

IDFA'S ORWA NYRABIA: 'WE CANNOT STAND ASIDE'

By Nick Cunningham



IDFA Artistic Director Orwa Nyrabia has several motivations for being a founding partner of the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk.

Firstly, a tendency towards protest and advocacy has always been evident within the initiative's founding organisations of IDFA, IFFR and the European Film Academy, he points out.

Secondly, as a filmmaker who has been imprisoned both for his views and his activities, Nyrabia knows only too well how effective a well-managed international campaign of protest can be.

"I have a profound connection to the topic," he says. "I was one of those filmmakers back in 2012, when the Assad regime detained me in my home country of Syria, and I was released because of the international film community's advocacy."

Nyrabia's disappearance sparked an industry-wide campaign supported by the likes of Martin Scorsese and Robert De Niro. "The fact De Niro issued a statement made more of an impact than any political figure," Nyrabia told Screen International in 2019. "That's the power of the filmmaking community. I've been dreaming about creating a body like this [the Coalition] for a long time."

Prior to his imprisonment, Nyrabia had been a long time defender of filmmakers' and human rights and was one of the organisers of, and signatories to, the Syrian filmmakers' public pro-democracy statement in April 2011. He was also a vocal supporter of activists and humanitarian aid in Syria, and has worked with the Centre for Documentation of Violations in Syria.

Back in 2002, he co-founded Proaction Films, the first independent Syrian film production and distribution company, which worked on features including *DOLLS: A WOMAN FROM DAMASCUS* (2007) by Diana El Jeiroudi. After his release in 2012, productions included *RETURN TO HOMS* by Talal Derki, which opened IDFA in 2013, and *SILVERED WATER, SYRIA SELF-PORTRAIT* (2014), directed by Ossama Mohammed and Wiam Simav Bedirxan.

Not surprisingly, the same dogged determination applies to Nyrabia's work for the Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk, which he formed with Bero Beyer (then director of IFFR, and who has since moved on to head up the Netherlands Film Fund) and the European Film Academy.

"What is new is the fact that the number of cases is growing beyond the capacity of our three organisations, and the many others around the world who care," Nyrabia warns. "More and more filmmakers are being threatened, prosecuted, detained, exiled, and even killed around the world every year now. We cannot stand aside, and we cannot accommodate for the quality work needed to respond. A coalition, and a dedicated structure, became necessary."

Both IDFA and IFFR have long been at the forefront of change in devising mechanisms to fund and support filmmakers from less developed industries; and in supporting filmmakers in times of personal danger.

"IDFA has always been part of the film community's efforts to advocate for fellow filmmakers in such situations. This translated, and will always translate, into raising our voice, making use of the organisation's visibility in Europe and around the world, in lobbying filmmakers and relevant organisations and festivals around a case, communicating with relevant authorities to raise the profile of a case," Nyrabia says.

"However, it has always been an improvised effort, no matter how committed we were. Now, we would like to make sure there is a process, a mechanism with the right instruments to harness the power of the global film community for the benefit of a fellow film person who needs it."

The three institutions are high enough profile to make a noise within their sectors or spheres of interest, and their respective heads are articulate advocates who will never shy away from espousing a true and necessary cause. But the Coalition will always need more voices to maintain momentum. Nyrabia expects other institutions, festivals and national bodies to join the cause.

"Many, if not most, of the international film bodies expressed their deep interest and commitment," he adds. "When we started the Coalition with these three founding partners, we were only spearheading the process and trying to make sure it becomes quickly viable and sustainable."



IFFR's Bero Beyer (left) with Orwa Nyrabia at an IDFA talk in November 2018

"Many others will join soon. It is not 'our cause' anyway... but rather a collective problem that requires collective investment and efforts. We also hope that creating such a body will make it easier for fellow organisations that do not have the capacity to examine each and every case. Having a body that the film community trusts will encourage them to join in, and will amplify the impact."

EFA Chairman Mike Downey concurs with Nyrabia. "If we can professionalise and co-ordinate our possibilities, we will have a greater chance of being effective and providing real hope to those members of the international film community who are in need," he says. "The International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk intends to be an organisation to advocate for, and to act in solidarity with, filmmakers at risk, respond to cases of persecution or threats to the personal safety and/or liberty of the filmmakers as a result of their work, and to defend their right to continue their work by mobilising the international filmmaking community."

The business of advocacy can be very tiring and must seem, at times, both daunting and thankless. That said, and the case of Oleg Senstov is testament to this, the sense of satisfaction when success is achieved must be palpable. The focus of this advocacy must always be the filmmaker(s) at risk, of course; success may sometimes be hard to quantify.

"Measuring success in such an endeavour is very difficult," he notes. "One can say, 'Imagine how Orwa Nyrabia would still be in detention, or might even be dead by now, if not for the film community's efforts over three weeks in 2012'. I believe a lot of the impact will be difficult to measure. However, despotic governments everywhere will start to think twice before harassing a filmmaker, once they realize that it is not going to be in the news [just] for a couple of hours and falling off after that. This is about all of us coming together to raise the profile of the filmmaker, any filmmaker, in this more and more brutal global reality. We can see how such behaviour is not [only] limited to countries like Syria, Iran or China."

And even as the world suffers a global pandemic, Nyrabia underlines the need for even more vigilance. "With the COVID-19 crisis we can see how the trend is moving fast and how some governments even in Europe are equipping themselves with the laws and regulations to suppress critical voices," he concludes. "Filmmakers are, generally, critical people."

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