Several festivals that are nowadays among the leading events in the European children’s film circuit were founded 30 years ago. Cinemagic is one of them. There must have been something in the wind back then, as most of these festivals have since developed in a similar way: ever-growing, with a more professional profile and extra attention for the industry.

Claire Shaw: Cinemagic derived from the film commission in Northern Ireland at the time along with key figures in the arts and film world locally. The festival was conceived as a cultural antidote and a creative arena for self-expression for young people during the Troubles. For 30 years the organisation has led the way in using film exhibition and production as a vehicle to inspire young people and it has provided a vital outlet for independent cinema, showcasing a film programme that offers a unique window to the world. With the industry growing in Northern Ireland and indeed film being offered as an academic subject in a lot of schools, we have been able to increase the profile and the reach of our work but our ethos has always remained the same. The nature of the festival’s cultural programming and the calibre of industry events, guests and film showcases marks Cinemagic out as the premier youth arts organisation in Northern Ireland which also fervently supports and nurtures young filmmaking talent and talent from these isles. We firmly believe that we should build a cinema-going audience that contributes to the industry through buying cinema tickets.

Cinemagic seems to have found a balance between brand new titles and extraordinary archive cinema. You bridge the gap between titles with an art-house appeal (THE RUNAWAYS, METAL HEART) and more commercial success films like SHAUN THE SHEEP and THE GREATEST SHOWMAN.

Shaw: We want to offer the best in new world cinema, cinema that broadens the imagination and tackles issues that affect youth and alongside that offer participants the chance to view classic cinema and key content that promotes film culture. It is about that balance in terms of knowing what the audience demand is as well as offering an opportunity to try something new. We are giving audiences a chance to be the first in our territory to see new releases. Filmmakers and distributors see the value in previewing content to captive audiences and target audiences for the releases. The added value around titles, like talks from the filmmakers, is a distinctive draw.

Claire Shaw about 30 years of Cinemagic

“A flagship arts event in the city of Belfast”

This year you screened again the very first film ever screened at Cinemagic, 30 years ago: VINCENT AND ME.

Shaw: We were thrilled to be able to locate and screen that film and host its actor Tchéky Karyo at it for a really special Q&A. He is known to audiences for a host of other film and TV roles (like the hit series THE MISSING) but holds this film very dear to his heart. The film itself stood the test of time and the story is heart-warming. To have it 30 years after we first screened it, in the exact same venue,
Festival Interview

was a really special occasion.

There was also a screening of THE WIZARD OF OZ in the Belfast Cathedral.

Shaw: For the first time we screened a film in the iconic surroundings of Belfast Cathedral, to create a gala feel to the closing of the 30th Anniversary Festival. The film was screened as part of a national initiative from the British Film Institute as part of the #BFIMusicals season and it’s a film that we have screened frequently over the years at Cinemagic.

It seems like the festival pays specific attention to what you could call “stars and celebrities”.

Shaw: Cinemagic is proud to include so many high profile patrons as part of our organisation but we ensure they are the right fit for the ethos of the organisation. We are supported by Liam Neeson, Pierce Brosnan, Saoirse Ronan, Julian Fellowes, Colin Farrell for example. As well as providing a welcoming space for local cinema lovers and the arts community in general, the role the festival has played in uniting communities and its dedication to promoting inclusivity contributes to Northern Ireland’s strengths as a creative and dynamic destination. Through programmes of masterclasses, workshops, screenings, film education and filmmaking, the Cinemagic Festival strives to motivate a new generation of young creatives.

This year you had more than 30 workshops and masterclasses addressing industry people. Because the industry is booming in Northern Ireland?

Shaw: There is a huge demand for the content in our workshops and masterclasses and film students strive to get involved in as many ways as possible. The industry is booming in Northern Ireland and we are able to contribute to the skills development of the next generation by enhancing opportunities to learn about the industry, to see diverse film content and nurturing raw talent.

Did the festival have an impact on the production of young audience content in Northern Ireland?

Shaw: There are more opportunities now in the production of young audience content and we hope that the achievements of the festival has contributed to this, even in the sense that we can inspire those that may want to work in the industry. We have always supported the exhibition of young audience content.

That is why Cinemagic is offering a platform for the work of young filmmakers?

Shaw: Annually we run a competition for young filmmakers aged 25 and under to submit their short films to Cinemagic. These films are screened as part of the festival to celebrate emerging talents. We wish to signpost as many opportunities as possible to help further their careers. The festival has many alumni who have gone on to work both behind the camera and on screen. Among the alumni credits include crew on hit shows such as GAME OF THRONES, DERRY GIRLS, LINE OF DUTY, TORVILL AND DEAN; movies such as SOLO: A STAR WARS STORY and one of Ireland’s leading post-production facilities, Yellowmoon. On screen alumni include Bronagh Waugh and Seana Kerslake. Behind the camera alumni include Oscar-nominated director Michael Lennox, most famously known for the worldwide success that is DERRY GIRLS.

How is the festival embedded in the cultural life of a city like Belfast?

Shaw: It has been a flagship arts event in the city for years and so many creatives across Northern Ireland have experienced being part of the festival over the years. In our 30th Anniversary year, we were awarded Best Creative Business at the Belfast Business
Awards and this is testament to our positive impact.

**You have a network of young volunteers working with the festival.**

Shaw: Cinemagic was a front runner in engaging with young people to have input to the festival content. A panel of young consultants offer their feedback on a selection of the proposed in-competition films and we value their thoughts as they are our target audience, and as well as that they input to the marketing and promotion of events so we are engaging in the best ways possible with our audience.

Dedicated volunteers help with everything from programmes distribution to front of house duties, ticketing and festival evaluations.

**Can you share with us one particular event that you are particularly proud about?**

Shaw: We were especially proud of all of our 30th Anniversary activities welcoming guests such as Saoirse Ronan and legendary actress Hayley Mills. The festival always has the audience at heart.

**Who are these people? This family doesn’t fit into the social safety nets but still found a way to survive.**

Heap: Even though the film touches on many social issues, I didn’t want it to feel like a grim Mike-Leigh-alike social realist drama. I wanted the film to have a sort of timeless gentleness. So their existence living isolated up on the cliff tops is slightly otherworldly. Initially we went looking for trailer parks along that coast, where people outside the North will classify both as Northern accents.

**In this Northern landscape is a certain desolation. These godforsaken places fit perfectly to the story.**

Heap: When the kids run off into the moors, things are getting dark and moody. The moors are often seen as a grim place, with villages that get snowed in in winter. That is where Wuthering Heights is set. But when we filmed in autumn – a season of change – the heather was in bloom and it looked more beautiful than desolate. At least to me.

**Turning donkeys into prima donna’s**

Angie and her younger siblings Polly and Ben live in a cabin by the sea. Their father hardly makes a living vending donkey-rides at the beach. For this family there is nothing like an evening of dark ale and folk singing in the pub to forget about life’s hardships. But that night Uncle Blythe returns from prison, harbouring a grudge over a long-standing family debt. Not much later the kids find themselves riding two donkeys over the moors under the drizzling rain, trying to escape from Blythe. At the Filem’on Festival we asked director Richard Heap about the exact locations of the film.

Richard Heap: THE RUNAWAYS is set in the North-East of England, on the farmland and in the small villages of the North York Moors National Park. There is a beautiful coastline with old towns like Whitby, where the story starts. When Dracula travelled to Britain, he landed in Whitby. Macy (Shackleton, playing Polly) is from Bradford, where they have the thickest of Yorkshire accents, while Rhys (Connah, playing Ben) is from Lancashire.