

INTERVIEW

MORITZ DE HADELN

Years of living dangerously

Juggling egos and rivalries, art and politics is all in a day's work for an A-list festival director. Moritz de Hadeln, former chief at Berlin and Venice, gives MELANIE RODIER a glimpse inside a job where a year's work is judged on two crucial weeks

When Mike Leigh picked up the Golden Lion for *Vera Drake* at the Venice film festival this year, his acceptance speech was laced with a barely concealed glee. "I'd like most sincerely to thank the Cannes film festival which rejected my film. Thank you Venice." Months earlier, Cannes had famously not selected Leigh's film, which went on to score near-universal critical acclaim and is now a front-runner for Oscar recognition.

Leigh later said he had not meant to take a shot at Cannes, which did not offer a reason as to why his film had been rejected. "I can only reflect that my film wasn't good enough for Cannes," he says.

The brouhaha came hot on the heels of an earlier controversy, this time between Cannes and Berlin. The latter lost out on a competition screening of Walter Salles' *The Motorcycle Diaries*, which the former snagged from under its nose. "If a director cannot accept my invitation, one that he has had for three months, then I have to make my programme without him," said Berlinale artistic director Dieter Kosslick, somewhat snippily at the time.

Moritz de Hadeln sighs with resigned recognition. Nearly four decades



as a top-flight festival chief have taught him that missing a potential hit is the bane of the job. “The strange thing about directing film festivals is that one needs nerves of steel to survive the unavoidable attacks from critics, and the sensitivity of a child to feel emotions when selecting films. Two things that contradict each other,” he says.

De Hadeln, who curated the Berlin film festival between 1980 and 2001 before being controversially dumped, and then moved on to the Venice film festival for another two years, says he regrets rejecting three films during his time in Berlin.

One of those was Hector Babenco's *Pixote*. “It was a very violent film with a scene of a boy being raped in a prison. I had members of my board who were so violently against this film, that I had to say 'OK, we won't take it.' After that, it became a cult film,” he says.

He also turned down Giuseppe Tornatore's *Cinema Paradiso* and Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful*. Both films were re-edited by Miramax after de Hadeln's committee rejected them. Both went on to win a slew of Oscars and are among the most successful non-English-language films of all time.

“We cannot rely on reviews in *Screen* or *Variety* to know how the film will be received,” says de Hadeln. “It's left to our own judgement, to mine and that of my colleagues on the selection board, and one hopes that one has not made the wrong choice. It happens that in many cases I made the right choices after listening to my colleagues, and I'm very proud of it.”

While every festival needs a figurehead who will take the praise as well as the flak in the industry's habitual festival post-mortems, the often irascible and always outspoken de Hadeln says that running a festival is all about teamwork.

“A festival director's main job is to animate, to motivate, a team. Because the event is so complex, so rich, and in the case of Berlin and Venice, so big, that one man alone cannot do much. If he does not have a team working for the same scope as he is, then he is lost.”

"She pretended she had seen it before"

During his career, de Hadeln has switched between jobs in Locarno, Berlin and Venice. He says there is not much love lost between A-list festivals. One of the most high-profile examples of festival rivalry was when Venice and Locarno squabbled in 2003 over the competition

“One needs nerves of steel to survive the unavoidable attacks from critics, and the sensitivity of a child to feel emotions when selecting films”

Moritz de Hadeln



programming of *The Return*, the debut of Russian director Andrei Zvyagintsev.

According to some reports, the film was offered to both festivals but was rejected by Venice's Critics' Week. Then, Locarno director Irene Bignardi announced the film would play in competition at the Swiss festival. The film's sales agent, Raissa Fomina of Intercinema Art Agency, confirmed it to Locarno and apparently informed Venice.

But the next day, Venice came back with an official invitation for the main competition. The film's producer, Dimitri Lesnevsky, told Fomina to cancel Locarno. By this point Bignardi had already unveiled *The Return* as part of her line-up, and sent a message to de Hadeln, suggesting there might have been a misunderstanding.

The picture went on to win the Golden Lion in Venice and de Hadeln recalls the Russian film's discovery as one of his greatest triumphs, disputing Locarno's claims that it was the first to accept the film.

“Irene Bignardi did ask for it, after we had accepted it, pretending that she had seen it before.” He suggests. “The true fact is that the film was offered to five or six festivals simultaneously, and they were all waiting to see what the number one, Venice, would decide. From the moment we said yes, the film was no longer available for other festivals.” For her part Bignardi believes there is an unspoken agreement between festivals whereby one will not take a film that has already been accepted by another.

De Hadeln insists A-list festivals never negotiate with each other. “Festivals have relatively friendly relations between each other as far as common problems are concerned. But as soon as competition comes into their relationship, there are no negotiations. Besides, what would there be to negotiate? ‘Don't take this film, please give it to me?’ This would be ridiculous. No-one would ever do that,” he says.

Still, de Hadeln admits that within a festival, a director does

occasionally have to make compromises. During his last year on the Lido, much ruckus was caused in the Italian media by rumours that Venice was forced to include Aurelio Grimaldi's *Rosa Funzeca* in its programme, as the film's lead actor and producer, Ida Di Benedetto, was the lover of cultural minister Giuliano Urbani. Urbani refused to comment on press reports at the time, and Di Benedetto herself denied having anything other than a platonic relationship with the minister.

"It's now publicly known we did not think *Rosa Funzeca* was appropriate for a screening in Venice. But after everything that had happened, somehow we had to put it in the programme," de Hadeln says, elliptically. "Franco Bernabe, the former chairman of the Biennale and someone I highly respected, said to me, 'You are free, I've guaranteed your freedom. But I appeal to your diplomatic sense. Is it worth a major battle with a minister who is the one giving the money to the festival, or is there a way to find a compromise?' And that was it. He never told me what to do. He left it up to me. And I finally decided it wasn't worth the conflict. These are the challenges that a festival director is confronted with very often."

Still, de Hadeln insists it is all about setting limits. He cites another example, again in Venice. In 2003, he invited actress Claudia Cardinale to be jury chairwoman. "She had more or less agreed, but her husband, [Italian director] Pasquale Squitieri, had just finished a film, *L'Avvocato Di Gregorio*, and he wanted to submit it to the festival. We saw the film, we didn't find it suitable. Squitieri told me, 'It's either both of us - the film and Claudia - or neither,' And to my great regret, I said neither, because I don't like to be put under pressure in such a way."

"It was one of my most terrible moments"

De Hadeln, who has a reputation as a formidable organiser, insists that, like a wedding, the secret behind a good festival lies in the months of planning that precede it. In a thinly veiled allusion to the organisational problems that marred this year's Venice film festival, he insists that planning is so important that once a festival starts, "there is very little a director can do if things go wrong."

"Of course, there is an enormous amount of adrenaline that you have to invest in it, so that you forget you're tired because you want it to succeed," he says. "But during the festival, a director's role is nothing very much more than to be a co-ordinator. You have to plan, to foresee things in advance, to train the right people in advance for the jobs they're going to do, whether it's small jobs or big jobs. This is the job of a festival director."

De Hadeln says that during each festival in Berlin and Venice, he tried to have daily meetings with the heads of the event's various sections to see if there were any problems and, if so, quickly correct them.

"I have not always shown the films I have liked, but have been convinced it was right and proper for a film to be shown because it comes at the right moment and represents something new"

Moritz de Hadeln

“But for the rest, you spend your time receiving delegations, giving interviews - always the same questions - and on the red carpet, welcoming filmmakers, presenting films on stage, attending meetings and meeting people. The tragedy of these major festivals, I once calculated it, is that if you have a 12 or 14-hour day, you are not able to talk seriously with more than 500 people in 12 days. If you count the amount of guests and press attending at a major festival, it means you are talking to one-fifth of the people who are there, which is always very frustrating because among these people you have many friends you'd like to take time out with. But you just can't.

“Then of course, there's a lot of administrative work to be done, answering e-mails, the phone. Another thing the director is there for, is for complaints. 'My hotel room is lousy', 'I have the wrong accreditation', etc. My trick was always to say, 'I'm very sorry to hear this, but you know we have commissions taking care of this. I cannot do anything but I will ask them to take care of it.' Even if I didn't have any commission for it. One has to be a little bit evasive in certain circumstances.”

Among the festival directors he rates most highly, de Hadeln counts Cannes chiefs Gilles Jacob and Thierry Fremaux, Toronto's Piers Handling, Telluride's Tom Luddy, Pusan's Kim Dong-ho and Chicago's Michael Kutza. His successors in Berlin and Venice, Dieter Kosslick and Marco Mueller are noticeably absent from his list - although he readily includes past Venice directors such as Guglielmo Biraghi, Carlo Lizzani, Felice Laudadio and Alberto Barbera.

Evidently, de Hadeln's ousting from Venice - after a protracted power struggle with Urbani - is still a sore point. While he recalls the Lido with fondness, he refers to his removal as one of his “most terrible moments”. “Urbani asked me to leave without offering any justification - in spite of a successful festival, the broad solidarity I received from so many people and my wish to continue my job there after only two short years,” he says.

The problem with Venice is the politics and the lack of appropriate infrastructures. There's no festival in the world where directors are changing all the time and where you can't do anything without some minister putting his nose into it. The Italians have great illusions about the future of their festival in Venice, if politicians continue to want to use it the way they do. There is no example in the world of a festival like that, not even in Moscow at the time of-the Soviet Union.”

Nor is de Hadeln optimistic about things changing on the Lido in the near future. “There's always been a desire to change things in Venice - since 1936. Plans for a new film palace, creating a market, moving the event away from the Lido to the Arsenal, separating the event from the rest of the Biennale - all ideas that have remained in the air for decades without anything fundamentally changing, even if each one of us has

THE SECRET OF MY SUCCESS

DE HADELN'S HOT TIPS

> A festival director must be as interested in the organisation as in the films he or she is showing. “There are many festivals that have by now separated the two jobs,” he says. “On the one side there is the artistic director, on the other the organisers. I find that this is not a good solution. It's right to delegate as much as possible and to have a team where everyone has their own responsibility. But you have to have the final decision the final responsibility. I am of the opinion - and maybe not everybody shares this - that when you receive someone in your home, you make sure that your home is in order and has a welcoming atmosphere.”

> Discover new talents.

> Be open-minded. Do not try to impose a certain type of film on the public just because you like it or because it is trendy. “I have not always shown the films I have liked, but instead I have been convinced -after long discussions in certain cases - that it was proper and right for a film to be shown because it comes at the right moment and represents something new,” de Hadeln says. “Our role is not to impose personal choices but to provide a podium for others to determine the trend.”

brought some new ideas and moved some inches ahead. When the country changes, the festival might.”

Political interference in Venice may have turned a director's job into a particularly ephemeral position, but any festival director has to be able to delicately juggle the egos of film-makers, producers and distributors, as well as politicians.

De Hadeln admits festivals are really all about promoting films in front of an enormous amount of media, and trying to keep everyone happy in the process. “There are all sorts of egos which go right down to the protocol, to where someone sits in the screening room, to if he's invited to the opening, to the screening, how the director of a film is treated, and how politicians are seated. Everyone wants their films placed in the best possible way in the programme so that they can take the maximum benefit out of their participation. This is not always possible. You cannot put all the films on a Saturday evening at eight o'clock. And it's not always a good thing for a film. Everyone wants to be put in the best possible spotlight. But you have to run a festival for 12 consecutive days, not just on weekends.”

Since de Hadeln parted company with Venice earlier this year, this British-born resident of Switzerland has returned to Berlin - where together with his wife Erika he has created a film consultancy company called de Hadeln & Partners. However, he says he is waiting for his next job as a festival director, which he says is his true calling. “I think I have a lot of experience to offer and, at the age of 63, I don't wish to retire. What happened to me in Venice was a rather big and unexpected shock.”

At Cannes this year, de Hadeln worked as a television reporter for an Italian cable channel. Since he left Venice, he has also chaired specialised juries in Morocco, Romania and at the gay and lesbian festival in Turin. “But that doesn't feed the man,” he says. “It's good fun, it allows you to see films, but it's not the only thing I'd like to do. After 36 years of doing it, my real job remains being a festival director.’

© Melanie Rodier & Screen International

THE SECRET OF MY SUCCESS (2)

DE HADELN'S HOT TIPS

> Be aware that film festivals could soon become cultural ghettos. “There is a very fine line between just showing entertainment for the sake of entertainment and focussing only on films for a small elite. Festivals are not subject to box-office criteria, so they can and must take risks presenting difficult and even unpopular films. But they should never forget the interests of the public at large.”

> Support local film-makers and reflect the world's cultural diversity. “We all love American cinema, but the world is much broader and greater than just the US. By giving space to Asian films, to Indian, to African or to European films, we are reacting positively against a mono-cultural world dominated only by American cinema.”