperation between the two festivals? If so, what would that look like?

Iljine: The interaction already exists. Many of the filmmakers who showed their short films at the student festival we later greet on the red carpet for a glamorous premiere at Filmfest München. What's more, the future lies in international co-productions. The Filmschoolfest is an ideal place for German and international film students to network. I consider supporting this a very important objective.

Krainhöfer: You have done a lot to increase the visibility of Filmfest München. Would it be smart or is it not necessary for the festival to broaden its activities throughout the year, instead of just for a limited time period?

Iljine: I think it is very important that Filmfest München maintains a certain presence, not just for nine days but, as you say, throughout the year. That is one of my stated goals. We have a lot of good ideas but further organisational changes are necessary, including increased manpower.

Krainhöfer: Since last fall Netflix joined national VOD providers in the German market. Do you see this as a threat to film festivals, and if yes what are you planning in order to combat that?

Iljine: I don't see this development as a threat, but as a supplement – much the way it was with the introduction of television or videos and DVDs. Many films today have a much longer shelf life because of these developments. Basically, digitisation attracts more talent to this often expensive medium. We as a film festival can acquire films and present them to the public that we never even dreamed of earlier.

Krainhöfer: Directly after the announcement that you had been appointed as managing director of Filmfest München you said that it had always been your dream job. After four years now, has that changed?

Iljine: It's still my dream job. Of course there were obstacles to overcome and there will continue to be challenges. A dream job is not one that is easy and comfortable. For me it's important to form something and to advance it. To present an increasingly sophisticated public the best films out there.

Krainhöfer: It is expected that your contract with the Internationale Münchner Filmwochen GmbH will be extended, if you are willing. What innovations and new developments are you thinking about and how do you envision Filmfest München in 2020?

Iljine: The film and media landscape is constantly changing. A lot will happen between now and 2020. You have to be flexible. I'm not worried, because I have a first-rate staff. We want to continue to instil in audiences young and old a passion for cinema, and we also want to play an even more important role for the industry.

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Notes

1. <http://www.filmfest-muenchen.de>
2. Krainhöfer 2014.
3. The shareholders of the operating company Internationale Filmwochen München GmbH are the Free State of Bavaria, the state capital Munich, the umbrella organisation of the film industry, and the Bavarian broadcasting company
4. Filmfest München 2012.
5. Hollywood in München: Neue Filmfestchefin Diana Iljine möchte internationale Stars an die Isar holen', *Die Welt kompakt*, 10 March 2011.

6. Filmfest München, Press conference, 10 June 2014.
7. Hauff 2012, p. 26.
8. Bialas & Wessler 2014, p. 8.
9. Hauff 2012, p. 25.
10. But from a U.S. perspective, Munich's importance always has been its unwavering support for the American indie scene. The festival was the first international event to launch a sidebar devoted to U.S. independent productions, and the creme de la creme of U.S. indie talent returned for the 25th edition.' (Roxborough 2007)
11. The sidebar *Imagining India in 2010*, featuring the highlights of modern Indian cinema, curated by Andreas Ströhl, required intensive research of more than two years (Filmfest München 2010).
12. cf. Ströhl in Dieckmann 2011.
13. Andreas Ströhl wechselt zur Münchner Filmwochen GmbH', 2003.
14. Strandgaard & Mazza 2011, p. 142.
15. Andersson & Getz 2008, p. 203.
16. Gojic 2011.
17. All translations are the author's except where otherwise noted. The answers from Diana Iljine were translated by Filmfest München.
18. The *Internationale Münchner Filmwochen GmbH organises Filmfest München as well as the Filmschoolfest Munich* (formally known as The Munich International Festival of Film Schools, <http://www.filmschoolfest-munich.de>).