



Cypriot teenagers get into character at ICFFCY's bi-communal weekend

International Children Film Festival of Cyprus

- Making movies across the political divide

West Side Story is a renowned classic of world cinema. It is celebrated on account of Leonard Bernstein's *virtuoso* score and the universal themes of youth, love and ethnic conflict. This year, the film features in the programme of the International Children Film Festival of Cyprus (ICFFCY). Few movies could make a claim to symbolise more effectively the conflict and aspiration to peace on this divided island.

The Turkish invasion in 1974 caused the division of the island in two; the Greek Cypriote in the South and the Turkish Cypriote in the North, under Turkish troupes occupation. The United Nations established a buffer zone running over 300 kilometres alongside the so-called green line. For more than 30 years, Cypriots have been living an uneasy truce on either side of this communal divide. The thawing of relations in recent years led to a partial lifting of the crossing ban, initiating closer encounters between the two communities. A lasting political solution to the conflict is nowhere in sight.

It was love of film first and foremost, not peacemaking, which drove two women working at the Highgate English public school in Nicosia, to start the Children International Film Festival in 2004. "Of course, building bridges between the Greeks and the Turks on the island was on our mind, but we thought we should do this by appealing to a shared passion for the medium of film," says Evanthia (Eva) Argyrou, who co-founded the festival with Highgate's Head of Media Studies, the French-born Bérengère Blondeau. They were soon joined by French educationalist Françoise Arnoult who also lived and worked on the island.

To begin with, the festival was a modest affair, involving coordinated screenings between Highgate and another English school in Nicosia. By the second year, Eva, Françoise and Bérengère, emboldened by their initial success, were determined to

extend it to all Cypriot children. Their efforts to attract the cooperation of the Turkish Cypriot side coincided with the relaxation of border crossing rules. "Before that time, we had collaborated with the Turkish side on a tri-lingual book of traditional stories," recalls Eva. "Restrictions were such that the only place we could meet and discuss the text was the village of Pyla, in the UN buffer zone." In 2005, the festival was held inside the Nicosia segment of the buffer zone, in the old Ledra Palace, once a luxury hotel. Like many buildings in that zone, the Ledra had become dilapidated; it was the first time children from all the island's communities (they include Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots as well as Armenian, Maronites and UN peace keeping force residents) were gathered together inside the green line.

The gathering took place during a bi-communal weekend of film creativity which has become the lynchpin of the festival. "The weekend is an opportunity for kids from all over the islands to explore filmmaking and hone their creative skills together," says ICFFCY Project Manager Ioannis Soulos. The event has different workshops covering a range of film making skills from story-boarding and animation to poster design and digital production. The children are split into age groups, all communities mixed together and the multilingual support staff is on call to smooth over communication challenges and assist the international film tutors. "The objective of the workshop is always, if possible, for teams to complete a short film," adds Ioannis. Last year, a group of 14-year-olds made *Nathalie*, a dialogue-free short about a young girl struggling with a developing drug habit. Others made a documentary collecting the views of Cypriot youth about what living in a communally divided island means to them.

Coordinating film screenings between both sides of the divide is proving to be a challenge for the ICFFCY. Initially, screenings were scheduled in various international organisations' buildings inside the buffer zone. Since border crossing to the occupied area became easier, they have been held in cinemas on both sides of Nicosia.

What of collaboration with the Turkish side? "At first there was a little bit of a trust issue, because they could see the sponsors were all from the Greek Cypriot side of the island", recalls Ioannis. The ICFFCY is supported principally by the Ministry of Education and Culture. "However, after a short while, the common passion of the teachers for introducing kids to film became the common ground and we were able to work together," he adds. Last year it was KAYAD, a Turkish Cypriot NGO and Community centre specialising in women's issues which was the ICFFCY's partner on the northern side, using its network of family contacts to mobilise parents and children. In 2008, another Turkish Cypriot NGO, Side Streets, will be the partner. "We have common views about what the festival should be about; to introduce children to a range of films not available in commercial mainstream cinema," says Eva, who is especially proud of the worksheets and teachers' packs produced jointly for use by teaching staff on either side.

"Cinema alone cannot induce reconciliation across political and communal fracture lines. However, by appealing to a shared passion it can help new generations emphasise what they have in common over what has divided their forebears. We hope the ICFFCY can play its own modest part in this process," says Eva.