

ZLIN FESTIVAL SHOWCASING UNIQUE TREASURE

Presenting the work of Albanian filmmaker Xhanfise Keko

In the late sixties and early seventies, East German, Czechoslovakian and Yugoslavian directors started making children's films in an outspoken political context, subtly working within the system that at the same time they were questioning. Within the communist bloc, Enver Hoxha's Albania was an isolated, self-sustaining entity. Even there, behind the country's guarded frontiers, filmmakers were working on an oeuvre that was impactful for an entire generation. Specifically one artist made a series of young audience films that were as poetic as they were subversive.

Now Albanian filmmaker Thomas Logoreci, together with film critic Marc Cousins, found the momentum to present Xhanfise Keko's brilliant oeuvre to the world. The Zlin Festival also programmed two of Keko's films in the festival's new 'Discover & Explore' section: SPOILED MIMOSA and

TOMKA AND HIS FRIENDS.

While under the communist regime films were supposed to bring a glorious tribute to reality, Keko dares to break away from realism, into a field of dreams, tenderness and fantasy, in the disguise of genuine communist iconography. Keko made 29 films in total, she died in 2007. Now in Tirana, a street is named after the country's first female director, where kids play on the sidewalk, as so beautifully depicted in Cousins' cinematic essay *HERE BE DRAGONS*.

* * * * *

In late 1972, an annual song festival was performed at the Soviet designed Palace of Culture in the centre of the Albanian capital, Tirana. Believing change might soon be coming to Marxist Albania, many of the musicians performed Western jazz and



Xhanfise Keko

rock & roll. During the televised concert, women dressed in short skirts sang popular songs, like the ones you could hear on American or British radio. It seemed that many of the musicians had been listening to Italian and Yugoslavian radio stations, which was considered a criminal act under the communist regime.

A documentary film about the concert shows many people in the audience looking tense. After living under the harsh dictatorship of Enver Hoxha for nearly 30 years, Albanians had no idea what the future had in store. Shortly after, the Albanian leadership denounced some of those performers as 'enemies of the people'. In early 1973, communist authorities used the event

as a pretext to end a brief period of cultural change in Albania. Several people who took part in the concert were imprisoned or sent into internal exile.

The middle of the 1970's wasn't an easy time to be an artist or filmmaker in Albania. But one director was able to use the children's film genre to express her personal ideas about the pain and joy of being young. Though much of the country's film industry was (and still is) dominated by men, Xhanfise Keko (1928-2007) is now considered to be one of the top directors in the world, and perhaps Albania's most well-known director. Already at a very young age, Xhanfise was so eager and enthusiastic about



the movies that she decided to become a filmmaker. In the early 1950's, she left Albania for the Soviet Union, where she studied the craft of filmmaking. For the next 20 years, Keko worked in the New Albania Film Studio, sitting every day behind a huge editing machine, cutting images shot by news reporters. She married one of the leading documentary cameramen, Endri Keko.



SPOILED MIMOSA

In the early 1970's, she decided to stop editing other people's films and to start making her own. Fascinated by the innocent world of children, in 1973, when the era of cultural freedom was at its end, Xhanfise directed MIMOZA LLASTICA (SPOILED MIMOSA). As with all her films, Xhanfise spent many hours with her young actors, talking and listening. This unique method allowed her to gain their trust, thus being able to direct them into authentic performances once the camera began to roll.

Zhaklina Dhimojani was only seven years old when she starred in the title role, playing a sour child that doesn't want to share her toys with her friends in the apartment block. Until Mimosa is left to play all by herself. In one of the most touching scenes,

Mimosa feels so lonely that she starts talking to her dolls. Only in the end, she realises her mistake and makes up with the other kids. Mimosa is spoiled no longer.

The communist regime approved with the film's ending. Albanian leaders found it utterly important that their citizens belonged to a collective, not acting like individuals. Even though the film's message was embedded in the philosophy of the dictatorship, SPOILED MIMOSA still holds a special place in the hearts of Albanian audiences. Everyone who saw the film, remembers the child actors' authentic performances.

For the next ten years, Xhanfise Keko continued to make films with young people. As authorities believed these

films were only meant for children, they often didn't notice how Keko used camera and editing techniques that male Albanian directors couldn't master. Though critics today often point out the communist messages in films like TOMKA AND HIS FRIENDS (1977), Keko's work features some of the most iconic moments in Albanian cinema.



TOMKA AND HIS FRIENDS

In 1979, her husband Endri Keko, got badly injured in a car accident. Until his death in 1989, Xhanfise's priorities shifted towards taking care of her partner. During these years, Keko made two of her most serious movies, WHEN SHOOTING A FILM (1981) and TAULANT WANTS A SISTER (1984).

After SPOILED MIMOSA, Xhanfise Keko made nine more fiction films with children. Unfortunately after the decline of the government-funded Kinostudio system, she never made another film again. This is one of the tragedies of Albanian cinema. If only she could have continued filming during the dramatic and chaotic 1990's, many young people might have found in her a friend and spokesperson who could reflect their problems onto the big screen.

Xhanfise Keko spent her later years writing her memoirs, in a book entitled THE DAYS OF MY LIFE, in which she spurs a next generation of directors to make films for children. "We had one common goal in life: to raise a new generation, beautiful, educated and wise, to serve Albania's tomorrow. Cinema and children remain two of my greatest passions."

Thomas Logoreci co-wrote the feature length essay documentary about Albania, HERE BE DRAGONS, with filmmaker Mark Cousins. He was co-writer and co-director of BOTA, Albania's selection for the 2016 US Academy Awards and is currently writing a Young Person's Guide to Albanian Cinema.