

INTERVIEW

Eno Milkani on Balkan Cinema

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We interviewed Eno Milkani, the artistic director of Balkan Film and Food Festival, now in its fourth year, which takes place each year at beginning of September in Pogradec, Albania. We met with Eno to speak to him about the story behind his festival and Balkan culture in general. Eno Milkani is an accomplished film director and editor who studied film direction at the Academy of Performing Arts in Tirana (1993) and at the European Film College in Ebeltoft, Denmark. His debut “Abandoned Eden” (2002), a documentary, screened in competition at KVIFF in 2003 and won Best Film at the Kiev IFF. Milkani launched the film company Bunker Film with his father Piro Milkani, a well-known Albanian director in 1994.

Could you tell me about the origins and aims of the Balkan Film and Food Festival?

Everything started in 2010 when I was invited to the *Divan Film Festival* in Cetate by Marian Țuțui to participate with the feature film *Smutek paní Snajdrové (The Sorrow of Mrs Schneider, 2008)* I co-directed with my father. Not knowing anything about the festival, it was like going to nowhere. It took 12 hours to get to Cetate by plane because we kept on missing flight connections. We finally arrived at 4am, and the next morning when I woke up, I asked myself what I was going to do here for one week. It's just a small village, the Cultural Port Cetate next to the river Danube, and in front there is Bulgaria, but not a living person around, just a few people from the festival. That was the first year, in 2010. Then it turned out that the festival of film and culinary art was a great idea, because we sat on the same table with Macedonians, Turks and Serbs, and we had a really good time. That was the beginning of a friendship with this very nice person, Marian. At the time he was the vice-director of the Romanian Film Archives, and he invited us to show our film because he was on the jury of the Durres International Film Festival the year before.

Upon my return to Tirana I had a conversation with my friend Fatos Baxhaku, a journalist, with whom I had made a documentary series for TV. When I remembered the *Divan Film Festival*, I thought, “What a pity why we can't do that in Albania.” First

I thought about organizing it next to this artificial lake near Tirana because Tirana is the capital of Albania and thus where institutions are located. Many people come here from other places to look for a job, so it's a very vivid city. When things happen, they always happen in Tirana. Fatos suggested Pogradec. But I responded that we didn't know anyone there. The first thing was to talk to the mayor and tell him about our idea. Then I thought: "Why Pogradec?" I remember that my friend from Ohrid, a theater director and actor, was telling me about its history. He said that in that area, the contraband was not about drugs, but about salt. Because the salt was coming somewhere from the Ionian and Adriatic seas and being transported inland to places like Bulgaria, it had been a trading route during the Ottoman Empire and so on. The other thing is that these water borders are symbolical; we share the Ohrid and Prespa lakes with Macedonia, and little Prespa is shared among Greece, Albania and Macedonia. All these borders are very symbolical, they are just lines on the paper, but as Fatos says it is enough to put your finger in the water, move it around, and the borders are gone. It is also a good place as it offers nice scenery, it's a small town with very nice people and the whole city would be focused on this event. We first talked to the mayor nine months before the festival, and he welcomed and liked the idea. We decided to organize it at the beginning of September, which is the end of the tourist season in Pogradec, so we could get good hotel deals for the guests. The whole idea of the project was to invite people from all over the Balkans, put them around the table so they can eat the same bread and cheese. I am sure that other Balkan countries share this tradition and saying there is in Albania: when you share the same bread you are friends forever. Basically this is our philosophy. We often watch the conflicts that exist on a political level among Greece and Turkey, Bulgaria and Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo, Serbia and Albania in the media and on television, and it's all about territories, borders and political views. Our idea is to communicate a message, a very little one, on a very low scale: that artists can sit on the same table because they are Balkanians. Apparently we have the same jokes and we laugh at the same jokes. Balkanians can sit at the same table and have a good time. We also hope this would have a positive impact on tourism. As organizers, we would be delighted if everybody returned to their country with good impressions from the festival. Also, we want to debunk this representation of Albania in the West, which in recent years has been the focus of news as the country with a new democracy and plenty of problems. In 1997, there were the pyramid schemes, where observers worldwide could see Albanians handing out machine guns and Kalashnikovs, and nobody knew what exactly was going on. For me, it was an unstable and uncrystallized democracy and political system, which would hopefully get better over the years.

Actually, the first idea that came to my mind when I thought about the festival was that we as a country and people sit a lot in cafes, drinking coffee and just talking. Why don't we just repeat this, but at the same time watch some films? The first year the festival had a very low profile, there was no red carpet and no star system, because this is the Balkans. We know that in the Balkans there are movies, and sometimes very good movies that receive international prizes. Unfortunately we cannot see them, because the media and television are filled with commercial films and TV shows like Big Brother. None of us have the chance to see Balkan productions. We know very well

what is going on in Hollywood, but we don't know what is going on in Turkey, Romania or Bulgaria. We know what Angelina Jolie or Brad Pitt are doing, but we don't even know the name of the most famous Bulgarian director. Of course, if you ask a Bulgarian he will tell you, but *we* don't know. And this was the idea; one side of showing films is also sharing information, to know what is going on in the film industry in Greece or Turkey.

In what ways do initiatives such as these bring awareness to and increase understanding of Balkan cinema?

The idea is to raise awareness about life beyond Albania. In Greece, too, there is a film industry, an audience, and film production. We as organizers have noticed in recent years that when we focus more on feature films - regardless of their nationality -, people come to the cinema. To my surprise, we had so many people attending the screening *Politiki kouzina (A Touch of Spice, 2003)* by Tassos Boulmetis that we were obliged to screen it twice. People are not very much into shorts and students films, which I like to have as a programmer. I like to promote the short films and allow young people from the Balkans to come to the festival, to let them experience being at a festival as a guest and feel the privilege of being a film director.

In one week, you can't screen more than twelve features. We have reached a point where we don't know what to do - to accept more features or focus on shorts, student films or documentaries, which I personally like more. Somehow this is the idea, to see what is going on in Turkey, to see everyday people, with their poverty and their loneliness. By knowing and understanding that in Greece, Albania and Serbia, we share the same problems, I think that people might realize that we are similar and that we need to work harder to abolish borders while preserving our respective identities.

Another aim was to organize a sort of a hub from the national film centers from Balkan countries. As far as I know they work on the French system, with a board which is elected every four-five years and a competitive selection process. The idea was to have these directors come to Pogradec and have joint projects. Two years ago we had Darko Basevski visiting, the chairman of the Macedonian film fund. To our surprise the Macedonian film fund also funds Turkish and Albanian films - due to the large minorities living in the Macedonia, all three languages must be represented in films supported by the fund. Darko was saying how they should fund Albanian TV series or film productions because this is the biggest market they could have: audiences in Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia. I would be happy if Pogradec was a birthplace for co-productions. We don't have a lot of money in the national film center to support film productions, the budgets are very limited. But Albania has specialists as well as cheap locations and production circumstances.

What are the criteria for selecting films?

Most of the films are selected online, and the criteria are to have short films, student

films and documentaries. There is always an international jury judging these films. It is Europe or the world judging Balkan productions, because if you have an Albanian or Greek guy in the jury they may be biased. On this issue we are very sincere, so every year the jury has been composed of different nationalities: Russia, Czech Republic, USA, Holland, Denmark and France.

Who are the festival's audience? What kind of response did you notice?

This year we awarded a fifty-year-old man from Pogradec a certificate because he has been the most regular spectator during the last four years. Every year he would take pictures during the festival the old way, printing and distributing them afterwards. When we awarded him with a certificate, people in the audience recognized him and applauded. We can't forget that part of the audience is from Pogradec, which somehow welcomes everybody. I've seen people from Pogradec talking to foreigners as well as Albanians, inviting them to their homes for a glass of raki or wine. I remember that during the first year, a French jury member noticed that there was a little boy, about ten years old, who came to every screening and sat in the front row. He was from Pogradec, both of his parents were jobless and on social welfare. I asked him why he comes to the festival, and he answered that he likes to watch films: "This is what I do at home; I watch films all the time". The French jury member remarked that the boy is not only a cine-lover but that if he gets a chance, he will work in film production one day because falling in love with the big screen is in his genes.

Who is involved in the organization of the festival and how is it funded?

The biggest supporter is the city hall, which I both like and dislike. I like it because it makes the festival easier, and the reason why I don't like it is because even logistic matters are handled personally through the mayor. For instance, we don't need to write a letter, it's enough to say we have this problem and he will resolve it. However, if the mayor changes due to elections, then we will have to start all over again and see whether the new mayor is a film lover and whether or not he is willing to do the festival in Pogradec.

The whole idea is to be independent and receive funding from private businesses. Every year we have some typical supporters; one is Raiffeisen Bank who is happy to support the festival with a modest budget, and for the first time this year, we involved the mobile company AlbTelecom, who helped us print the catalog and provided free internet in front of the cinema. The other sponsors are hotels which provide low accommodation prices for festival guests. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism was involved for the first time this year, covering the projection costs for professional projectors. This year, we introduced 35mm screenings thanks to the generosity of the Albanian Film Archive, and we screened three films made in Pogradec during the seventies and eighties. Other supporters are insurance companies and some restaurants, which fits our culinary side. The total budget of the festival in cash through the Foundation is 25,000 euro. This budget covers flight tickets of jury and

guests, partial payment of trips, dinners and part of the hotel rooms for unexpected guests. We work on the festival the whole year, so we also have office expenses and transportation costs.

If we had more funding, we would be able to cover the full transportation and hotel expenses for all the guests – at the moment we only do this partially. The fact is that institutions such as the ministry of culture still don't understand the value of such festivals, they provide very little funding. We allow for mass media distribution of culture, as entry to the screenings is free. At the moment, we are sponsored and we get the films from the producers for free so we cannot charge tickets. In fact, for every euro spent on this activity, the return is more, even if you don't see it.

How many film festivals are there in Albania?

Somehow in Kosovo there are more festivals. *DokuFest* in Prizren has gained notoriety in a very short time thanks to the support they get from private businesses and organizers with a clear vision. Also, the focus is very smart: just documentaries. These are the festivals in Albania at the moment: the *Tirana International Film Festival (TIFF)*, this year in its 11th edition, the *Durres International Film Summerfest*, *AniFest ROZAFa - International Festival of Animated Films for Children and Youngsters* in Shkoder, *DEA International Film Festival*, in its first edition in Saranda, which we hope will continue in the future, and the *FIERI International Short Film Festival*. There was also a student film festival which didn't get any support after its first year. This year in Vlora, there was a Mediterranean film festival in summertime. They screen films open air, but they do not invite directors or other filmmakers. The Marubi film school in Tirana organizes the *International Human Rights Film Festival* at the end of September, a big event which is also supported by the American Embassy.

How do you see the Balkan Film and Food Festival in the next five years?

There are lots of things to do and to improve. We would like to have a culinary show each day. Next year it would be nice for a group of Serbian people to have Serbian food, but they may say we don't have the right recipe for the dish, which is the kind of conversations I like to have. For instance, if you ask for Turkish coffee in Greece, they will say that it isn't Turkish, but that it is Hellenic coffee. We are not trying to find out if Moussaka is Greek or Turkish, but to create an atmosphere of fun – to have a festival of tasty film and cinematic food.

Also, we would like to have more involvement from the embassies; they could propose some special wine or food from their respective countries. Basically we want to gather people from all over the Balkans and create a spirit of understanding. Artists don't look at political divisions, or fake ideologies, or heroes. What they want is what comes from the spirit; every work of art is a little breathtaking at the moment it is accomplished, that is its duty. The idea of the festival is to have all these friends sit together. I am sure that five hundred years ago or even earlier there was such a climate in the

Balkans, people used to travel and trade across the Balkans and there were no problems or prejudices based on religion. At least there were no prejudices as far as there were no borders. Crossing borders was free, while the ideologies brought hate which is what we are fighting.

I wish I can continue to show student films, even though some people are against this idea, and to give them the opportunity to feel like a celebrity. It allows their films to be seen by an audience beyond their friends and family. So they understand that this is a profession which has achievements but behind which there is a lot of work. In general, making films is one of the hardest professions there exists. Being a director is very time- and energy-consuming.

I see it with more people, more guests and more directors, and we were thinking of a place beside the festival, a house for the artists. Anytime, anyone should be able to come and stay. However we have not thought about this concretely, this is only a dream for now. Let's say a Croatian director has a project and would like to make a film in Albania - he could come during the year and pay a symbolic fee to use the facilities, a creative place, an office for meetings. This place could be used by artists, directors, painters, photographers if they need to rest for a few days or as a facilitator for future film productions.

In terms of the festival I think it will grow in the sense of its notoriety and the quality of the films. It will get harder and harder to be selected. I see it with more sections, juries, events and parallel screenings. Once, we tested a local jury to involve people from Pogradec, with the idea being to give a prize to a non-Albanian-speaking film. We would also like to continue screening more films on 35mm, which professionals really enjoy seeing, and have morning screenings. Educate young people so they can see the difference between film and digital - we are talking about the difference between a magazine and a painting. To sharpen their sight, to make people look, not just see. As Thomas Logoreci was saying it would be one of the few festivals in the Balkans to screen on film.

The idea is to create a Mecca of cinema in Pogradec for at least one week per year!

Thank you for the interview.