

# IFFR'S VANJA KALUDJERIC: "THE FESTIVAL GIVES US A GREAT PODIUM TO GENERATE AWARENESS ON A LARGE SCALE"

By Wendy Mitchell



The International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) is one of the founding partners of the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk. Former festival head Bero Beyer, who recently joined the Netherlands Film Fund, has handed the baton of the festival and the Coalition partnership to new IFFR director Vanja Kaludjeric.

Kaludjeric takes the reins of IFFR in an exciting time, as the festival plans its 50th edition to kick off (health precautions permitting) in January 2021. Kaludjeric, born in Croatia, was previously head of IFFR Talks from 2016 to 2018. Since studying Comparative Literature and Cultural Sociology Studies at the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia, Kaludjeric has held acquisitions posts at both Co-production Office in Paris and at Slovenia-based distribution company Demiurg. She has worked with Les Arcs European Film Festival, Holland Film Meeting, Sarajevo Film Festival, Cinéma du réel and CPH:DOX, and before joining IFFR was director of acquisitions at MUBI.

## **Why is an international coalition the best way to help filmmakers at risk?**

What we learned from the campaign to secure the release of Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov from his five-year detention is that there is a strong passion and dedication from film professionals worldwide to set in motion various activities to make a difference for filmmakers under threat. Through this, it also became apparent that what might be lacking to create an even greater impact is a permanent body within the film industry to streamline these various initiatives. Which means that every time a film professional who is imprisoned, or facing prosecution or censorship of their work or views, is completely reliant on the benevolent initiatives of individuals and organisations that are started from scratch again and again. While other cultural or societal bodies may exist to help their peers, the film industry seemed to lack the lobbying network that would channel dispersed yet genuine expressions of support.

Joining forces together with EFA and IDFA to create the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk enables us to find funding to support all filmmakers facing political persecution for their work on a year-round basis. Each of our organisations is able to address wide and qualitative outreach that will help generate awareness and secure additional partners.

### Why is IFFR in particular so interested in this work?

At IFFR we have always felt strongly about representing the many and diverse voices that together make great cinema. We support filmmakers from all corners of the world, quite often from countries where they have little to no support whatsoever. This is why we started the Hubert Bals Fund (HBF) more than 30 years ago. Also to help filmmakers who are being censored, and in some cases whose lives are being threatened. With so much oppression happening in various countries lately, we feel it is critical for a coalition like this to exist. So we can take the next step in offering our help, for example through legal support.

### What has IFFR done to support filmmakers at risk in the past?

Over the years we have done various things to bring the precarious situations of filmmakers to the attention of both the public and industry members alike. The festival gives us a great podium to generate awareness on a large scale. An example of this is the Mohammad Rasoulof and Jafar Panahi photo campaign back in 2011 to protest against their imprisonment. All festival visitors were invited to have their portrait taken with the names of Panahi and Rasoulof at the main festival location. Both filmmakers at that point were already very much part of the IFFR family and had visited Rotterdam as filmmakers, producers and jury members over the years, so their convictions came as a great shock. We feel it is our obligation to have an activist approach and bring situations like this to the attention of the widest possible audience. In addition, we organise a Freedom lecture each year to discuss the importance of democracy, freedom and the constitutional state. And we organise panels and talks to be a platform for filmmakers whose voices have difficulty being heard such as the Rojava Film Commune lecture during IFFR 2020. This is in addition to the HBF support to selected projects throughout the year.

### What do you think is the responsibility of film festivals in general to protect filmmakers and artists?

Film festivals and curators, in general, are not only gatekeepers but also very much custodians of the diverse and unique voices that together comprise great cinema. We all have a great responsibility to protect this diversity and make sure that their voices are being heard, no matter what dire circumstances the makers and artists are facing. Each of us has outreach and impact potential that can really act as a catalyst for change.

### Are you worried about these challenging times of the pandemic that civil liberties and artistic freedoms could be eroded further?

Well, it's safe to assume at this point in time that the world and society will not be the same as before the pandemic. If the new situation will be more challenging and difficult in regards to artistic freedom is difficult to say. Undoubtedly, filmmakers from territories that are already struggling will encounter even more difficulties. At the same time, this whole situation also forces a change in perhaps a more positive way. With some festivals not being able to take place in their usual shape, this has led for example to a move towards the digital realm, which leads to a more democratic access of audiences. We are already seeing the first few results of festivals that mention their audience is now much broader than before because people unable to travel to festivals now can actually access this great breadth of work online. So, the silver lining might be that a much bigger audience awareness is created, which is a nice building block for the future.



### How can the wider film industry gain more awareness and help filmmakers at risk?

By combining forces and through more knowledge exchange we can achieve a massive outreach. In the current situation, you already see this happening with lots of festivals sharing how they are dealing with the current disruptions. This can be in online sessions or hyper-local initiatives. This industry and all the people who are part of it are incredibly resourceful and full of determination. By coming together as a network, the possibilities of what we can achieve are endless.

We also have a duty towards the creators that make our festivals possible; we are in the powerful position to help filmmakers at risk, raise the public's attention and ply authorities' consideration towards individuals whose sole crime may have been to express themselves through the art of cinema.

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