

CINEMA RITROVATO KIDS

Watching Russian hedgehogs

Probably the most delightful cinema goosebumps of the year, I got in Bologna during the Cinema Ritrovato festival, when during the open air screening of *VAMPYR* (Carl Theodore Dryer, 1932) on the Piazza Maggiore, church bells started to ring at the *moment supreme*. Pure magic! But isn't it a bit nerdy, a festival where the introduction speeches emphasise the restoration techniques that were used, and where restoration studios get more applause than directors? Among the audience you will find cinephiles, representatives of film schools and film museums, and children! Within this huge festival, a young audience section stands out not only for its unique programming, but also for the astonishing diversity of its audience.

Elisa Giovannelli and her team are running Schermi & Lavagne, the young audience section of the Cineteca di Bologna, presenting programmes for all age groups, from toddlers to teenagers, both during the festival and throughout the year. What I want to know from her is: how to reach out to



such a diverse audience? And why is it important to introduce children to archive cinema?

Elisa Giovannelli: I believe that cinema history is not a dusty thing from the past, it is something very much alive and we citizens of today are in the centre of it. Children are not only tomorrow's but also today's audience. It is also a way to open new horizons through rather unusual types of cinema. Apparently there is no limit to

what children can appreciate, as long as it is playfully presented for the right age group.

How 'unusual' do you go?

Giovannelli: We present not only silent films, but also experimental cinema, avant-garde with live electronic music, etc. On the other hand we sometimes screen traditional children's films; animated shorts for the little ones, feature films for the older ones. There aren't many titles availa-



**SCHERMI
& LAVAGNE**

ble on the Italian market, except the obligatory Disney and a few others.

Often it is said that children's cinema diet is getting more scarce, due to the commercialised film market, but could it be that nowadays, with access to digital media, they might be more open to less standardised formats of moving images?

Giovannelli: New technology made kids familiar with short videos as a way to express themselves, which is a positive evolution, but they should still understand what it can be like to see a film in a theatre, in terms of sharing a socio-cultural experience with others.

In media education referring to the cinema classics was always a French tradition.

Giovannelli: Yesterday it was the festival's honour to welcome Alain Bergala, who is considered to be the father of modern film education. Like him, we don't believe in a strictly chronological approach; instead of following a straight path, we rather prefer to



mix different elements. We share his vision that instead of entire films, you can compile extracts and clips. But ever since his theory was launched 30 years ago, society has evolved, and so have our perspectives. We insist on involving children with new technologies. In our work with schools and families, we mix the educational and the hands-on part.

You seem to be standing very close to your audience.

Giovannelli: In the run-up to the festival, we discussed several types of forms where the audience could write down their urgent questions. I decided to use none of them, and reply one by one to every single question from every single parent. Building up direct contact with our audience, meeting them outside the cinema, getting their feedback is crucial for us.

Is addressing families more challenging than addressing schools?

Giovannelli: Throughout the year, every Saturday and Sunday we organise a film club for young people, offering a programme with classics, previews or second releases, often followed by workshops or panels. Included is also the “Cinnoteca” – a word game with ‘cinno’, a Bolognese word for very small children – in which we

have screenings for kids aged 2 to 5. This initiative was warmly received (and we can only dream of re-launching this activity soon). And in summer we welcome children all day long in a ‘camp’, in collaboration with a Bolognese association for children’s literature. This is our gift to the parents

been the Cinema Ritrovato Kids section. This is our final celebration, the climax of our work, and a treat for the families that followed us all year long.

How come this is possible in Bologna, and maybe only in Bologna?

Giovannelli: Bologna is a peculiar city,



of Bologna, taking care of their children during the summer vacation.

In summer... you mean... right before the festival?

Giovannelli: Exactly. Our summers are pretty packed. For five years there has

with a strong cultural tradition. It’s a university city with a wide variety of interest groups. This open minded atmosphere is reflected in our audience and in the festival. I consider myself lucky to work in a city like Bologna.

The titles in your family programme are remarkable; Russian animation from the 70s, a selection of Estonian shorts... In most festivals such programmes are screened for empty theatres.

Giovannelli: Throughout the year in our film club, we build up a relationship of trust with families; they know our selection is well thought through, which they see as a “quality guaranteed” label. From there on, we’ve built up a tradition, step by step; it took us 10 years to arrive at this point. Do you know that several festival guests, coming from abroad, bring along their kids, leaving them with us to watch *THE HEDGEHOG IN THE FOG* while they go to Cinema Arlecchino to watch a newly restored classic?

You’re not only reaching out to the regular festival audience; you’re also targeting other groups.

Giovannelli: We also address families that normally would not come to us, because they don’t know about us, or because they can’t afford a ticket. We try to involve them through our cooperation with social services, local associations, a public housing company, etc. Thus, we’re building a network that hopefully can lower the threshold to welcome these kids in our screenings, alone, with their parents



or their educators. It's an intensive and time consuming method, but we strongly believe in it. What we offer is not just for the happy few.

So the audience that comes to watch Russian animations about hedgehogs...

Giovannelli: ... Is different, and it is mixed. We do not organise separate screenings, we just open our doors. We meet those families, we explain what we're doing and why we're do-

ing it.

How big is Cinema Ritrovato?

Giovannelli: Huge! This year we screen around 450 films in 10 theatres and in open air venues, and we welcome people from all over the world. Normally 70% of our audience is international, from Japan to Australia. Sometimes it feels like our festival is better known abroad than in Italy.

And the audience is a bit... nerdy?

Giovannelli: Not all of them are! Our catalogue ranges from obscure titles, to restored popular films in Technicolor. Last year Sergio Leone's western trilogy was screened at the Piazza Maggiore, often described as "the most beautiful cinema in the world". This brought back memories to Sunday evenings at my grandfather's. Only when there was a western on TV, he told us to be silent; "tonight I can't play cards with you because there is cinema on TV". For him only westerns were true cinema.

Somewhere in the back of this huge Cinema Ritrovato catalogue is the children's section. How do you position yourself within this big event? With a humble "thank you for having us"?

Giovannelli: It has been like that for a few years. But year after year we gained our place, as Cineteca director Gianluca Farinelli believes in the benefits of film education. We got our own space in the Cineteca – a small theatre with 64 seats – and due to the pandemic restrictions we have now established relationships with open air venues in the city, in courtyards, parks etc.

You also have a distribution project.

Giovannelli: Italy doesn't have a tra-

dition in distributing children's films, and in general the interest of the industry is low. We started distributing restored classics in theatres and on DVD. But after I saw the film *O MENINO E O MUNDO* by Alê Abreu, I discussed with my director the opportunity to launch a small distribution line for children. The film did well, and ever since, we have distributed one title for children per year. In recent years we picked up Magic Light productions, like *THE GRUFFALO* and next November we will launch their *REVOLTING RHYMES*.

After all those years, are there any particular screenings that you will always remember?

Giovannelli: There was one in a historic theatre in Imola, where *MODERN TIMES* was seen by 400 school kids from different age groups. Hearing their collective laughter was very impressive. And there was the screening of *O MENINO E O MUNDO* on the Piazza Maggiore for 3000 people – me presenting that film was one of the scariest moments of my life! But the screening was fantastic.

–
Gert Hermans