



Switzerland Marcy Goldberg

In 2011 Swiss cinema succeeded in garnering a satisfying amount of attention, both at home and on the international festival scene. The domestic market share was four per cent, down from five per cent a year ago. However, two significant films on human rights issues captured the public's imagination and generated important debates in the media as well as the political sphere.

Markus Imboden's Swiss-German historical drama **The Foster Boy** (*Der Verdingbub*) reminded local audiences of the systematic mistreatment of foster children hired out as slave workers to farms, a practice that began in the early 1800s and persisted well into the 1950s, thanks to the collusion of local authorities and the Church. Imboden's 'movie of the week' aesthetic and a predictable, not to mention overly melodramatic, script will likely hamper the film's international sales. However, at home *The Foster Boy* topped the box-office chart for several weeks in November, beating international blockbusters like Steven Spielberg's *The Adventures of Tintin*.

Fernand Melgar's hard-hitting documentary **Special Flight** (*Vol spéciale*) called attention to a current and highly controversial aspect of Swiss



Fernand Melgar's **Special Flight**

refugee policy that will strike a chord in many other First World countries: detention centres in which asylum seekers and illegal immigrants can be incarcerated for up to 18 months whilst awaiting deportation. In this follow-up to his award-winning *The Fortress*, which had examined the refugee application process, Lausanne-based Melgar spent nine months filming in one of Switzerland's 28 detention centres – the end of the line for those whose applications have been rejected. Shot in direct-cinema style with no commentary, the film powerfully captures both the desperation of the men facing forced expulsion – the 'special flight' cases – back to countries where their lives may be in danger, and the dilemma of the prison wardens charged with ensuring 'humane' conditions for the inmates.

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On the festival circuit, Swiss films were present at Berlin, Cannes, Locarno, Venice, San Sébastian and Sundance, mainly with documentaries and international co-productions. For the time being, it seems likely that the country's chances of recognition abroad continue to lie in these areas, rather than in success with domestic features.

The Berlinale 'Forum' saw the debut of Thomas Imbach's self-described 'fictional autobiography' **Day Is Done**. The experimental documentary juxtaposes 15 years' worth of luminous 35mm footage shot from the filmmaker's studio window, with answer-machine messages culled from the same period. Taken together, this material tells the somewhat fictionalised story of T., a filmmaker struggling to build a career as his personal life unravels. Also in Berlin, in the 'Panorama' programme, was **Off Beat**, Jan Gassman's promising feature debut. Shot in a dark and hand-held 'indie' style, it tells the story of an illicit gay love triangle set in the Swiss-German hip hop milieu.



Thomas Imbach's **Day Is Done**

Following a lacklustre period for Switzerland's Italian-language film sector, there has been a growing number of co-productions between the two countries. Cannes' 'Directors' Fortnight' featured the Italian-Swiss co-production **Corpo celeste**, a coming-of-age drama about a teenage girl's return from Switzerland to Italy, written and directed by Alice Rohrwacher (sister of the Italian actress Alba Rohrwacher). **Summer Games** (*Giochi d'estate*), another Italian-language film, premiered out of competition in Venice. This sensitively shot story of a family's summer

vacation gone awry was written and directed by Swiss-Italian Rolando Colla, produced by the Zurich-based Peacock Films and shot in Tuscany with a Swiss and Italian cast and crew. Both films went on to enjoy much success at festivals, which should continue into 2012.



Milagros Mumenthaler's **Back to Stay**

Further proof that Switzerland would do well to increase its focus on international collaborations was provided by the Swiss-Argentine-Dutch co-production **Back to Stay** (*Abrir puertas y ventanas*), a family drama by Swiss-Argentine director Milagros Mumenthaler. It received the Golden Leopard and Best Actress awards at Locarno and was also screened in San Sébastian, before going on to pick up several more awards at Latin American film festivals.

Two of the year's most fascinating documentaries unfolded some way from the Swiss border. Jarreth Merz's **An African Election**, which premiered at Sundance, chronicles the 2008 presidential election in Ghana as it transformed into a tense stand-off between the country's two main political parties. Also on an African theme, Heidi Specogna's **Carte Blanche** follows investigators from the International Criminal Court in the Hague as they research war crimes allegedly committed in the Central African Republic on the orders of Congolese political leader Jean-Pierre Bemba.

Finally, two personal favourites from 2011 marked a departure from more stereotypical Swiss seriousness. **The Sandman** (*Der Sandmann*) by Peter Luisi, a gently surreal



Laurent Nègre's *Opération Casablanca*

comedy in the spirit of Michel Gondry and Spike Jonze, tells the story of an aspiring and eccentric classical music composer who inexplicably leaves a trail of fine sand wherever he goes as his professional and personal life begin to crumble. And **Opération Casablanca**, by Laurent Nègre (a co-production with Canada and France), is a satirical slapstick comedy, poking fun at stereotypes of Muslims and terrorists that manages to be timely, entertaining and witty.

All in all, Swiss cinema – whether in German, Swiss-German, French, Italian or the country's unofficial *lingua franca*, English – continues to show potential for increased success in the years to come. Last year also saw veteran producer and film festival director Ivo Kummer replace the controversial Nicolas Bideau as the head of the Federal Film Office, a change that observers hope will serve to reunify the linguistically and regionally fragmented film industry. At the same time, Kummer's post as longtime head of the Solothurn Film Festival, the influential annual showcase for Swiss cinema, has now been filled by Seraina Rohrer.

As a representative of a younger generation, and the first woman to hold the position, Rohrer is the focus of much anticipation as to how she will make her mark on Swiss film culture.

The year's best films

The Sandman (Peter Luisi)
Opération Casablanca (Laurent Nègre)
Back to Stay (Milagros Mumenthaler)
Special Flight (Fernand Melgar)
Day Is Done (Thomas Imbach)



Peter Luisi's *The Sandman*

Directory

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