

## PRACTITIONER TALKS

### 12. Festivals Must Not Only Nurture Audiences: They Must Create Them Too

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**Abstract:** The film curator, producer and festival consultant, Hebe Tabachnik, reflects on dramatic changes in the film festivals since the 2020 onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Tabachnik was not defeated by the turbulence caused by the pandemic as the festivals she programmed were evolving from online to hybrid formats. On the contrary she recognised how challenging it was going to be to get back to the past practices. The time of the pandemic became the time to adapt, evolve and create new strategies to reach out better to the audience while investing and nurturing the future one. It was also the time for building larger and stronger bridges across cultures, identities, and histories, and expanding synergies among people, communities and organisations.

**Keywords:** festivals, storytelling, audience, nurturing, diversity

For me, film programming always starts with the story, and a story that resonates with me. There is a combination of elements—the performances, the setting, the approach to the story that should be fresh and unique. I like to see the voice behind that story. If the film resonated with me, I hope it will resonate with different audiences.

I like to make sure that I listen and am very aware of the audience's reaction to the films that I program. I try to fine tune everything, taking

into consideration the subtleties of the different cities, communities, and demographics like Cartagena in Colombia, Palm Springs in California, Seattle in Washington, or Minneapolis/St. Paul in Minnesota. The Cartagena Film Festival (FICCI) has a bustling young audience fed by the city university and college life coupled with more grown up movie goers; Palm Springs on the other hand being a retirement heaven in Southern California with a very lively LGBTQ community tends to have older crowds, however being also part of one the Coachella Valley cities, is attracting a growing younger Latino fans; the Seattle International Film Festival (SIFF) brings the cosmopolitan make-up of a big city, has year-round screenings presented in their own venues together with die-hard fans who watch almost the entire festival line up of films; last but not least is Cine Latino Minneapolis Saint Paul with an audience nurtured also by the year round activities of the MSP Film Society and rapidly changing demographics that include a fast growing Latino population. But the bottom line is that the programming teams in all these festivals have a common goal, bring films that the people will appreciate, they will embrace, and with which they will have a connection. Often, the characteristics of a film will encourage a particularly strong connection with a specific demographic. For example, every year the large Ecuadorian community in Minneapolis always comes to see films that represent their country at the Cine Latino Film Festival like the North American premiere of the film *The Preacher (El rezador)* directed by Tito Hara, a razor-sharp thriller set in Quito with a cast led by one of the most renown actors of Ecuador, Andrés Crespo (*Narcos*).

That doesn't mean that they don't come to others, but it's very interesting to see how we help galvanize those communities. Festivals must not only nurture audiences, but they must also create them too, as witnessed a few years ago with the film *7 cajas* (7 boxes) by Juan Carlos Maneglia and Tana Schembri (2012 Paraguay). The film was shot in a market in Asunción, Paraguay called "Mercado número cuatro" (Market Number Four). Piracy is rampant there, but because the market community embraced the film production, the directors, and their vision, everyone felt proud to participate in the creation of the film, and everyone involved swore not to pirate it. The film premiered at Toronto followed by the San Sebastian Film Festival. When released in Paraguay, it had already received accolades as a breakthrough film. The relatively small Paraguayan community in the United States learned of it through word of mouth. The US premiere at Palm Springs International Film Festival in 2013 was almost sold out due to the Paraguayan-Americans who traveled to see it. It is important how you attract an audience to see your films, but it is even more determinant what kind of films you bring that makes the audience interested and invested in that

particular story. It's a fruitful, fragile, and ever-changing dialogue between what you bring and how that content becomes something enticing for the audience to be drawn to that festival.

At the same time, I bring new voices and new stories, knowing ahead of time that sometimes those might be tougher to embrace, but in all the festivals we take the nurturing of these up-and-coming storytellers as one of the most rewarding parts of our programming. I remember many years ago a person leaving the theater thanked me for bringing a film, even if he was the only one who enjoyed it. I'm not programming for one person, but sometimes you are programming for those few. However, at the end of the day people should feel satisfied. A festival is not sustainable if the audience isn't seeing the films. If the theater is empty, something is not right. Even if it might look sophisticated to bring high-concept avant-garde media, it's not doing anybody any favors if the audience is not drawn to that. Quality is the starting point, but then you need to understand what stories will resonate. It's a fragile balance, like tuning a radio.

There's a sense that there is a grey area in terms of programming, but knowing what station to fine tune the radio to is undeniably a puzzle. It can be difficult to gauge exactly what the audience wants. There have been times when I questioned bringing certain films, and then was shocked with the audience's response. Programmers tend to focus on the details, on editing and production values, and think they know what's going to happen. Audiences prove them wrong by being freer and they just dive into the stories. I thought *Al final del túnel* (At the End of the Tunnel) by Rodrigo Grande (2016 Argentina) was going to be a serious dark thriller with just a small fan club but when I showed it, to this eager for clever, emotionally engaging, and original stories SIFF audience, they thought it was hilarious. It helped me see the film with different eyes as well. Fresh eyes. It is probably one of the reasons I love this audience so much. It doesn't matter how many films they have already seen, they are always open and thirsty for more. It was the second time in the history of SIFF that the same movie won both Audience awards for Best Director and Best Film out of some 250 feature films we showed that year.

As a programmer I feel I have an obligation to offer audiences a glimpse of culturally diverse styles of cinema. Being from Argentina, where I also went to film school, my specialty is films from Latin America, Spain, and Portugal. Though Latin American movies have been offered in additional film festival programs, Southern California's huge Spanish-speaking and bilingual population makes Palm Springs an especially apt place for film lovers to gather, with the Coachella Valley having one of the largest Hispanic populations in the United States. The Palm Springs International Film Festival is about 60 percent

White and 30 percent Latino. Currently (2023), the audience requests more Latin cinema. I know from the reaction we get when we show these films, they're thirsty for these stories. The number of Ibero-American films has been steadily increasing, the number of screens available has expanded year after year, and there have been more sell-outs than ever before. Their productions are expanding and reaching new heights every year, cementing their place as some of the most vibrant and creative cinemas in the world. Fresh new voices join seasoned storytellers to bring never-before-told stories with innovative perspectives that always keep focus on the human spirit. The recognition of this region at the Palm Springs International Film Festival, that started as the Cine Latino Award, sponsored by Mexico's largest cinema showcase, the Guadalajara International Film Festival, and the University of Guadalajara Foundation-USA became a permanent competition that highlights the Best Ibero American films in the festival.<sup>1</sup> SIFF also established a similar competition around the same time. That also indicates that the festivals' evolving audiences want more movies from across the hemisphere. Smaller signs of this cultural shift include volunteers from local colleges replacing the movie-loving retirees. We are not even close to finishing our work, but we notice more and more of these little steps forward.

And this is not just Latinos in the audience. We are creating a taste for these films among a wider community. When I program for the different festivals, I'm trying to show universal stories that people will relate to around the world, but most of the films selected are also stories that are moving away from stereotype. I try to show subject matter, genres, and a blend of stories from "nuestras raíces" (our roots) as a celebration of us, and stories that audiences in the past have said they are interested in. I love to take chances as well as to push the boundaries when possible. There is a fascinating trend in some of the newer voices from the region, to mix and blend genres, like *Good Manners* (As Boas Maneiras) by Marco Dutra and Juliana Rojas (Brazil/France/Germany 2017), one of my all-time favorites. It is a hybrid of art house and genre cinema, combining sharp social commentary with Grand-Guignol fantasy. The film premiered at the Locarno Film Festival, played at the Palm Springs, Seattle, and Cartagena Film Festivals. Another outstanding example is *The Untamed* (La región salvaje) by Amat Escalante (Mexico

<sup>1</sup> These are films from Latin America, Spain, Portugal, and the Caribbean. At both Palm Springs and SIFF, we have jury awards for the best film in the Ibero-American Competition. The award was called Cine Latino Award at the Palm Springs Film Festival when it had a sponsor but then it was changed to Best Film in the Ibero American Competition. In the case of Seattle, it carries an unrestricted cash award for the director.

2016) that competed at the Venice Film Festival. Escalante masterfully combines his usual realism with fantasy, and subversive allegorical body horror elements. Animation is also growing in the region with very distinctive styles, higher production values and concepts, and country specific stories that have universal appeal. And of course, there is the increasing thirst for documentaries that shed light on the vast complexities and riches of the region. Every year we challenged ourselves to make the experience of going to the festival relevant, thought-provoking, while inspiring and entertaining.

COVID-19 has of course changed everything dramatically. With most of the festivals going online, some limitations were erased in a second, and everything became available everywhere. Now all showcases understand the vitality of having virtual screenings and being able to reach places where before it was almost impossible. We saw it in Seattle, where the films were available not only in Washington state but nationwide. Now we, as festivals, are overlapping audiences because festivals like Sundance and the Berlinale were also available globally. Where before you had a separate crowd who went to Park City and a separate crowd who went to Seattle, with the virtual space, those borders have vanished, and we are not going back. The numbers that Sundance had in 2021 were stratospheric, borderline a million people. Once festivals tap into that, they are not reverting to the old system. The potential is apparent, as is the reality that there are people who are not going to go to Park City or St. Paul because they're hours away. This is the way society is moving. There is intense demand now, especially from young people, to get content, get it now, and get it easily.

During the pandemic, Cine Latino in Minneapolis/Saint Paul 2020, in the state of Minnesota, moved online. Though it was presented through a completely different format, the essential components of the festival were relatively unchanged. Fortunately, every film we wanted, we were able to present. The ultimate goal, to create an event that will engage and interest people, remained. The elements that did change may have actually changed for the better. One of the great advantages we had is that because everything was virtual, we could reach out to areas in Minnesota we haven't been able to reach in years past, versus just Minneapolis and St. Paul. We were also able to have more live Q&As with creators all over the world. In years past, we would bring in a few guests based on our budget. But in 2020 we had probably forty to fifty people over the week, representing a wide variety of countries and cultures. The films were only available in Minnesota, but these live conversations were free and available worldwide. This means that people could interact with our presenters, which was something we hadn't done before. Someone from a small town somewhere in Minnesota could

interact with a filmmaker in Mexico or Spain or Argentina. If an interested person wasn't available at that particular time, then the sessions were recorded. There was a crowd who would watch Q&As live, but the number of people who watched them after the fact was huge. In 2021, we had a hybrid edition for Cine Latino Minneapolis/Saint Paul, and we saw a very telling situation. People chose very carefully which films to attend in-person and which ones to watch online when that was available for a particular film. It was also evident that having guests in-person drew people back to the theaters. Audiences longed to get together and share the common ritual of that dark room, laughing or crying together in front of the big screen.

Hybrid events are here to stay though, in the post-pandemic time we are living today, festivals are re-evaluating the percentage of in-person versus virtual offerings. I see all these changing circumstances as opportunities. The in-person experience is a necessity. That didn't happen for many months and many events, and it's a loss we cannot replace. But we are building different bridges. We are getting together in a different way. It's a time of adaptation. We must create new strategies and make the best of all these challenges.

I believe my role as a programmer is to be an explorer of uncharted territories. No matter how many mountains, rivers, or plains I have seen already, it is what lies ahead, as yet undiscovered, that keeps me going. My work doesn't end when a film is selected. I like to think we help create a collective story out of all the individual ones, an ideal arena to discuss and embrace our differences, and a vital sense of community between the filmmakers, the audience, and the industry at large. I feel we have an ethical responsibility toward the films, their creators, and to the audience. We want to see them shine, grow, and strengthen their unique voices. We firmly believe in the extraordinary power of cinema and the arts, to inform, inspire, and transform individuals and communities.

## About the Author

**Hebe Tabachnik** is an experienced curator, festival consultant, and producer that seeks to empower visionary artists who highlight human rights as well as social, political, and environmental justice. She is Senior Programmer at the Seattle, Palm Springs and Cartagena International Film Festivals and is Artistic Director of Cine Latino Minneapolis Saint Paul. Hebe's most recent films as executive producer are *Valentina*, that won twenty-five awards at over seventy film festivals worldwide and *The Perfect David* that premiered at the 2021 Tribeca Film Festival.