



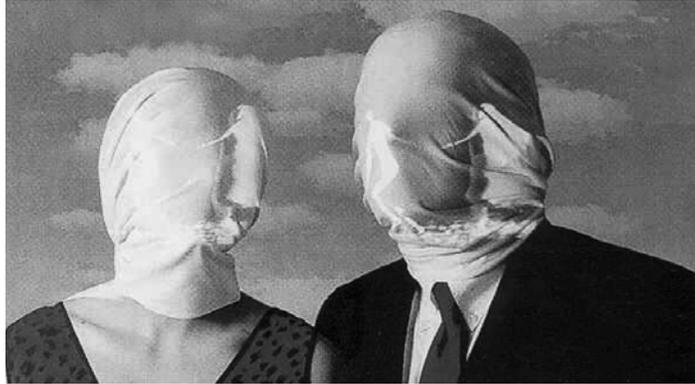
A puff of freedom – Teenagers come of age in the rural Turkey of *Times and Winds*, which opened the Euro Film Fest

## Euro Film Fest - Bulgaria brings European co-production home

“There was a time, at the beginning of the nineties, when our national cinema survived only by co-producing with the rest of Europe.” Irina Kanusheva, Head of International Affairs, Festivals and Promotion at Bulgaria’s National Film Centre, has vivid memories of those years. “After the end of the Communist regime, we went from State-sponsored production averaging between 25 and 50 films a year, to almost nothing.”

Because it was born out of urgent necessity, Bulgaria’s annual Festival of European Co-productions Euro Film Fest, which has been running since 1996 in Sofia, is no ordinary film festival. At the time, it was seen as an essential initiative to resuscitate Bulgarian cinema by anchoring it firmly in the European film landscape. “In the early days, Bulgarian film festivals were often the only sign of our national cinema’s survival,” recalls Irina. “Even if no films were produced in a given year, the festivals still ran. It gave us hope, helped us develop a network of relationships and created opportunities for a new generation of film makers here. They needed a way to stay involved with cinema and for a certain period the festivals played this main role.”

The Festival of European Co-productions presents a diverse selection, showcasing some of the best co-produced films from Eastern, Southern and Central Europe and further afield. Over 12 years it has shown over 350 co-productions from the four corners of Europe. From its inception, the festival was also conceived as much as an industry event as an opportunity for Bulgarian cinema-goers to see European films which were practically missing from the programming of the commercial cinemas or national television.



Gagging for true Love – *Elle*, scripted by the legendary Raul Ruiz, a Portuguese, French, Swiss and Bulgarian co-production

“The biggest part of the budget for the festival goes towards inviting foreign filmmakers and experts with a solid knowledge of every aspect of co-production,” says Irina. During the festival, Bulgarian and visiting filmmakers have a choice of different co-production workshops designed to keep them up to date on new opportunities in Europe, such as an event on script development ‘Script Crossing Borders’ and a working session of the South East European Cinema Network, for example.

Over the years, the growth of Euro Film Fest has both paralleled the renaissance of Bulgarian cinema and contributed significantly to it. The Film Industry Act of 2003 sets the minimum number of films to be supported by the National Film Centre at no less than seven features, 14 documentaries and 160 minutes of animation (starting from 2009). The Centre can also count on an annual agreement with national public television which today helps co-finance the majority of Bulgarian feature films.

“The Centre and public TV have made a decisive contribution to re-launching Bulgarian film production,” says Irina. “But co-production remains the most important part of our national strategy. Today, the majority of our features are co-produced with other European countries and this generation of producers knows how to do it. Euro Film Fest was one of the events that helped them acquire knowledge about co-production and develop useful contacts.”

Whilst France was an important production partner during those lean years of transition of the late 1990s, Germany is now providing more regular opportunities for Bulgarian filmmakers. Neighbouring Greece and Turkey, both of whom have established film industries, have also proven to be reliable partners, as have The Netherlands and Hungary.

“But Euro Film Fest is not a one-way street,” adds Irina. “Over the years, it’s also been an opportunity for filmmakers to find co-production opportunities for their own projects.” *Times and Winds*, a bittersweet drama of adolescence in a Turkish rural community was last year’s opening film. Directed by prominent Turkish director Reha Erdem, it was produced by Atlantik Film, represented in Sofia by Ms. Gulin Ustun, who made the connection with a Bulgarian producer, who is now coproducing the next Reha Erdem’s film *My Only Sunshine*.

The renewal of Bulgarian cinema through co-production has been accompanied by the slow redeployment of a national cinema infrastructure. Irina is sanguine about the progress made. "After the regime change, most of the cinemas (there were over 3,000 screens before 1989!) were privatised, then turned into bingo halls or shopping precincts. At some stage, very few commercial theatres were left. Today, however, we have more than 100 screens, half of which are in new state-of-the-art multiplexes." However, these cinemas have based their business predominantly on American films and have not necessarily boosted the visibility of Bulgarian films and European co-productions. "I do not consider the multiplexes as something good, I am mourning over the old *cinema de quartier*," adds Irina.

From the quasi-disappearance of its national cinema in the late nineties, Bulgaria has bounced back. There were a record nine features made in 2006. It has achieved this remarkable turnaround largely through a deliberate strategy of European integration helped along in no small measure by Euro Film Fest.

Irina is cautiously optimistic about the future. "It takes at least ten years for a director to build a career and attract production funding based on his or her body of work. The Festival of European Co-productions sustains their efforts by getting their work known and opening up opportunities for them to develop bigger projects, with higher production values."