

The UKZN Griot

...of Festivals and Policy



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What can be learned following all the excitement, despair and finally elation resulting from the 2013 Durban International Film Festival?

No theatrics, no protests, no foul language, no more sore bums and backs from watching too many movies, too often at too many venues. Must say, DIFF really does jazz up Durban. Much more fun than ICC conferences on toilets, climate and sanitation. Descending upon the town are all those quirky film directors, scheming producers, and earnest creative artists. In their wake come the film buffs, international film scholars, film fanatics and all manner of hustlers on the make. DIFF's epicentre, the Blue Waters Hotel, really does rock for the 10 days.

Our students got professional experience. They generated film reviews for *City Press*, learning about real pressure in the real world and the need to meet real deadlines. Under these pressing conditions of mimicking a real newsroom they had to generate publishable articles overnight.

UKZN student reporters were jostling for attention along with globally published journalists, film makers, bloggers, film critics, activists and social media nutters. The students moved from being eyes-wide shut to eyes-wide open. Some also were employed by visiting scholars to assist them in their own research. Others chaired workshops, panels and selected films and served in many organisational capacities, learning event management along the way.

DIFF has become a great incubator of media professionals, real-world training, and it offers a high pressure creative laboratory via the Talent Campus. It is also a hub for financing via the Durban Film Mart. Indeed, the financial and creative contribution of DIFF to Durban's economy is being studied by our students, who also work with the Durban Film Office in

assessing Durban's film services and the city's film friendliness. DIFF and Durban are synergetically intertwined.

DIFF/Durban and Africa are all conjoined, as one West African film director argued in his assessment of the impact on the continent as a whole of the banning of: *Of Good Report*. If artistic freedom is lost in South Africa it will never emerge in the rest of the continent, he observed.

DIFF has never been just a film festival. Rather, it has historically worked as part of the contested public sphere, as it should do. Debates, hot air, cold nights, lots of coffee, huge crowds, deafening parties, and seminars and workshops all jostled for attention. DIFF is a place where public policy gets proposed. This is where film makers get to interact with the Film and Publication Board and other state bodies like the National Film and Video Foundation and the Department of Trade and Industry. These organisations are vigorously reminded that they are accountable to the film and public sectors - and not just to themselves. Policy debates emerge out of the controversies, are negotiated in the corridors and the endless haze of cigarette smoke in which creatives constantly cocoon themselves trying to look cool (while getting very hot under the collar).

In the old days, thanks to a loophole in the censorship legislation, films banned from cinemas could be rented from film stores and screened in homes and other places. The contradiction was that only 35mm films were subject to censorship. 16mm and Super 8 were excluded. Festivals were from the early 1980s granted an automatic censorship exemption. Specialist educated audiences were assumed by the then Directorate of Publications as being mature enough to handle controversial fare. DIFF was a key player in securing this policy change from the silly idea that assumed that all viewers are copy cat rats lacking aesthetic discernment - a lesson forgotten by the current Film and Publication Board.

The Board ironically did the country a favour by banning *Of Good Report* and placed UKZN at the centre of debates about the public sphere. This is exactly where a university should be. Current issues impacting access to information and the credibility of the national public sphere were re-ignited with explosive force.

Festival films are usually innovative, activist and challenging. "Audiences," as one wag put it, "are part of the struggle" for aesthetic freedom and for restoration of the integrity of the citizen-led public sphere. A key demand was that artists, authors, film makers, academics etc, should be advising the state's regulatory bodies. In the course of events, cool heads prevailed, and it was agreed that "due protocols" would be pursued, including a respectful engagement with representatives from the Board.

It was really good to be part of an institution hosting such energy, shaping the debates and supporting the film sector.

This banning incident goes to the heart of authorial issues: the role of archives, international conventions and United Nations and other declarations on freedom of expression issues, and reader/viewer access. The tweeting and blogging even during the opening, and later media releases turned the opening night's film banning into a global issue. How to find a balance between "protection" and "expression" becomes an issue for the Board, as indeed it was for the authors of *Of Good Report*.

This is the real world in which students participated and learned. They came back to the second semester bristling with self-confidence, knowing that they can cut it with the best, that they participated in the making of history, and also they got to hob nob with so many celebrities.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.