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‘SEEfest’ Is A Must-See



From left: Chantal Chauzy, Director of Feature Programming for SEEfest, with Veronique Siklosi, Cultural Attaché from the Belgian Consulate and Vera Mijojlic, Founder and Director of SEEfest.

by Dawn McElligott

Having trouble catching films from Croatia or thereabouts? Itching to have your movie shot in Belgrade screened in Beverly Hills? Rather than leaving cinephiles stranded, SEEfest has been connecting moviegoers with films from South East Europe since 2002.

As it says on the [festival website](#), “Founded in 2002 and incorporated in 2006, the South East Europe Film Festival in Los Angeles (SEEfest) pioneered the concept of regional, cross-border programming with issue-driven films that tell a larger story about South East Europe, where borders of all kinds are fluid and porous just as often as poisonous.”

By 2012, it was judged by Flavorwire.com to be among the 10 best “under-the-radar” film festivals in America.” During last year’s event, festival goers were still able to snatch up tickets, refreshments, and parking at bargain basement prices.

The 2017 SEEfest opened at the WGA Theater in Beverly Hills with “The Constitution” (2016). For a budget-friendly cost of \$20.00, ticket holders were able to enjoy the screening and a reception afterward in the theater lobby. Other films were screened at Laemmle Music Hall where expertly popped popcorn and refreshing soda were sold at surprisingly reasonable prices. Parking was available in the upper, “visitor”

levels of the WGA Theater for a total of \$ 6.00 until midnight. Additional films were screened at the Goethe-Institut in Miracle Mile and the West Hollywood Library Campus.

The story of the film festival begins with its inspirational founder, Vera Mijojlic. Chale Nafus had interviewed Mijojlic in 2010 and again in 2012 for an article on a one-time event in the Lone Star State known as SEEFest Austin. Nafus' article in Slackerwood.com paints the portrait of Mijojlic's early life, a tale with enough drama to warrant its own movie.

The festival founder was born in Bosnia, Herzegovina, when it was part of the former Yugoslavia. Her parents were Serbs. In the article, Mijojlic sets the scene: "World War II was a traumatic experience for my parents' generation. Once Hitler invaded Yugoslavia in 1941, the country split into several Quisling states and immediately hostilities between the Serbs, Croats, and Muslims fanned a bloody war-within-the-war, with Tito's partisans fighting the Germans as well as nationalists on all three sides. My dad was a Tito partisan, and so was my mom's brother. They were Communists, idealists, and they believed in the possibility of living together in a free society."

Her father became "the Bosnian equivalent of the board president of a documentary film production company called 'Sutjeska Film' in Sarajevo. Mijojlic grew up watching documentaries and reading scripts that her father brought home. "... Most of all my parents raised me to be independent and a free thinker, to fight injustice and to protect those who are unjustly under attack."

Mijojlic attended public school in Sarajevo with a love of cinema. "While girls in school all wore makeup and spent all their money on the latest fashion, I spent every penny of my pocket money on tickets for the Kinoteka, the Yugoslav Film Archive's theater (each Yugoslavian republic's capital city had one. I watched everything, sometimes three movies per day on weekends."

By the time Mijojlic finished her Journalism degree at the University of Belgrade, she was already writing a column for the Sarajevo cultural review called Echo (Odjek). With her knowledge of English and French, Mijojlic was able to find work with international productions filming in Yugoslavia. Her film production experiences included *Benia Le Roi* (Silberman Productions), *Twist Again a Moscou* (Gaumont) and *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (NBC).

During the 1984 Winter Olympic Games in Sarajevo, Mijojlic worked for Jalbert Productions, documenting the games. She ran the office at the press center. The multi-cultural journalist realized the unique nature of the coverage. "It was a special kind of filming when you only have one chance to capture the action—you can't very well ask the athletes to please repeat the race for the second take ... It was an exciting time, only 8 years before the bloody war would start on those same streets."

Mijojlic was in Belgrade when the war in Bosnia broke out. "My friends were almost all in the anti-war movement. Not that we made much of a difference, but I surely got my share of tear gas and water cannons. In June of 1992, I finally decided to leave, because I didn't want my two boys to grow up in the madness. They were 2 and 3 ½ years old at the time. My sister lived in Los Angeles so that's where I went.

Ten years later, Mijojlic founded SEEFest by inviting a group of artist friends to a dinner where "I read a short manifesto which we all signed. It was a symbolic beginning. By 2004 I had put together the very first full program, and in 2006 SEEFest was incorporated and became a non-profit, 501-C3 organization. My vision was to create something that would tell a story about this interesting and complicated region of the world, making it more accessible to American audiences through well-selected films."

One of the more troubling stories of the region was told through *The Fixer* (2016), a film directed by Adrian Sitaru. When a 14-year old prostitute is "caught in the act" in Paris, she is repatriated to Romania, from where she had been kidnapped and forced into the sex trade.

Upon her return to Romania, she seeks shelter in a convent but is hunted all over again by Parisian journalists, insisting on a televised interview with her to expose the truth.

The story focuses on one journalist, Radu, a father himself, who comes to realize his own predatory nature in pursuing the interview. The film personalizes the depersonalization suffered by victims of human trafficking. The movie's most disturbing aspect is that it's based on real events.

Another standout feature of the festival was the inclusion of films directed by women. The 2017 event screened 23 movies with female directors. Anca Miruna Lazarescu's film *That Trip We Took With Dad* (*Die Reise Mit Vater*), 2016, took home a number of prizes including the Audience Award and Best First Feature. The film explores difficulties a family member had in 1968 as he was traveling from Romania to Germany. He was in a desperate search for a life-saving medical treatment that became unduly complicated by politics.

On a much lighter note, the festival also screened *King of the Belgians* (2016) from the writing and directing team of Peter Brosens and Jessica Woodworth. The mockumentary portrayed a king participating in a tightly controlled documentary, designed to cast the royal family in the best possible light. He's on a state visit to Istanbul when he learns that Belgium is splitting apart. Meanwhile, as *Variety* puts it, "a cosmic storm has cut off phone lines and air travel ..." Returning to Belgium involves a road trip through Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania. The king's journey gives him a closer look at countries that under different circumstances, might be considered "flyover territory." Of course, as with all road trip movies, the excursion also gives him new insights on his life's purpose and his entourage.

A darker comedy was at play throughout *The Constitution*. Billed on its website as "a love story about hate," it was a moving tale of people living in the same building in Zagreb, the Croatian capital, but are unable to connect to each other because of longstanding prejudices and fears. Tension and humor coexist in this film, more easily than among its main characters, but their codependence forces them to understand and respect each other, leading to a joyful and satisfying ending.

The feature-length narrative, written by veteran filmmaker Rajko Grlic and Ante Tomic, had already won the prestigious Grand Prize of the Americas Award at the Montreal World Film Festival before its screening at SEEFest. At the conclusion of SEEFest on May 6th, *The Constitution* won the 2017 SEEFest Best Feature Film, Grand Jury Prize, Bridging the Borders Award. Not only had the film entertained audiences with a theme of mutual respect but its culturally diverse co-production, (Croatian, Slovenian, Macedonian, Czech, UK) acted as an example of multi-national cooperation.

This year's festival blooms like a springtime garden from April 26-May 3, 2018. Among the gardeners are numerous volunteers and supporters including the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the California Arts Council, the Goethe-Institut and many others. The regular film submission deadline is fast approaching on December 31, 2017, and the late deadline is February 1, 2018. Dive into the details at <http://seefilmla.org>

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