

Forum of Independents finds new gems

Revamped festival sidebar focuses on supporting gifted and uncompromising mavericks

Laura McGinnis

What makes an "independent" film? Traditionally, the label was reserved for films made without the support of a major studio, but developments in the film industry have blurred the distinction between independent and studio projects in recent years.

Many major studios now have "independent" divisions, and champions of the indie scene are reassessing the genre's definition. Under the direction of co-directors Štefan Uhrík and Hana Cielová, KVIFF's Forum of Independents celebrated films with unconventional content and spirit for 14 years. This year, program director Julietta Sichel continues the tradition with 12 films by 12 directors – many of them fledgling filmmakers.

Eight of these films will have their world, international or European premiere at the festival.

"We really wanted to focus on discoveries – films which really correspond with what the filmmaker was trying to say," Sichel says.

The most significant change to the program this year is in the number of entries. The festival programmers opted to present fewer films in order to give audience and jury members an opportunity to see all of the films at main screenings. But in other respects, this year's program aims "to keep the tradition of what the Forum of Independents used to be," Sichel says.



Ying Liang's *Good Cats* puts a human face on the Chinese economic boom.

From the beginning, the Forum of Independents has supported films that might not receive traditional studio backing, but that's not its only function, Sichel says. It also strives to discover new talent and to give audiences the opportunity to see films that are long shots for film and television distribution.

The 12 films in this year's sidebar lack the characteristics of a typical Hollywood blockbuster, but each presents a unique story, and a new voice.

"We really tried to focus on the factor of independence of the filmmakers, and especially the conditions under which the films were made," Sichel says.

Most of the films in the section

were made on small budgets with small production teams. In many cases, the director also served as a scriptwriter, producer, distributor or actor.

Although united by an independent spirit, the content and style of the films varies considerably.

Unemployed Easter bunnies, a drumless drummer and a magical teenager are among the characters gracing the screens this year. *Adventures of Power* is an offbeat comedy about a talentless musician with big air-drumming dreams. In *Hank and Mike*, two Easter bunnies attempt to find new jobs after they're laid off. And *Mermaid* is a modern fairy tale, based loosely on the Norwegian

classic, about a young woman with the power to grant wishes who nonetheless struggles to make her own dreams come true.

Several films explore themes of modern urbanity in very different settings. In *This Beautiful City*, five strangers are drawn together by tragedy when a young woman falls from her Toronto balcony. Three months later, their lives continue to intersect and transform one another in unexpected ways.

In *Good Cats*, urbanization brings changes to the Chinese province of Sichuan. And *Divizionz*, directed by a Ugandan creative team that refers to their style as "guerrilla filmmaking," tells the story of a day in the life

of a young man in Kampala.

Several of the films deal with the ever popular themes of love and friendship. *Good Morning Heartache* follows a young couple whose lives totter between comedy and tragedy, privacy and exposure, as their deteriorating relationship is captured by a documentary team. *The Man Who Loved Yngve* is a coming-of-age tale in which 17-year-old Jarle must choose between the two people he loves.

A young man, growing up in the political turmoil of Northern Ireland, finds himself torn between the demands of friendship, family and the political ideology of a long-dead father in *Peacefire*, a film based on director Macdara Vallely's stage play. *Poppy Shakespeare*, a film about a friendship forged by two women in a psychiatric ward, explores the blurred line between sanity and madness.

Written is an existential drama that examines the creative process itself. The film follows a character trapped within a story. Although he longs for freedom, his creator keeps sending him back to the beginning to follow the narrated path.

The films may have disparate topics and production styles, Sichel admits, but what unites them is a dedication to the message they are trying to convey, without making any studio-friendly compromises. All 12 films will compete for the Independent Camera-Czech Television Prize for the Best Film.

WHAT AM I DOING HERE?

Phillip Bergson
ShIPLEY, West Yorkshire, UK
(KVIFF International Consultant)



■ What are you doing in Karlovy Vary?

Well, as a film critic and broadcaster, this is one of my favorite events.

■ Who do you work for as a film critic?

I've always been what was called independent, but now it's called freelance. In the very same week I left Oxford, I started at *The Sunday Times* and BBC radio. I was starting at the top and I've been working my way down ever since!

■ How does it compare to other festivals?

I think this is the most enthusiastic audience of any festival in the world. You see crowds in Cannes but they're only there for the leers. Here in Karlovy Vary the audiences love the films. There are also increasing numbers of important critics, producers, and filmmakers. I'm putting together an agency to represent European actors and filmmakers and this is a great place to brainstorm new projects face-to-face with people who can make them work.

ON THE TOWN

Pub Watch

Rotes Berlin

Jaltská 7

☎ 353 233 792

Open from 5pm to 6am during fest

True to its name, this buzzing club is a star of the local scene for its old school Berlin clubbing vibe. With resident DJs like Freedom, Gummy and Chosekilla, it's fair to say there's a double helping of atmosphere with your beer. The place to see and be seen if you're a clubbing maven, with cool red walls and bizarre statues everywhere. It's also a decent option for a late, late night meet-up if you're just too jazzed to go to bed (or don't have one in town). Service can be sparse but it's all just part of the show, somehow. Surprisingly reasonable drink prices.

XXX Long

Vřídelská 23-94

☎ 353 224 232

Open daily from 11am till 1or 2am as required

With a wall-to-wall chic ethic, this plush little Italian eatery is a place to nosh your gnocchi in style to be sure. Its motto, "Not everything cool must be expensive," is encouraging, though you could still spend a fair packet here without too much trouble. Still, the creamy color tones, Philip Stark designs, banquette seating and chrome accents do make for a Hollywood-style experience if you need to woo a star or impress a potential producer. Aside from the delicious pastas and delicate pizzas, the

Food and Drink

grilled steaks (200-390 CZK) and fish (up to 850 CZK) are done with a deft touch and interesting sauces. Word of caution: Unless you're a real power player, you may feel awkward unless you dress for dinner.

Schaffy's Garáž

I.P. Pavlova

(100 m from the Thermal)

☎ 775 727 928

Open daily from 5pm till at least 1am

With a rollicking American college bar feel, a close proximity to the Hotel Thermal and a huge cocktail menu (starting at 89 CZK), Schaffy's would be a good find even if it didn't feature a secret weapon. But it does: This lively little spot offers hot food

until late into the night. It's also got a decent selection of non-alcoholic cocktails, another welcome and rare innovation in Karlovy Vary. Do try the Sticks Menu (don't be put off – it's actually an appealing range of mozzarella pieces, chicken strips and such). Besides offering 0.4 l pitchers of Granát (a malty amber-coloured Czech lager) there is also a whole range of shooters (50 CZK).

U Švejků

Stará Louka 10

☎ 353 232 276

Open daily from 11am to 11pm

Don't be thrown off by the life-size model of one of Czech literature's most iconic characters sitting outside. This is no haunt for

soldiers hoping to avoid the front. But the Good Soldier Švejk would indeed have approved of the atmospheric (borderline fantasy) interior, which is almost like a film set of an old-world Czech pub. What's not a prop is the excellent Pilsner beer (although at a hefty 65 CZK per half-liter, you probably shouldn't settle for anything less). The kitchen, as you'd expect, has mastered all the Bohemian classics, from beef goulash and bread dumplings to more zesty game dishes (venison's a treat) for a range of 150-350 CZK, depending on weight. Non-carnivores, however, should be wary of typical Czech "vegetarian" dishes, which include a tuna salad and an omelette with ham.

Side Events

KVIFF's first big Saturday night will not disappoint, with live acts, hot DJ scratching, and scenemaking all over town. If you're out to spot celebs, a good bet is the **Vodafone FER Klub** (Lázně I, Mlýnské nábřeží 5), where everyone staying at the Grand Hotel Pupp is likely to be at some point. On the main stage, leading Czech rappers Indy & Wich take charge at 11pm, followed by PSH (DJ Mike Trafik, Orion and Vladimír 518) and DJ Robot Funky. At the Hotel Thermal's newly redone basement disco, **Tretter's Party Power Energy Drink Club**, it's Mega Star Night (appropriately) with Techronic and Daisy Dee Live, plus DJ Witek Cerweny, rocking till the wee hours.

DAILIES



Photo: Laura McGinnis

Who says KVIFF's too cool for cats?!



Photo: Laura McGinnis

Halušky (Slovak gnocchi) are now a fine fest tradition.



Photo: Laura McGinnis

KVIFF just wouldn't be the same without the rain.