

Article**Martin P. Botha**

The Significance of the Cape Winelands Film Festival As A Platform for World Cinema

Introduction

South African film history is captured in less than 20 books. Developments in early South African cinema (1895–1940) has been chronicled in Thelma Gutsche's *The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa: 1895–1940* (1946/72). Other significant studies include

Keyan Tomaselli's *The Cinema of Apartheid: Race and Class in South Africa* (1989), Johan Blignaut and Martin Botha's *Movies Moguls Mavericks: South African Cinema 1979–1991* (1992), Martin Botha's edited volume, *Marginal Lives and Painful Pasts: South African Cinema After Apartheid* (2007), Jacqueline Maingard's *South African National Cinema* (2007), André le Roux and Lilla Fourie's *Filmverlede: Geskiedenis van die Suid-Afrikaanse speelfilm* (1982), Peter Davis's *In Darkest Hollywood: Exploring the Jungles of Cinema's South Africa* (1996), Martin Botha and Adri Van Aswegen's *Images of South Africa: The Rise of the Alternative film* (1992), Tomaselli's compilation of revised

and reworked papers and chapters published elsewhere, *Encountering Modernity: Twentieth Century South African Cinemas* (2006), Isabel Balseiro and Ntongela Masilela's edited volume, *To Change Reels: Film and Film Culture in South Africa* (2003)

Martin Botha's *South African Cinema 1896 – 2010* (2012), Lucia Saks's *Cinema in a Democratic South Africa: The Race for Representation* (2010), Litheko Modisani's *South Africa's Renegade Reels: The Making and Public Lives of Black-Centered Films* (2013), as well as Leon van Nierop's reflections on the history of Afrikaans cinema in *Daar doer in die fliiek* (2016).

In the 128-year history of South African cinema, only two academic books have been devoted to South African film directors: Martin Botha and Hubert Dethier's *Kronieken van Zuid-Afrika: de films van Manie van Rensburg* (1997) and Martin Botha's *Jans Rautenbach: Dromer, Baanbreker en Auteur* (2006).

In general, the artistic achievements of film directors have received little scholarly



attention. Attempts to rework the history of South African cinema, such as Isabel Balseiro and Ntongela Masilela's edited volume, *To Change Reels: Film and Film Culture in South Africa* (2003) as well as Jacqueline Maingard's *South African National Cinema* (2007) devoted entire chapters to the ideological analysis of films such as *De Voortrekkers* (1916), *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1951) and *Come Back, Africa* (1959), but in the process, they ignored the significant oeuvres of directors such as Jans Rautenbach, Ross Devenish, Manie van Rensburg, Katinka Heyns, Darrell Roodt as well as many of the directors of the 1980s and 1990s. Surprisingly, Heyns and Roodt, and other significant (and internationally acclaimed) post-apartheid directors such as Gavin Hood, Mark Dornford-May, Rehad Desai, Francois Verster, Ramadan Suleman, Madoda Ncayiyana, Craig Matthew, Craig and Damon Foster, Jack Lewis, Liz Fish and Ntshaveni Wa Luruli, are absent from the list of 25 film-makers and cultural leaders whom the American scholar Audrey Thomas McCluskey interviewed for her publication on post-apartheid cinema titled *The Devil You Dance With: Film Culture in the New South Africa* (2009).

Not a single academic book has been devoted to South African film festivals.

The years 1959 to 1980 were characterised by an artistic revival in filmmaking worldwide, ranging from exciting political films in Africa and Latin America to examples of excellent art cinema in Europe and Asia. Unfortunately, due to moral and political censorship, a lack of audience

development and inadequate film distribution, South Africans and, thus, local filmmakers were not exposed to these remarkable developments in world cinema.

Severe state censorship during the 1970s, for example, also prevented South African audiences from experiencing developments in world cinema. Many films by directors such as Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bertolucci and Fellini (for example, *Fellini Satyricon* and *Fellini's Casanova*) were banned. Cuts to remove violence, nudity, sex and/or "foul" language in films such as *Midnight Express*, *Coming Home*, *The Omen*, *The Deer Hunter* and *Taxi Driver* left audiences with mutilated texts. The word "fuck" was allowed for the first time uncut in 1979 in *And Justice for All*, but the 1980s and early 1990s were still characterised by moral and political censorship (Botha 2012).



Film societies and festivals

Opportunities to experience world cinemas came in the form of film societies, which had been in operation since the 1930s, film festivals and independent cinemas in the major cities. Under the leadership of Freddy Ogterop from the Cape Provincial Library, a successful 16mm film society network

operated especially during the 1970s. The Bloemfontein branch, Fliekklik, managed by Braam Muller, for example, offered audiences the opportunity to view a large selection of world cinema, such as the oeuvres of Fellini, Bergman, Fassbinder, Wajda and Werner Herzog.



Since the late 1970s, international film festivals in South Africa have become crucial to breaking the sense of isolation felt by South African audiences. In some cases, the censors of the 1980s were more lenient regarding film festival screenings and allowed some nudity and sex in films. The Cape Town International Film Festival started in 1977 – under the directorship of James Polley from the University of Cape Town’s External Studies. It ran till 1999, when Polley passed away. The last edition was successfully directed by Trevor Steele Taylor. Still, the festival made way for the Southern African International Film and Television Market (Sithengi), which included a world cinema festival at that stage. Sithengi started in 1996 and, unfortunately, had its last edition in 2006.

The Durban International Film Festival started in 1979. Under the directorship of Ros Sarkin, the festival included screenings in the Umlazi township from the 4th edition onwards. Due to the cultural boycott and local

censorship, the festival included a rich selection of world cinema and titles South Africans could otherwise not have seen. Len Davis staged the Johannesburg International Film Festival for most of the 1980s in Johannesburg.

The Weekly Mail Film Festival, hosted under the umbrella of the independent newspaper The Weekly Mail (later Mail & Guardian), offered an invaluable festival of independent, oppositional filmmaking in South Africa from 1987 till the early 1990s. Festival director Liza Key also included milestones from other African countries to break the isolation between South African filmmakers and their colleagues elsewhere. At the Weekly Mail Film Festival of 1990, for example, co-hosted by The Weekly Mail newspaper and the Film and Allied Workers’ Organisation (FAWO), a collection of rare films on South Africa found in archives around the world, examples of resistance cinema never seen publicly in this country, as well as 20 films by independent South African filmmakers and over 20 short films in a short film competition were screened.

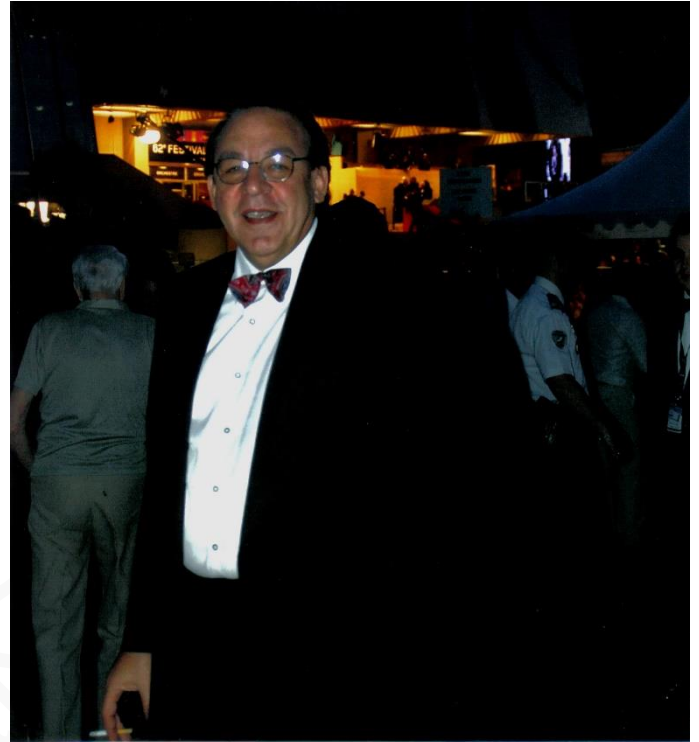
The Out in Africa Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, under the leadership of Nodi Murphy, started in 1994, and the first Encounters South African International Documentary Film Festival was held in 1999. The founders are Nodi Murphy and Steven Markovitz. The latest film festivals in South Africa are the Tricontinental Film Festival, which had its first edition in 2005, as well as the Cape Winelands Film Festival (from 2008 to 2012), which in many ways filled the void left by Sithengi’s World Cinema Festival and the Cape Town International Film Festival. The festival will be discussed in this article.

The role of independent cinemas

Independent cinemas were also crucial throughout the history of South African cinema to provide alternative programmes to the Hollywood-dominated menu on big screens. The Vistarama, managed by Heinz Kallenbach, offered a rich selection of European masterpieces between 1979 and 1985, including *The Night of the Shooting Stars*, *Padre Padrone*, *Diva* and *The Tree of the Wooden Clogs*. This programme was complemented by the Piccadilly in Cavendish Street, Bellevue/Yeoville, Johannesburg, the Labia in Cape Town, the Lyric in Fordsburg, Johannesburg, 7 Arts in Norwood, The Electric Cinema in Durban North, as well as the Corlett Cinema complex in Bramley, Johannesburg. Sadly, by the mid-1990s of all these independent theatres, only the Labia in Cape Town was still going strong. The mainstream distributor Ster-Kinekor started a Cinema Nouveau complex at the Rosebank Mall in December 1987. For most of the 1990s, thanks to programmers Jan du Plessis and Ludwig Wagner, provided an excellent selection of world cinema, including Kiarostami's *The Taste of Cherry*, Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* and Kieslowski's *Three Colours Trilogy*. After the departure of Du Plessis and Wagner, the so-called Cinema Nouveau circuit stagnated from 2000 till 2011, and mostly less commercial films from the USA and the UK were screened. The diverse selection from world cinema became a memory of the past.

The Moosa family's Avalon Group is one of the few independent cinema groups that survived. In October 2010, it celebrated 71 years of independence. In Durban during the 1920s, a young man named Aboobaker –

or "AB" – Moosa fell in love with the cinema and longed to have a theatre of his own where he could watch the movies he wanted for free. In 1939, at age 37, his dream was realised when he and Abdulla Kajee co-founded the Avalon Theatre in Durban's Victoria Street.



Festival Director Leon

The theatre was hugely successful, catering mainly to the South African Indian community. Moosa built on this success by becoming one of the first to bring early Bollywood movies to South Africa and establishing a distribution agreement with 20th Century Fox. The business boomed, and AB opened theatres elsewhere in South Africa – in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Kimberley, Durban, East London, Port Elizabeth and Paarl. In its heyday, the Avalon Group operated 18 cinemas nationwide, making up over 10% of the market share. But AB soon fell afoul of apartheid legislation and its Group Areas Act. In 1964, at 21, Moosa Moosa witnessed his father's humiliation at their family's eviction from their grand

colonial home on the corner of Goble and Windmere Roads in Durban under the Group Areas Act. As Indians, they were no longer allowed to live in what had been declared a whites-only area. AB Moosa did not survive the eviction. The Group Areas Act and Reservation of Separate Amenities Act began to destroy AB's empire. During this time, Moosa Moosa took sole ownership of Avalon and ran only one cinema in Durban. In the 1990s, apartheid ended, and the Avalon Group's fortunes began to revive. Around that time, Moosa was joined in the business by his only son, AB Junior, who was named after his grandfather. AB Junior had just left school and decided to work alongside his father.



With over 50 years in the industry, Moosa Moosa was the longest-serving cinema executive in South Africa and among the longest-serving in the world. In 1997, he appeared before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission business hearings to give

evidence on the abuses inflicted by the apartheid system on African, coloured and Indian businesses. In 1998, he was invited to appear before the portfolio committee in parliament to make representations in relation to the new Competition Bill. In 2007, Moosa was given a South African Film and Television Industry Lifetime Achievement award. The Avalon Group is now the oldest and third-largest cinema operating company in South Africa, after Ster-Kinekor and Nu Metro, and a leader in distributing increasingly popular Bollywood movies in South Africa.

Since the late 1980s, the annual Weekly Mail Film Festival has become an essential forum for screening short films (Botha 2012). A short film competition also encouraged new and young filmmakers to present their work at this festival. In the early 1990s, short films about socio-political changes in South Africa and how people relate to them have become thematically dominant at this festival. In the 1980s, the contours of South Africa's political landscape were transformed by massive black protests and government promises of a 'new' South Africa. Between black political mobilisation and a state attempting to manage a disintegrating economy existed another reality — an embattled white working class struggling to defend a way of life in the face of loss of privilege based on race. Against this background, Guy Spiller's short film *The Boxer* (1990) explored the effect which broader socio-political changes in South African society had wrought in the intimate space of a white working-class family in Johannesburg. In particular, the film documented the hopes and fears of a young

champion boxer in a society where the passage from youth to manhood involves entry into a world moulded by a violently defensive culture bound by a narrow patriotism and captured by the rhetoric of right-wing politicians.

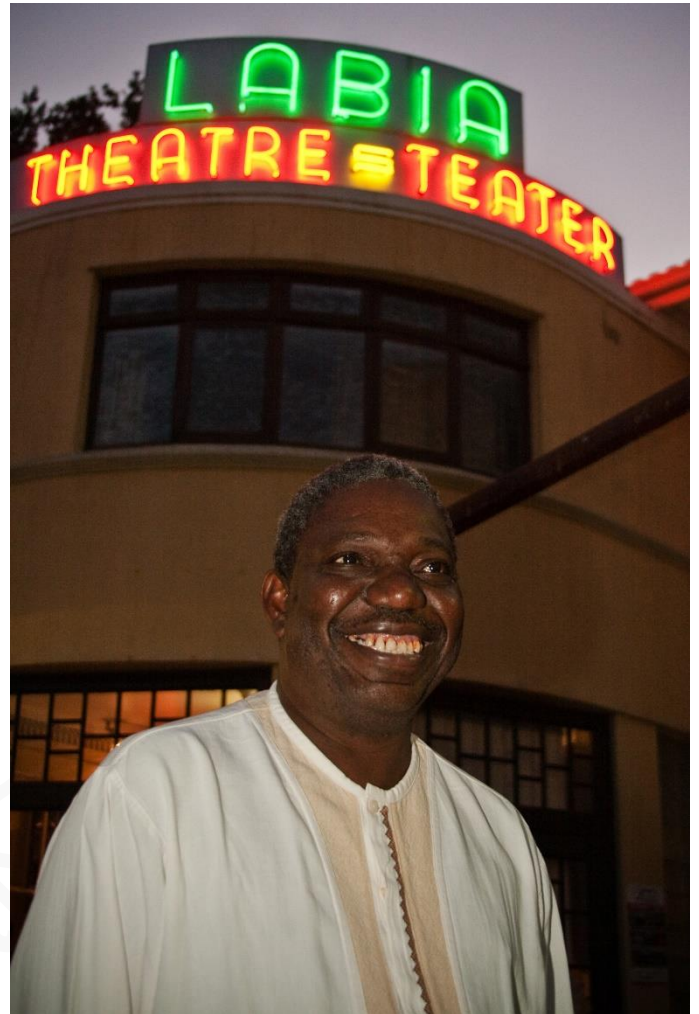
Marketing and distribution:

- South African product distributors were insignificant in the global arena during apartheid.
- Many South African films experienced no box-office success.
- International marketing strategies by South Africans were insufficient.
- Local producers focused on making and not selling films.
- Local films had difficult access to large markets.

It was recommended that the National Film and Video Foundation provide an infrastructure for global marketing strategies, that incentives be created for local broadcasters to promote South African films, that new media be involved in marketing and distribution strategies, and that training providers add new media to film training courses.

One of the highlights at the Global Film and Music Fest of Ischia was an exhibition on the 113-year history of South African cinema. This unique collection of film stills, posters and DVD clips resulted from a collaboration between the Cape Winelands Film Festival director, Leon van der Merwe, and the South African National Film Archives. The exhibition on South Africa's film heritage demonstrated to an international film audience that among the decades of film escapism, racist films and government

propaganda, South African cinema produced cinematic jewels.



Idrissa Ouedraogo

A film industry, or in more ambitious terms, a national cinema, ultimately depends on the number of people willing to pay for it. There can be no industry without a paying audience, whether cinema, television, video or new media exhibition. With a total population of approximately 64 million people, South Africa has a tiny cinema-going audience measured at approximately 5 million persons, with a rapidly growing television-consuming public penetrating approximately 49% of the total number of South African households (Botha 2012). In the future, audience development will become increasingly crucial to building

audiences for post-apartheid cinema. South Africa's film industry has been held to ransom for decades by the developed markets' funding and exhibition models, content and distribution strengths, and worldwide dominance of Hollywood studios (Botha 2012). It has been estimated that Hollywood products dominate 99% of screen time in South African cinemas. Local filmmakers have to compete with independent American, British, and Australian filmmakers and "art-house" films from Europe, the Middle East, and Asia for the remaining 1%.



Leon van der Merwe

Other challenges facing the industry are the inaccessible film exhibition sites outside the reach of most South Africans, the limited concentration of theatres in metropolitan areas and the lack of culturally specific, community-based film exhibition points and products. According to research by the NFVF, audience attendance at South African cinemas is decreasing at an alarming rate to the extent that exhibitors have had to close down cinemas, especially in townships. Some independent cinemas in townships have been converted to churches. Various factors

contributed to this decline, including increased entertainment media, especially a wider range of television content, door price increases, unemployment, crime, and a lack of effective marketing strategies (Botha 2004). Strict COVID-19 regulations also led to the closure of cinemas in 2020, and Ster-Kinekor's cinema experience business was rescued afterwards.

Some theatrical distributors such as UIP (United International Pictures) owned by international studios merely serve as a "courier service" between the international and local exhibitors. They do not have a quota system for local content distribution and exhibition. and the rationale that informs their decision to acquire and exhibit or NOT to acquire and exhibit a product is based on the product's commercial viability. Criteria used to determine viability are sometimes out of touch with South African and African realities, mainly if one studies the cultural role of cinema within African communities. In this regard, one could also look at South Korean cinema and its struggle to fight American dominance. The unfair competition and massive marketing budgets of Hollywood studio-backed film releases reduce the chances of South African box-office success at the cinema level. Introducing incentivised screen quotas for domestic and African film theatrical releases thus becomes a necessary intervention. France and South Korea are important case studies in this regard.

Through audience development programmes, South African distributors and exhibitors can ultimately create a demand for local content on the screen, video hire, video sell-thru, pay TV, free TV, streaming platforms and public broadcasters, both

locally and internationally. There is a definite need for aggressive marketing of South African films in people's home communities and the generation of local media enthusiasm around the promotion of local products. Local film journalists and critics should also be encouraged to support local products. It is a fragile industry, especially in the face of globalisation.

Within this context, the demise of audience development initiatives such as the Film Resource Unit during the past decades is a matter of concern. Other vital platforms for South African films, such as Sithengi and the African Screen at the Labia Independent cinema in Cape Town, also ceased functioning. The Cape Winelands Film Festival (2008 – 2012) was an invaluable World Cinema platform in this context.

Cape Winelands Film Festival

The Cape Winelands Film Festival (CWFF) was one of the most significant film events on the African continent. Since the first edition in 2008, the CWFF has significantly grown in size and international participation. Over 70 features, documentaries, and short films from over 35 countries competed in 2009, and more than 130 productions were part of the festival programme. The sheer diversity of film cultural offerings at the 2009 festival was acknowledged by several film critics.

The 2010 edition (17 – 27 March) featured 300 screenings in open-air amphitheatres and cinemas in the scenic Winelands district of Stellenbosch, as well as in the historic independent art cinema of the Labia Theatre in the beautiful city centre of Cape Town.

The main objective of the CWFF was to provide a window on world cinemas. Judged by the international response, the CWFF short film competition has also developed into the most essential film festival platform in South Africa for quality productions worldwide. The 2010 edition included a magnificent selection from Spain, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Germany.



The festival was an important forum for South African cinema, Five South African features competed with films from Latin America, Africa, Asia and Europe in the feature film competition. The opening night film, *Master Harold and the Boys*, an adaptation of a play by Athol Fugard, had its world premiere in the glorious open-air amphitheatre at Spier estate in the Cape Winelands district near Stellenbosch.

The multi-award-winning *Shirley Adams* was also in competition, as well as three new local features: Darrell Roodt's *Jakhalsdans*, Minky Schlesinger's sensitive drama *Gugu and Andile*, and *Darfur*, a hard-hitting drama about the violence in Sudan.

Apart from selected open-air screenings in the Cape Winelands district and Sea Point, the 2010 edition featured screenings in the

historic independent art cinema of the Labia Theatre in Cape Town.



The festival includes a strong focus on the environment. An international and local documentary programme has been carefully selected to raise awareness of global warming and its environmental impact.

One of the highlights of the CWFF was the first-ever South African focus on the rich film cultures from the Baltic States (Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia). Official entries from Estonia and Lithuania for the 2010 Oscar competition were among the Baltic selection – for example, the powerful period dramas *December Heat* and *Taarka* and the visually stunning *Vortex*. Documentaries such as *The Singing Revolution* and *Disco and Atomic War* provide unparalleled historical perspectives on the changes in Estonia during the past century. Apart from the Baltic focus, excellent features and documentaries from Nordic countries also form part of the year's line-up with highlights such as two Finnish dramas, *Last Cowboy Standing* and *Letters to Father Jacob*, and the Danish gay film *Brotherhood*.

The organisers of the CWFF paid tribute to the great British filmmaker Terence Davies with screenings of his most famous

films: *The Long Day Closes*, *The House of Mirth*, *The Terence Davies Trilogy*, *Of Times and the City*, as well as *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives*. *Of Time and the City*, which premiered out of competition at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival to great acclaim, uses vintage newsreel footage, contemporary popular music and a narration by Davies himself as a bittersweet paean to his hometown of Liverpool. It has received rave reviews on its premiere. *Of Time and the City* is both a love song and a eulogy to Liverpool. It is also a response to memory, reflection and the experience of losing a sense of place as the skyline changes and time takes its toll.

The CWFF once again focused on the exciting developments in current Brazilian cinema, mainly due to the wonderful dedication of Mr. Joaquim A. Whitaker Salles, Consul General of Brazil in Cape Town.

The CWFF will also pay tribute to the French master of cinema, Alain Resnais, who received a Lifetime Achievement Award at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival. The focus included classics such as *Hiroshima Mon amour*, *My American Uncle* (starring Gerard Depardieu), and recent films by this great filmmaker.

During 2011 the CWFF expanded the window on quality films from around the globe to include features, documentaries and shorts from more than 52 countries, including the work by more than 25 South African filmmakers. The festival remained an important forum for South African cinema. One of the highlights of the CWFF was the comprehensive focus on documentaries and features from Eastern Europe and Finland, as well as the annual celebration of Brazilian

cinema. Mr. Joaquim A. Whitaker Salles, Consul General of Brazil in Cape Town, was thanked for his outstanding dedication to this festival and the strengthening of cultural ties between South Africa and Brazil.

Judged by the overwhelming international response, the CWFF's short and feature film competition has also developed into the most essential film festival platform in South Africa for quality productions worldwide. Regarding features, 27 films formed part of the competition in 2011, with a record of 55 documentaries and 56 international shorts. The competition included a NETPAC jury, the first for an African film festival.

The rich selection of outstanding documentaries includes many films that attempt to create a better understanding between human beings, enhance respect for different ideological and religious viewpoints, and deconstruct stereotypes of the Other. Films such as *Enemies of the People*, *Cultures of Resistance*, *I Shot My Love*, *Paradise Hotel*, *Reconciliation: Mandela's Miracle*, *State of Mind*, and the International Emmy winner *The World According to Ion B* formed part of this selection.

Once again, the festival featured a strong focus on the environment. Highlights included the Foster Brothers' *Into the Dragon's Lair* and one of the most devastating documentations of the impact of global warming, *There Once Was an Island*, a heartbreaking account of the effects of climate change on the culturally unique Polynesian community of Takuu, a tiny low-lying island in the South Western Pacific.

Several documentaries also celebrated the rich cultural expressions by a diversity of artists from Armenia (*Moving a Mountain*), Hungary (*Moleman*), Poland (*Another Side of the City*, *Fryderyk Chopin*), Spain (*Por El Flamenco*) and South Africa (*Afrikaaps*).

Great achievements from cinema's long, rich history will be celebrated again. The masterful work of great directors such as Jean Renoir, Federico Fellini, Akira Kurosawa, and Glauber Rocha was part of special screenings in Stellenbosch and lectures by film experts. One of the guests was Prof. João Luiz Vieira from Brazil. He is the author of a seminal history of Brazilian cinema entitled *Cinema novo and beyond* and an in-depth study of Sergio Bianchi, director of *The Tenants*, which formed part of the focus on Brazil.

The festival returns to its original venue of 2008 in Stellenbosch, namely the Oude Libertas open-air amphitheatre and auditorium. By 2012, it became clear that the festival needed an international film market to grow the South African film festival. It led to the Cape Town Film Market and Festival, which will be the subject of another paper.

Conclusion

Without the leadership of festival director Leon van der Merwe, the Cape Winelands Film Festival wouldn't have been a reality. Leon is a highly esteemed and accomplished Film Festival director. With his passion for film and vast industry knowledge, he has played a significant role in shaping the landscape of film festivals worldwide.

Born and raised in South Africa, Leon developed a deep appreciation for cinema from a young age. His love for storytelling

through film inspired him to pursue a career in the film industry, leading him to become a director of several successful film festivals.

Throughout his career, Leon has curated and organised countless film festivals, each showcasing a diverse range of films from various countries and genres. He believes in the power of cinema to bridge cultural gaps and promote understanding among different communities.

One of Leon's notable achievements as a film festival director is his commitment to highlighting films from emerging and underrepresented filmmakers. He understands the importance of giving a platform to voices often marginalised in the mainstream film industry. By promoting these filmmakers and their works, Leon has provided them with invaluable exposure and recognition, helping to shape a more inclusive and diverse film community.

Acknowledgement:

Stills, all courtesy of the Cape Winelands Film Festival

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