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Ecofilms: Creating synergies

Annual festival on Rhodes featured over 100 international films, participation was up 30 percent in '06

'Dreaming by Numbers' won second prize in the feature film category.

By Vivienne Nilan - Kathimerini English Edition

Ecofilms sparks off creative synergies by bringing together filmmakers from around the world, local government and local communities in the Dodecanese, environmental organizations and an expanding fan base. The most visible point of its year-round effort is the annual international festival of films and visual arts that ended yesterday on Rhodes.



Wide-ranging as they inevitably were in style and approach, the films often conversed with each other in interesting, unpredictable ways that illuminated both subject and filmmaker. Some linger in the mind's eye for unforgettable moments: Powerful emotion remains unspoken but is expressed in the body language of the two men when Bernt Hermele reveals his identity to the brother of the man who killed his mother in «My Mother Was Killed by a Suicide Bomber;» and young children quietly recount horrendous events they have lived through in Joop van Wijk's powerful «Echoes of War,» some willing to articulate their experiences for the first time after the shared reading of a fairy tale.

Other films document how social and environmental horrors past and present are enacted with the complicity, if not downright connivance, of the authorities. In «Poisoned Boats,» Vincenzo Pergolizzi shows how unprotected workers in a town on Turkey's Aegean coast break up ships laden with asbestos and heavy metals, destroying their health while polluting the water. In «Australian Atomic Confessions,» Greg Young and Kathy Aigner reveal how British nuclear tests conducted in Australia in the mid-20th century played havoc with the health of workers and local Aboriginal communities and how the present government tried, unsuccessfully, to foist a nuclear waste dump on the same area, but is likely to succeed in locating it elsewhere.

Others used humor to tell a story or wrap up a message. «Kitchen» by French director Alice Winocour mixed a desperate housewife's extreme solutions when confronting the live lobsters she has offered to cook for her inattentive husband with a subliminal message about what we do to the creatures we eat. Konstantin Faigle romps, tongue-in-cheek, through history, science, politics and sociology to ask why Germans whine in «The Great Depression.»

Hasmet Topaloglu and Belmin Soylemez observe their native city with perception and humor to make «How Beautiful Istanbul Looks Today,» a no-commentary short on election noise and pollution, and «Taxi,» a series of illuminating interviews with Istanbul taxi drivers. And British filmmaker Eva Weber persuaded her subjects to allow their very private yet public telephone conversations to be recorded in «The Intimacy of Strangers.»

There was much more, 114 films in all, and parallel events as well.

The screenings attracted a lot more people this year: «The numbers are up by 30 percent at least,» Ecofilms artistic director Lucia Rikaki told Kathimerini English Edition. She attributes the increase to the work Ecofilms has done locally, especially with the Ecokids program that introduces schoolchildren from the Dodecanese to selected films.

«This is the best year we've had so far,» said Ecofilms president Spyros Kouvelis, citing the broad range of well-attended events and the high visibility of the festival's environmental aspect.

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What about the future? More facilities for DVD watching are definitely on the wish list and the organizers agree that fewer films would allow breathing space for discussion. Rikaki plans to deepen the engagement with the local community on Rhodes, and Kouvelis would like to forge more partnerships with other organizations working in the field. It's those synergies again.

The awards

The first prize and 6,000 euros for a feature film was shared by «Mana: Beyond Belief» (USA) by Peter Friedman and Roger Manley and «Shutka Book of Records» (Czech Republic) by Aleksandar Manic.

The jury commented on the originality of the themes, their unusual approach and cinematographic excellence. Second prize and 3,000 euros went to Anna Maria Bucchetti for «Dreaming by Numbers» (Italy) for its poetic take on life in a Neapolitan neighborhood. «Lopukhovo» (Belgium) by Jara Malevez won first prize (5,000 euros) for a medium-length film. Second prize (2,500 euros) went to Arash's «Exile Family Movie» (Austria).

Polish director Malgorzata Skiba won the first prize (3,000 euros) for a short film with «Eco Dharma,» which the jury praised for its wealth of spiritual, social, political and environmental perspectives. Chilean director Ilan Stehberg won second prize (1,500 euros) for «Sea Wolves at the River Market» for its originality, cinematographic language and discreet environmental message. Special mention went to «My Friend, Mr Bull» (United Arab Emirates) by Majed Neisi.

The Greek Cinema Center's inaugural prize for the best Greek film went to Katerina Patroni's «O Pinakas» (The Painting). The jury noted its personal style, use of cinematic language and the artist's passionate relationship with nature. Special mentions went to Dionysia Kopana's «Kifissos, A God's Awakening» and Nikos Theodosiou's «Koursal.»

The prize for a film about water and wetlands went to «Rain is Falling» by German Holger Ernst, with special mentions for «Cyanide Blues» (Sweden) by Zoltan Torok and «Freshwater Lands» (Venezuela) by Ana Cristina Henriquez. The Rhodes Cinema Club's award was shared by «Rain is Falling» and «At the Right Time» by Italian director Luca Gasparini.

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