

DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT: CHAMPIONING DISSIDENT VOICES SINCE 1969

By Michael Rosser

Filmmakers are looking at creative ways to tell stories from their own homes during the pandemic lockdown. But for Iranian director Jafar Panahi, making films while under house arrest has been a reality for close to a decade.

In spite of being convicted by Iran's Islamic republic of "making propaganda against the system" and placed under house arrest, film festivals around the world have celebrated his work and championed his cause.

Festivals have long proven to be a key part of raising awareness and campaigning for persecuted filmmakers, from Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov to Myanmar director Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi and Iran's Mohammad Rasoulof, winner of this year's Golden Bear at the Berlinale for *THERE IS NO EVIL*.

Christophe Leparc, managing director of Directors' Fortnight, recalls how the Cannes sidebar launched in 1969 to support such voices.

"At that time, every country had to present a film to the Cannes selection through their own ministry of culture," he says. "If you were an independent director like Tarkovsky or a dissident artist that wasn't supported by their own government, you couldn't access the festival. So the Fortnight was launched to break that rule."

The sidebar would go on to support filmmakers like Panahi, who was awarded the section's Carrosse d'Or prize in 2011 and whose absence was marked by an empty chair on stage. Asked about the importance of festival support for such directors, Leparc says: "It's important, first and foremost, because artists need to be free to do their work and if they have problems creating films, we need to get behind them.

"Second, festivals give the opportunity for mass communication. There are so many journalists at Cannes every year that it provides a major opportunity to support these directors."

With EFA, IDFA and IFFR joining forces to create the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk, Leparc welcomes the opportunity to maintain visibility of persecuted directors year-round. "If you make a declaration at Rotterdam in January, raise it again at Berlin in February and so on, we can keep these issues alive all year and not let governments sleep on the difficult situations of these directors," he adds.



Christophe Leparc

"IT'S IMPORTANT THAT FILM FESTIVALS TAKE SIDES"

EFA Close-up spoke with festival directors from around the globe to get their views on helping filmmakers at risk.

Alberto Barbera, Director, Venice Film Festival



"Alongside everybody in the cultural world, I am extremely worried about the increasing level of censorship in many countries that put at risk the freedom of expression for a lot of filmmakers. Even worse than that, there is the political and social persecution against some directors who are in jail or had to spend a long period of time in prison,

due to their ideals and beliefs, without being able to express themselves as all artists should do, sometimes risking not only their freedom but also their own life.

"I think that it is very important that film festivals take sides and make every possible effort to support filmmakers in danger. Raising our voice in defence of these directors, and the ones who will find themselves in a similar situation in future, is a moral obligation. Using the stage of a festival to focus the attention of the media on these cases, spreading news about the filmmakers' situation and increasing the level of awareness can help to force our own governments to make political steps in their defence. Very often, the most brutal regimes fear the consequences of negative public opinion that can affect their image."

Cecilia Barrionuevo, Artistic Director, and Fernando Juan Lima, President, Mar del Plata International Film Festival



"A film festival is and should be a place of freedom and diversity. Argentina's history teaches us that only with the rule of law in full force and effect is it possible

for our personal rights to be upheld.

"The fact that the Mar del Plata International Film Festival has not been able to be held every year is a sign of its incompatibility with censorship (regardless of the reasons used in those years to try to justify this).

"Our history and its essence has compelled us to give a special place in our programme to the work of directors under threat, those persecuted for political, social or religious reasons, for their life choices or even for simply exercising their freedom."

Lili Hinstin, Artistic Director, Locarno Film Festival



"If cinema can be considered as a country where freedom is the most important rule, then film festivals are platforms where the filmmakers' freedom of expression has to be guaranteed. Locarno Film Festival has always stood for freedom in all its forms and will continue to support the integrity of those filmmakers who find themselves at risk because of the images they create and the ideas they convey."

Cintia Gil, Festival Director, Sheffield Doc/Fest



"A film festival is a safe space for defending freedom and has a very important and effective power: a public voice. Therefore, a fundamental task for any festival is to stand-up for filmmakers at risk, bringing them to the attention of the international community and spreading an unequivocal message against violence and oppression against artists.

"We will definitely continue to stand for filmmakers at risk, not only individually but also in circumstances where the very practice of cinema is threatened by authoritarian governments, as we see happening in Brazil, Iran, Turkey, and many others."

Carlo Chatrian, Artistic Director, Berlin International Film Festival



"Throughout their history, film festivals have helped filmmakers raise their voices, especially when their work is going against the mainstream or touching on itchy topics. I'm thinking about the role played by film festivals with neo-realism in the aftermath of WWII, or with Eastern European countries during the Cold War.

"In the 21st century, we have the illusion that the world is an open book. In reality, without the presence and the commitments of artists, much of the diversity we have knowledge of would be lost or not recognized enough.

"The Berlinale has a long tradition in supporting daring films, independent voices, and unconventional filmmaking, as well as films that come from countries where artists must work underground in order to speak truth to power such as Iran or China. I believe this is quite natural for a film festival that takes place in a town that has endured and survived very adverse situations.

"To me the political background of Berlinale is directly connected with the history of the city over the past century and the political and moral awareness that the inhabitants have developed. Berliners can embrace the political side of a film much better than any professional audience. The mix of press and 'normal' viewers is something unique that we probably don't acknowledge enough. Luckily, films and their success at the festival remind us of that."

Tabitha Jackson, Director, Sundance Film Festival



"Freedom of expression and the free movement of artists and their work is a vital component of any healthy society, but in this moment, filmmakers are facing increased risks to themselves and their work: financial harm, physical harm, imprisonment, censorship and the most insidious of all, self-censorship.

"Film festivals can play a vital role in challenging at least some of those countervailing forces. They can form an alternative distribution system – a network for the circulation of ideas expressed in cinematic form.

"They are also gathering places, protective spaces and catalytic sites of both solidarity and meaning-making. Cultural revolutions can be seeded.

"For some film teams, publicity provides a layer of protective visibility. For others, quiet and behind-the-scenes support is best. And, of course, it not just the filmmakers who are at risk. This year, we also provided additional support and measures to protect the identities of the subjects of SAUDI RUNAWAY and WELCOME TO CZECHNYA.

"Sundance Institute is also part of the Safe+Secure initiative, which is aimed at the independent documentary film community and focused on production, but much of the guidelines and protocol apply to distribution and release."

Karel Och, Artistic Director, and Kryštof Mucha, Executive Director, Karlovy Vary International Film Festival



"Ever since the rebirth of the Karlovy Vary IFF in the early 1990s, Vaclav Havel, a key figure in Czech culture and politics, was a friend and supporter of the festival.

With a patron of such immense influence, who himself spent several years in prison during the communist era, we simply could not remain indifferent towards limitations on artistic expression of any kind, nor on an artist's personal freedom.

"KVIFF considers it a duty not only to support filmmakers at risk but also to facilitate their communication with the audience on the other side of any "fence" that is limiting an artist's freedom."

(In 2013, KVIFF enabled Jafar Panahi to introduce his film CLOSED CURTAIN via Skype while under house arrest.)

José Luis Rebordinos, Director, San Sebastian Film Festival



"It is very important that film festivals support filmmakers who are persecuted for their ideologies. There are many filmmakers in the world who use their films to try to transform the realities in which they live. Many of them are prevented from practising their profession or are imprisoned. Film festivals can show their work and give them visibility so that their repression does not go unpunished."

Albert Wiederspiel, Festival Director, Filmfest Hamburg



"I don't think film festivals are just about watching good films in a nice atmosphere. Festivals are precisely curated programmes that have the unique opportunity to emphasize different aspects of filmmaking.

"Filmfest Hamburg has chosen to show many politically relevant films so it is a matter of course that we engage ourselves with films and filmmakers from countries where freedom of expression is not given. In the case of Mohammad Rasoulof, we offered him and his family a residence in Hamburg.

"But small gestures also generate important attention. For several years, we have stopped giving flowers to our guests and instead donate the money to a filmmaker at risk, for which each guest receives a certificate of the donation in their name. This not only collects urgently needed money for the filmmaker's family or legal advisors but also reminds the audience and the media of their fate."

Michael Rosser is a London-based writer and editor specialising in the UK and international film industry. He regularly contributes to Screen International, previously worked at IMDb and Broadcast, and moderates at screenings, events and film festivals