

International Film Forum Arsenals Riga, 12-21 September 2008 Susan Skogstad, Kirke og Film, Denmark



Report from the 19th Riga International Film Forum Arsenals 12-21 September 2008 Susan Skogstad, member of the Jury INTERFILM (Kirke og Film, Denmark)

This is about how it was to be a film jury member of INTERFILM at the 19th film festival Arsenals held in Riga, Latvia.

Riga, a name which brings many connotations to my mind. From former German 'Hansestadt', with prosperous merchants, and many other several occupations lasting over 800 years, to the ultimate USSR, which left it with the essence of Russian fragrance, which comes up in many people's pronunciations of Latvian words. Interesting to note the flow of cultures from East to West. The bay of Riga with the Daugava river creating a division of the city, crossed with many bridges that leads to the seashore of Jûrmala and the open Baltic sea.



So here I was in this wonderful city, arriving just in time for the opening ceremony, not having any time to get to my hotel and change clothes. This would be a prediction of what was awaiting me for the coming week. If anybody thinks that being member of a filmjury is a 'piece of cake', then you better think it over again. It was hard work, but worth it. The program was intense, really intense. So I had to choose among the many side offers of cultural activities and seeing films. The last won, not with a certain regret in my heart, but I had come to evaluate films, not to mingle around. So after being picked up, jointly with my German colleague from INTERFILM, at the airport by one of the assigned staff members from Riga Arsenals Film Festival, we arrived at the festivals opening in Latvian National Opera. The Festival had arranged a huge table with drinks, or rather to say whisky

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glasses, and on both ends of the table were two trays with living heads, one of Salomé and the other of John the Baptist. With this performance the atmosphere was set to accomplish the silent film 'Salomé' made in 1923 by Charles Bryant. The music of the film was created by French composer Marc-Olivier Dupin in 2001 and directed by Latvian dirigent Aigars Meris. Tired but in good spirit I went back to the hotel to unpack and prepare for first days screening next day.

We, the jury of INTERFILM, composed of three members of the Lutheran Church, coming from Germany (Dietmar Adler), Latvia (Agris Sutra) and Denmark (me), met next day and greeted each other. In this pleasant way our first journey started. Our 'screening headquarter' was going to be the beautiful restored Theatre Riga, during this multicultural visual travel into unknown territory, which films always are.

We saw many films. Every day screening started at 13,30 and finished around 22 hours, more or less. This also applied for Saturday and Sunday. We had a hard work choosing the films we thought best, for so many good films were in competition. But finally we agreed upon the following films should be awarded:

Interfilm's Jury Prize for best "International Competition Film" was given to "Silent Light" by Carlos Reygadas, which was also one of this year's Arsenal's most attended films. And a commendation to Ramin Bahrani's film "Chop Shop". Curiously the Interfilms jury in 2006 also granted a prize to Bahrani in the same festival in 2006, for his film "Man Push Cart". This coincidence was also noted by some of the commentators, but we did not know about his earlier prizewinning, and even if we had known, we would still have chosen his film.

In the category "Baltic Film Show", we decided that the most vivid Baltic film was "The Class" by Ilmar Raag. A commendation was given to Edmunds Jansons' short documentary animation "Little Bird's Diary".

How did we reach this agreement? What was that made specially these films awardable? We followed our hearts and also Interfilm's regulations for HOW and WHY one should elect a film for a prize. We took into considerations Interfilm's criteria for choosing films which "show genuine artistic talent and succeed in expressing actions or human experiences that comply with the Gospel, or in sensitizing viewers to spiritual, human or social questions and values". We also paid special attention to "topics relevant to Christian responsibility in modern society such as respect for human dignity and human rights, solidarity, justice, and the protection of the Creation". These were our primary points of departure for selecting the prize winning films.

About "Silent Light", which was the prize winner in the International Competition, following can be said: the film tells a story, with excellent pictures, about love and infatuation. It deals with guilt and forgiveness and the importance of not judging others. Johann and his family live in an Anabaptist Mennonite commune in northern Mexico. The main character, Johann, has been fulfilling the duty of husband and father for many years when he violates the Law of Men and God by falling in love with another woman. The paths of Estere (his wife), Johann, and Marianna (his lover) cross on the undefined border between the spirit and the flesh. Is it possible to choose a future direction without destroying one their lives? This is the question. But more remarkable is the death of

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Estere. She dies heartbroken. Two reasons are given for this: One is that she is desperate and two: she has dared to judge her "neighbour" Marianna. She has sinned against God. The last scene takes place in a way that at first sight could be described as a fairy tale scenario, but there is more into it than that. Hope has vanished, death has conquered when Marianna, the sinner, enters the room where Estere lies and kisses her. Estere returns to life. In this way life and death become reliant to God's forgiveness.

The film "Chop Shop", which we gave a commendation in the "International Competition Film" category, deals with a twelve years old Latin American boy, called Alejandro, who lives in the outskirts of New York, works in auto repair shops and washes, collects scrap metal, and lives in a small room that belongs to his employer. His sixteen-year-old sister Isamara is Alejandro's only family. Desiring a better life for both of them, Alejandro starts saving money to make his dream come true— he wants to buy a van and turn it into a store. But then he has to face the adult world and take decisions he has never dreamed about. It is a story about hope and disillusion and yet to have the strength to continue to live and fight for a better life, without growing bitter. Alejandro learns that grown ups not always are reliable and falls also in the trap, when quick money can be obtained by stealing. The film does not judge, just presents the facts about how a solitary person can find its way round in a labyrinth and survive.

In the "Baltic Film Show" we gave it to "The Class", because it shows how easily it is not to intervene when things go wrong in the beginning of a conflict and how this evolves in a no-way-out situation. The film presents two sixteen year old boys, Kaspar and Joosep. Joosep is the class outcaste, the whipping boy. After having defended Joosep, Kaspar soon finds himself in an identical situation. How far can teenage cruelty go, and what happens when a resistance of the ridiculed and an attempt to regain dignity lead to even greater violence? The film, based on real teenager stories, speaks about one of the most topical issues of modern society. A certain feeling of 'deja vue' invades me when writing this. Just some days ago a young man killed 10 people in Finland. Just like in the film. Questions as, what went wrong? How could they do it? comes to one's head. Reasons can be sought in the indifference and lack of solidarity towards the outsider. No feeling of compassion with the different is allowed in this sort of society. The film is an eye opener and shows how easily it is to blindly adapt oneself to a repressive and totalitarian group.

Finally, but not least, we gave the documentary "Little Bird's Diary" a commendation in the category of "Baltic Film Show". Why did we choose this film? We choose it because it showed in a wise and understandingly form eighty-year-old Irina Pilke's (nicknamed the Little Bird) life. The film depicts the events of her life as sketches in her diaries. The diary pages reveal her experiences under World War II. Love and separation are characterised with a subtly ironic view on the events in the Soviet Union and its society. The Little Bird looks at the world from the viewpoint of a small creature, rather than from a perspective of power and politics which may be the reason for why her life story seems so incredibly heartwarming, familiar and true down to the tiniest detail. It is also a story about never giving up. It is a story about keeping hope and faith in the future, even when things seem at their very worst moment.

Other films in competition were also mentioned for Interfilm award, but finally we decided for the above mentioned. That does not mean that other films were not interesting.

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Films like "About Water: People and Yellow Cans", that show three different remote parts of the world– first Bangladesh on the Indian Ocean, then a fishing village in Kazakhstan near the shrinking Aral Sea, and finally a slum in Kenya, in the central part of Africa. The film focuses on the issue of water in developing countries that are beautifully portrayed despite harsh living conditions. In the first part houses must be constructed so they easily can be dismantled, in order to leave land taken over by water and how this affects daily life of the inhabitants of the area. The climate change has brought heavy rain to the area in the last 20 years and people have to flee the tidal waves. Second part shows a ship cemetery right in the middle of the steppe and desert in the Aral area. It pictures the result of a megalomaniac Soviet dream of supplying cotton fields with water, by leading water from the Aral Sea into human made canals for irrigation of the desert, just to find out, some years later that the sea has diminished in about more than 100 kms. Third part shows people in the ghetto of Kibera, queuing up in the streets with yellow cans in their hands to buy water from a local distributor. People are relatively satisfied with their lives. They only complain about the water's price and dream about how it would be with cheap water in their near.

The film "Small Gods" was also on our list. The film shows a woman, Elena Her son has died in a car accident, which she blames herself for being responsible for. After her son's death Elena does not want to live anymore. David, a stranger, kidnaps Elena from the hospital and takes her on a journey to nowhere. Sarah, a speech impaired orphan, joins them. Together, all three of them, they wander through forsaken places, get to know each other, and try to get rid of the past ghosts. Throughout the journey they are accompanied by a sense of guilt and a craving for revenge. The plot of the film could have been better developed, it has too many loose ends. Among others, the audience never get close enough to Elena to find out if she just has been dreaming about the car accident, or if it did really happen. Though roughly there is no redemption or deliverance for Elena, there still is some hope in the end for David and Sarah, and this was what made us put it on our list.

Finally one of my favourites to the International award was "O'Horten". But when it came to choose one winner "Silent Lights" won. This does not mean that the film is of a lower category, it is just different. The story goes about a man and his routines during more than 40 years. Odd Horten has conducted the same train route every day for such a long time that his life has become a serie of comfortable rituals. But now the sixty-seven year old train conductor has to retire and his regular and solitary existence will have to face a future full of confusing questions. Will Horten ever fly in a plane? How is he going to end up in red, high-heeled shoes? Will he survive a night drive with a blind man at the steering wheel? The only thing that is clear is that Horten will get himself into absurd adventures and strange accidents. He has not done any unforeseen thing in 40 years. It is first on the last night of his last working day, when things seem to get out of control for him. The amazing thing is that he adapts to being out of control, he lets himself 'float along with the action' and many bizarre situations occur. He has always dreamt about becoming a ski jumper at 'Holmekollen' (Norwegian ski jump). Finally he gets enough courage to make the plunge and fulfil his youth dream. So it is a story of not giving up, even if you 'dwell' for long time. The message to all of us is: "If you allow yourself to relinquish controlling everything in your life, then life will give you the opportunity to realize your dreams, no matter how old you are". There were many other films, but these were the ones that I liked most.

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For the other prizes which were given under the Arsenals Festival the ambassador of Austria to Latvia Hermine Popeller presented an award of 1500 euro to the best Baltic debutant, and the award was given to Juris Poškus, the director of the film "Monotony". The FIPRESCI jury announced that the award in the Baltic film show was given to "Vogelfrei" (directors: Jānis Kalējs, Jānis Putniņš, Anna Viduleja, Gatis Šmits) and in the International film competition – to "Andalucia" (director: Alain Gomis). The award "Best Documentary" of the Baltic film competition jury was given to the Estonian director Priit Valkna's film "The Headwind Hall", the award "Best Animation" was given to Edmunds Jansons' film "Little Bird's Diary", the award "Best Feature Film" was given to "Autumn Ball" by Veiko Ounpuu. The award "Best Baltic Film" was given to "Vogelfrei" by Jānis Kalējs, Gatis Šmits, Jānis Putniņš and Anna Viduleja. This award and 5000 euro were presented by Inga Šīna, vice-president of Rietumu Banka. The audience prize went to "The Class" by Ilmar Raag, and a lottery decided the viewer – Eduards Gavars – who received an opportunity for two to go to Venice next autumn. The award was presented by Jānis Vanags, corporate communications vice-president of "air Baltic", who emphasized that films just like flights let a person travel in time and space, thus providing new feelings and unexpected adventures.

"Arsenals" main prize – 20 000 US dollars – was drawn in a lottery as usual, thus emphasizing that all international competition films are equally good to deserve the main prize. The director or another representative for each film was kindly asked to come to the stage. As usual for "Arsenals", the main award was drawn in an unusual way – each film representative chose a cup of coffee. In one of them, Elvita Ruka, the president of Arsenāls, had hidden a petal. After a given command all representatives started to drink the coffee and the lucky petal was in the cup of a Latvian boy, the representative of the film "Chop Shop".

After the ceremony, Sergei Ovcharov's film "The Orchard", based on Anton Chekhov's play "The Cherry Orchard", was screened. "Arsenals" president Elvita Ruka gave also a special "Arsenals" award to this film director for "Collective Creativity" that had helped him create such a wonderful orchard. The Orchard gave inspiration also for Arsenāls closing ceremony, as it had a green grass, rose petal rain and a cherry blossom that was later found in Pauls Ārgalis coffee cup.



After the official ceremony the party continued with dances and jokes in the Latvian Society House, thus finalizing the 19th International Film Forum "Arsenals".