

Out of Africa

The making of an African film festival network
BY TODD LESTER



CINE AFRIQUE IN STONETOWN, ZANZIBAR

film professionals that come to festivals. This local/informal and regional/formal exposure generated by these festivals and propels the African film industry.

Two examples of this multidirectional tendency are two films, *Yellowcard* and *Stonetown: Old Houses and Strong Women*. The former is a social message drama about AIDS and teenage sexuality by Zimbabwe's Media for Development Trust. *Yellowcard* is an English-language film, so for it to be accessible to French-speaking audiences in West and Central Africa, it had to be either dubbed or subtitled. Due to cost and available technology, it was more practical to first downgrade the film to video format before changing the language. However, in video format, the film was then susceptible to pirating and widespread showing in local video clubs.

Over the last 15 to 20 years, demand-driven usage of VCRs by households and businesses



CINEMA KANDARGA IN ZINDER, NIGER USES DVD TECHNOLOGY FOR PROJECTION

(i.e. video clubs) has precipitated the closing of cinema halls throughout the African continent. These halls may not have been financially sustainable due to old equipment and costly (or impossible) repairs, so many have been retrofitted with VCRs, thereby transforming them into video clubs.

Without viable cinema space for formal screenings, the festival becomes even more important for local and national film sectors. *Yellowcard* was featured at the 2001 *Pan-African*

MENTORING IN AFRICA

This spring, veteran South Asian director Mira Nair—who just had her *Vanity Fair* released—teamed up with Bala Entertainment International to establish International Bhenji Brigade (IBB), a film production company that will create independent Asian and African cinema for the global marketplace and help novice filmmakers as well. As an extension of that effort, her production company, Mirabai Films, established an annual filmmaker's laboratory, *Maisha*, dedicated to supporting visionary screenwriters and directors in East Africa and South Asia. The first lab, focused on screenwriting, will launch this coming August, 2005, in Kampala, Uganda.

Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO) in Burkina Faso and a mini-festival during the 13th International AIDS Conference in Durban, South Africa.

The latter film mentioned—*Stonetown: Old Houses and Strong Women*—was a participatory video project on urban renewal and property ownership in Zanzibar's historic port of Stonetown. The film, which was made by the community and the NGO, Maneno Mengi, was featured at *The Zanzibar International Film Festival* and then went on to screen at *The Berlinale International Film Festival*.

Some of the first generation African filmmakers are still living today, such as Sembène Ousmane of Senegal [his film *Moolaadé* will debut at *The NYFF* this year]. As members of the audiovisual community as well as of local society, these filmmakers are the driving forces for training youth locally in film production and development communications. Burkina Faso-based veteran director Gaston Kaboré has created the Imagine Institute for student filmmakers. Rwandan director Eric Kabera has created the Kigali-based Rwanda Cinema Centre to offer public screenings and film education.

And just as individual filmmakers serve as important catalysts by providing features for the festivals and leading industry-related training activities year-round, the professional atmosphere created during the festival, networking activities and affiliated markets is an essential function. Each country's film industry depends on these African festivals to create a buzz for the year surrounding these annual events.

The African film festival has a large impact both internally and externally. Somewhat different than many western film festivals, the African ones tend to offer more democratic access.

So, while there are exclusive events within the context of the festival, there are rural/isolated populations that can't access urban centers due to financial reasons. So many national festivals present alternatives. Both *The Neighborhood Festival of Dakar* and *The Amakula-Kampala Festival* conduct free out-

door screenings in popular quarters.

Often a combination of these elements advance a festival programmatically. For example, *The Zimbabwe International Film Festival* started in 1998 as a relatively modest event based in Harare. This year it extended into the university city of Bulawayo. Additionally, its management evolved into a year-round organization, The ZIFF Trust (ZIFFT) that has four primary activities—*The Festival*, The Short Film Project, a periodic Film Forum, and a school-based program 'Outreach 2 Educate'.

It's a festival's ability to evolve according to popular demands that allows it to reconcile a state's desire for a status symbol with this film industry's need for growth. Eddie Mbalo, head of South Africa's National Film and Video Foundation, put it best when he said, "We see film as a means of promoting economic development as well as art... It's important for the image of Africa, for our image of ourselves, for democracy."



VIDEOTHEQUE IN ARUA, UGANDA

There are approximately 30 active festivals across the African continent and countless Africa-themed film events throughout the world. With 54 countries to speak of, an African film festival can never lack for something relevant to say.

In 2002, *The Durban International Film Festival* administration hosted the first ever *African Union - Film Festival* under the banner "African Cinema in the African Century." *The Festival's* second edition is slated for Addis Ababa, Ethiopia—an historic proving ground for the Organization of African Unity that the African Union now replaces.

With themes such as human rights, sexual identity and the environment; advancing technological media; and a generational shift to student and short film festivals, the landscape

for screening of African films holds not only a pan-continental significance, but one more broadly crucial to human development.

Moreover, film festivals within the continent have learned to accommodate the haphazard distribution forms for films and video created by African filmmakers. A jumble of contradictory examples marks the terrain for intellectual properties across the African continent. This situation is incapable of compensating filmmakers in standard terms, but seems to facilitate screening opportunities outside of existing, yet sparse, distribution networks.

Film festivals, in essence, create a counterbalance to piracy and informal screenings and offers filmmakers a window of opportunity to further launch their work into regional entertainment sectors, and among a range of

FILM FESTS IN AFRICA

Carthage Films
Carthage, Tunisia (beg. date 1966)
October of even years
Contact: Nadia Attia, Directrice
culture.jcc@ati.tn

Pan-African Film/TV Festival of Ouagadougou-FESPACO
Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso (beg. date 1969) February of odd years
www.fespaco.bf

Cairo Int'l Film Festival
Cairo, Egypt (1977) Nov./Dec.
www.cairofilmfest.com

Durban International Film Festival
Durban, S. Africa (1979) June

Mogadishu Pan-African Film Symp.
Mogadishu, Somalia (1983) one-off

National Film and Video Festival
Lagos, Nigeria (1992) Nov. restarted in 2003 after decade-long absence
www.africultures.com/actualite/murmures/detail.asp?no_murmure=1166

Ecrans Noirs FF
Cameroon, Central African Republic, DRC, Chad, Gabon (1995) June/July
www.ecrans-noirs.org

'Out in Africa' South African Gay and Lesbian FF
Johannesburg/Cape Town, S. Africa (1995) March/April
www.oia.co.za

Sithengi: The Southern African Int'l Film & TV Market Initiative
Cape Town, South Africa (1996) Nov.
Contact: info@sithengi.co.za
www.sithengi.co.za

Zanzibar International FF (ZIFF)
Zanzibar, Tanzania (1997) June/July
www.ziff.or.tz

Neighborhood FF of Dakar
Dakar, Senegal (1997) December
Contact: filmduquartier@forut.sn
www.forut.sn

Zimbabwe Int'l FF Trust (ZIFFT)
Harare, Zimbabwe (1997) August/Sept.
Contact: zimfilmfest@zol.co.zw
www.ziff.co.zw

Africa Cine Week
Nairobi, Kenya (1998) Sept./Oct.
www.artmatters.info/film/filmmarket.htm
www.artmatters.info/film/nairobiilmfest.htm

Encounters-South African International Documentary Festival & Laboratory
Cape Town/Johannesburg, S. Africa (1999) July/August
www.encounters.co.za

Lagos International Forum on Cinema, Motion Picture and Video in Africa
Lagos, Nigeria (2000) July
www.thisdayonline.com/arts/20040702rev03.html

Apollo Festival of Independent Film
Victoria West, S. Africa (2001) Sept.
www.apollotheatre.co.za

Marrakech Int'l FF
Marrakech, Morocco (2001) Oct.
www.festivalmarrakech.com

Cape Town World Cinema Festival
Cape Town, S. Africa (2002) Nov.
Contact: info@sithengi.co.za
www.sithengi.co.za

Zambia International FF (ZAMIFF)
Lusaka, Zambia (2002) Nov./Dec.
Contact: Jabbes Mvula, Director-jabbsmvula@yahoo.com

Glassdoor Animation Festival
Cape Town, S. Africa (2002) Nov.
Contact: info@sithengi.co.za
www.sithengi.co.za

Africa and the Islands FF
Saint-Denis, Reunion (2002) Oct.
Contact: Alain Gili, Director
alain.gili@wanadoo.fr

Yaoundé-tout-court Shorts Festival
Yaoundé, Cameroon (2003) Nov.
www.africultures.com/guide/actualite/murmures/detail.asp?no_murmure=1130&murmure=

Quintessence-Ouidah Int'l FF
Ouidah, Benin (2003) January
www.festival-ouidah.org

3 Continents Human Rights FF
Asia, Africa, America (2003) Sept.
www.3continentsfestival.co.za

South African Int'l FF
Johannesburg, South Africa/Nov.
<http://www.safilmfestival.co.uk/ff/index.php>

Southern African FF
Harare, Zimbabwe discontinued event
<http://web.mit.edu/21f.853/africa-film/1028.html>

RESFEST Digital FF
Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban, S. Africa (2003)
not yet listed for current year
www.resfest.com

Amakula Kampala International FF
Kampala, Uganda (2004) May
www.amakula.com

Africa Film Market (AFIMAT)
Accra, Ghana (2004) Inaugural edition slated for October at the Ghana National Theatre
www.africafilmv.com (search)

Rabat International FF
Rabat, Morocco (2002) June
www.maghrebarts.com/cinema/rab-film-fest.html

FILM FESTS AROUND THE WORLD

Africa in the Picture Film Festival
Amsterdam, Netherlands (1987) Sept. of odd years
www.africainthepicture.nl

Mostra de Cinema Africà de Barcelona
Barcelona, Spain (1996) Nov.
Contact: mcabfbcn@hotmail.com
www.antillasalsa.com/10.html

Festival Cinema Africano, d'Asia e America Latina
Milan, Italy (1991) March
www.festivalcinemaaficano.org

Tokyo African Film Festival
Tokyo, Japan-Sept./Oct.
www.afvforum.org/AD2003/top/index-e.html

Colours of Africa Film Festival
Ottawa, Canada (2001) July
www.coloursof africa.ca

African Diaspora Film Festival
New York City/Chicago (1993) Nov./Dec.
www.nyadff.org

African Film Festival-New York
New York City (1990) April
www.africanfilmny.org

Pan-African Film & Arts Festival
Los Angeles, California (1992) Feb.
www.paff.org

Dubai International Film Festival
Dubai (2004) December-important for East African film sector
Contact: diffinfo@dubaimediacy.ae