FILM REVIEW

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The Paradox of a Film Festival In Zanzibar

'What a crazy bet to organize a film festival...in a city which does not even have a single film hall!' marveled FIPRESCI (The International Federation of Film Critics) Jury member, Jean Marie Mollo Olinga. What a paradox then, that the Zanzibar International Film Festival, has run its 8th edition, and by now has firmly established itself as one of Africa's premiere film festivals, right besides FESPACO. FIPRESCI vice president Hassouna Mansouri noted during his keynote address at the Awards Gala, that ZIFF was the first sub-Saharan festival to have been granted the honour of hosting a FIPRESCI jury, the most authoritative organization of film critics. The only other festival in Africa that has a FIPRESCI Jury is the Carthage Film Festival, the oldest on this continent. Why has ZIFF been singled out and accorded this accolade, yet it is situated in a region of Africa that does not have a prolific film output?

Zanzibar has witnessed the demise of its two last remaining cinemas, The Cine Afrique (in the process of becoming a mall) and The Majestic (relegated to the status of a video parlour), with the Empire having been earlier converted into a supermarket, which speaks volumes for our times. In many ways, what could have been perceived as the 'End of Cinema', had this occurred in any other place, has ironically offered itself in Zanzibar as an ideal pretext for the staging of a festival of this quintessential art form of our contemporary age. For is it not, in these times of overabundant visual stimulus demanding our attention at every twist and turn, that convincing an audience, any audience, about the unique nature of a festival, is simply next to impossible? Festivals, since ancient times have always existed to mark periods when work ceases and celebrations take place. They have been an occasion for invoking the best of our human aspirations. One may argue, that precisely because there is such a dearth of cinemas in Zanzibar, that the longing and hunger for film is greater here than elsewhere.

Zanzibar's Stone Town can lay claim to being the first truly cosmopolitan city in East Africa, with electric street lighting being available way before it was in London. By 1916 a cinema hall was in place. It was also here that the 'offspring' of cinema, colour television, was to be established for the first time in the whole of Africa in 1973. The proliferation of video in the 1980's and 1990's, and cable TV that soon followed, spelled doom for many cinemas not only around the world but also here in Zanzibar. It
was technology that had brought the culture of the moving image to Zanzibar, and now it appeared that technology too was about to take it away. It was within this context too, of scuttling cinema audiences, that ZIFF was initiated in 1997. The movies' last stand took place within the confines of the historic Old Fort which overlooks the harbour, where an open-air cinema was installed for the duration of this annual festival. And indeed, like a lone island in the middle of an ocean of filmic despondency, ZIFF not only kept the dream of cinema afloat for the region, but also is now poised to become the flagship of a major initiative to turn around the tide.

ZIFF has made a conscious and deliberate decision to become a fully-fledged trans-regional event, true to the implications of the term 'International' that is found in its name. While still being firmly embedded in the idea of being principally a showcase for the dhow countries cinematic output, ZIFF is looking much further, with the belief that the African continent needs to have a festival in this region that can pull in global attention. Swahili culture and language, so much at the root of Zanzibar's historically intrinsic cosmopolitan outlook, where the inclusiveness of other influences has never been perceived as a hampering force but rather a challenge inspiring creative adaptations, lends themselves as pliable means of connecting together a vast geographical space.

This year's opening film was Mweze Dieudonne Ngangura's The Governor's New Clothes (2005), from the DRC (Congo). It is rare for African filmmakers to use the musical form, with this being the fourth such venture in our continent's film history. In this film, many of the traits that epitomise the spirit of cross-cultural interaction could be noticed. Mweze Ngangura openly admitted that he was inspired by the influences that span the Indian Ocean basin, with Bollywood as one of his role models. This is a blending of three continents, as the story is taken from the Danish Christian Anderson's tale, The Emperor's New Clothes, while the ballads of his film are performed by Papa Wemba, one of the most famous Lingala singers from Congo. It is this intertwining of influences, in many ways almost literally shaped by a historical past where trade routes connected the eastern part of Congo with Zanzibar, which in turn was linked by sea routes with the Indian subcontinent. Mweze, although he had never lived in East Africa, communicated with the local media and audiences in Kiswahili, a language that has evidently become a lingua franca as far away as Kinshasa. Mweze's film was immensely popular with the Zanzibari audience, because as an author he perfectly understands the cultural components that inform the sensibilities of his viewers. He had already demonstrated that he is one of Africa's most popular filmmakers with his Pieces D'Identities (Pieces of Identity), 1998, and La Vie Est Belle (Life if Beautiful), 1986. While Mweze has never shied away from a more populist approach with his films, he at the same time conducts his discourse with Africa's political and social predicaments in his unmistakable
sardonic and provocative manner. It is the clarity and ability of the message to move his audience that has always been his concern. This would very much concur with Ousmane Sembene’s view that ‘I want to bring back to my people their own situation so that they can recognise themselves in it, and ask questions.’

Perception, misperception, and issues of identity were one of the predominant issues that came across most clearly during the festival. The winner of the Best Documentary Award went to The Importance of Being Elegant by George Amponsah and Cosima Spender. This film formed a perfect duo with Mweze’s film, as it too followed the life of the Congolese star Papa Wemba. In the feature film, Wemba’s myth was utilised for the enhancement of the story, while the documentary about him took every effort to deconstruct his myth. A myth built around not only Lingala music but on the fetish of expensive designer clothes, as a possible compensation for the hardships of living as immigrants in Europe. Beneath the frivolous and often bizarre scenes emerge uneasy questions about the dream of migration that has taken a hold of countless young people on the continent.

‘Monsoons and Migrations’, the theme of this year’s edition found itself weaving in and out of a permutation of other concerns. Earth and Ashes, directed by Atique Rahimi, and the recipient of the Best Feature Film Award, and the SIGNIS Award, follows a journey undertaken by a grandfather with his grandson, in search of a son and father gone missing. As they migrate across an Afghanistan recovering from strife, they try to re-establish their ability to understand each other and the world beyond. Symbolically, the generational divide is posited in a grandson who has gone deaf, and a grandfather who has to learn to be a nurturer all over again. Drum, by South Africa’s Zola Moseka carried the FIPRESCI Award as a costume film of almost epic proportions taking us back into the dehumanising mechanisms of Apartheid. Tanzania’s Tumaini (Childhood Robbed) by Beatrix Mugishagwe, a tale of perseverance in the face of adversity was given the UNICEF Award. The other films that won awards were Indonesia's The Rainmaker by Ravi Bharwani, India’s While it Rains Hard by Kamal, Kenya's Babu's Babies by Christine Bala, Zimbabwe’s Mother’s Day by Tsitsi Dangarembga, Sudan’s All About Darfur by Taghred Elsandouri and Uganda’s Calabash by Ndalko Katondolo Petna. This last film, a short lasting 13 minutes, was one of the most evocative and refreshing bursts of talent to have been unleashed on the audiences in Zanzibar. The filmmaker has taken a simple object, a calabash, and out of it created a dense and subtle ode to the power of African traditions. What is so innovative for this region is that this film while looking back towards the past, at the same time reinvents and reinvigorates tradition by incorporating it into a sophisticated modern form. And this film form springs entirely from Uganda’s heritage. Could this film then be a herald of a new approach for the development of an authentic voice and grammar of cinema in East Africa?

When we talk of film grammar, its further development, it makes sense to draw some comparisons to established forms of cinema. This year we presented a special screening of a major Hollywood film as a Zanzibari, Said el Gheity of the Centre for African Languages in London, was a major collaborator on its production. He was given

Dhow culture Dialogues  107
the task of inventing a fictitious African language for Sydney Pollack's The Interpreter, starring Nicole Kidman. Said el Gheity was able to take the floor after the film to answer often pointed questions as to why such a fictitious language had to be used in the film. The stimulating debate that ensued was informative to all those involved, particularly as Said was very conscious of the implications and the long history of mainstream cinema's attempts to exoticise and detach language from spatial reality.

Besides the films that won awards, and those that were presented in other non-competitive sections, a new and bold panorama has been instituted at ZIFF called the 'Heritage Extravaganza'. Films presented under this banner are bound by their common depiction of indigenous communities that have lived in comparative isolation and have preserved much of their original heritage. Among the films that comprised this theme were Atanarjuat The Fast Runner by Zacharias Kunuk (Canada), Himalaya by Eric Valli (Nepal) and Yeelen, The Brightness by Souleymane Cisse (Mali), who was also the recipient of this year's Lifetime Achievement Award. Why many wondered was a film on the Inuit going to be screened? What was the rationale behind such programming? What relevance did it hold for the dhow region? The principal aim behind this unconventional screening was a belief that filmmakers from our region need to be exposed to the very best film practices that have worked elsewhere, very often in the most trying conditions. Atanarjuat The Fast Runner, the first film made by an Inuit, and the first in the Inuit language, breaks several barriers. The most important of all is the presumption that a film made by a small minority living in a remote and 'disadvantaged' region, cannot gain popular international acclaim and cannot be a thrilling and engrossing filmic spectacle. This film proved beyond doubt that this is possible, as it went on to be feted at Cannes and beyond. The other important lesson that can be drawn from this film is that non-professional actors, from communities that do not possess trained ones, can still carry a film, given the right direction.

And this draws us back to the paradox that Zanzibar has become for film. We intend it to become an open laboratory for filmmakers in our region. Since formal solutions that had been attempted to date in our region have not made the impact that they
were meant to, in terms of releasing the vast pent up resources of talent in our region, ZIFF is taking it upon itself to generate the momentum for change. Films are therefore not only programmed for the audiences at large, but are selected to also fulfil an educational purpose for our film adepts. The fact that this festival offers a wide spectrum of other arts, such as music, theatre, painting, photography and literature, means that for the duration of the festival it can try to fulfil, albeit in this condensed time period, a semblance of a film school, that would offer courses on all the arts under one roof, for the benefit of its filmmakers. Film can thrive successfully in an atmosphere that is informed by all art forms. This year’s workshops included a cutting-edge course on interactive filmmaking that was conducted for the very first time in East Africa by Jori Polkki, a film director from Finland. A one-minutes project from the Netherlands has resulted in films by students of this workshop, now having been posted for the world's public to see on the Internet.

There was a cautionary tale too, in this edition of our festival. While paying tribute to Sao Gamba (1940-2004), East Africa's artist extraordinaire, and also the first professional African filmmaker in this region, ZIFF was making a clear statement that those entrusted with fostering the arts in our region should no more banish and ruthlessly relegate to oblivion such incredible talents as his. Talent is a resource that our region cannot afford to squander. Sao’s sublime and at moments trans-like documentary, People of the Red Ochre (1975) made this point sufficiently clear.

This year’s ZIFF Jury was chaired by Dr. Harold Weaver from the W. E. DuBois Institute for African and African-American Research at Harvard University. Dr. Weaver who was the first to have introduced the teaching of African films in institutions of higher learning, stated in his report that he

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"felt privileged to have worked for an ambitious festival." It is taken by ZIFF as both rewarding but also a challenge to strive for more with each coming edition. Imruh Bakari, my immediate predecessor, had left a solid and painstakingly constructed structure for furthering the urgent cause of cinema in this part of the world. The sheer determination of such, and other pioneers, is what has made progress possible.

Ousmane Sembene, the 'father of African Cinema' advocated that 'People must listen to what is in the film, and they must talk about it. That is why the language used plays a very important role.' (from Film and Politics in the Third World, edited by John D.H. Downing, p.46, 1987, Library of Congress)

Earlier on in the year ZIFF had conducted an experiment that was unique for our
region. With the collaboration of both France and Germany and the State University of Zanzibar, ZIFF undertook to conduct simultaneous and live translations of films. The audience's response was overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Viewers in the amphitheatre were seen frantically sms-ing and calling their families and friends to hurry to the screenings, for this was an experience that could not be missed. What a sight to see people rushing into an auditorium! Zanzibar was abuzz with the excitement and realisation that given the chance, any and every film, from wherever in the world, could be made accessible in Kiswahili. The audiences gasped, laughed, and cheered. No nuance was lost on them. This is what cinema is after all, at its most profound. And it happened here, on an island with not one single functional cinema. But then this is Zanzibar, a place of paradoxes.