

Wels 99

By Ron Holloway

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KINOVA: FESTIVAL OF EUROPEAN FILMS IN WELS

This was a festival of the superlative - the rebirth of the Wels festival in Austria, formerly under the aegis of the late and able Reinhard Pyrker (when it was known as the "Austrian Film Days"), today under the imaginative direction of Andreas Gruber. Renamed "KINOVA -- Festival of European Films" and scheduled 16-21 November 1999, its aim is "to focus on the European cinema as an aesthetic category of its own but also as a counterpoise to customary movie programs." In addition, Andreas Gruber pledged to be "frantically original" - and he and his staff were all of that!

Italian master Gianni Amelio came for his retrospective workshop and remained for the whole week, introducing all his films (including the early tele-features) and chatting with festival guests about the breadth and depth of European cinema. During one of these sessions Amelio enthused over the cinema of one of his favourite directors, Robert Bresson, and wondered aloud why the French pantheon director had never been honoured by the European Film Academy with a Lifetime Achievement Award. Coming from a director who himself had received a couple of European Film of the Year Awards from the Academy, the consideration carried the weight of a declaration - the more so, when the news broke a short time later that Bresson had died in Paris at the age of 98.

The international jury awarded the Grand Prize of the City of Wels to Sasha Gedeon's *Return of the Idiot* (Czech Republic), an original adaptation of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* to the mores of contemporary life. Set during the Christmas season, the presence of the "idiot" František (sensitively interpreted by Pavel Liška) at family gatherings, as a "stranger among his own" who can perceive good and evil in the thoughts of others, underscores the "Christus" metaphor in the Russian classic.

Similarly, Nora Hoppe's *The Crossing* (Netherlands-Germany) chronicles in five acts the visit of a stranger to a lonely, bitter old man in a rundown pension. When we discover that the visitor, Sarban (Johan Leysen), knows all about Babak (played by Behrouz Vossoughi, an Iranian actor living today in exile) and his past -- including the unspoken crime he committed when he fled his native Afghanistan twenty years ago - the drama takes on the character of a morality play, as though an angel of death was calling upon a recluse for a final reckoning on judgment day.

The same theme of despair and loneliness was present in other entries -- in Andreas Dresen's poignant *Nachtgestalten* (*Night Shapes*, Germany) and Andreas Kleinert's dark psychodrama *Wege in die Nacht* (*Paths in the Night*, Germany), in Valdas Navasaitis's impressionistic *Kiemas* (*The Courtyard*, Lithuania), in Torun Lian's sensitive family drama *Only the Clouds Move the Stars* (Norway), and in Sandrine Veysset's neorealist *Victor...pendant qu'il est trop tard* (France). Is contemporary European cinema an expression of alienation? Or one of spiritual depth anchored to hope and animated by a belief in a better future? One would like to think that the latter is true.

Author Information

Ron HOLLOWAY (1933-2009) was an American critic, film historian, filmmaker and correspondent who adopted Europe as his home in the early fifties and spent much of his life in Berlin. He was an expert on the study of German cinema and against all odds produced, with his wife Dorothea, the journal *German Film*, keeping us up-to-date with the work of directors, producers and writers and the showing of German films around the world.

In 2007, Ron Holloway and his wife were awarded the Berlinale Camera Award. Ron also received the Bundesverdienstkreuz (German Cross of Merit), Polish Rings, Cannes Gold Medaille, the American Cinema

Foundation Award, the Diploma for Support of Russian Cinema and an honorary award from the German Film Critics' Association.

Ron was also a valued contributor to *Kinema* for the past fifteen years.