

Dina Iordanova, Forget the Red Carpet: What it's Like to Serve on a Film Festival Jury
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Forget the red carpet: what it's like to serve on a film festival jury

Dina Iordanova

Ever wondered what it's like to be on the furry of a film festival? The red carpet, the extravagant gowns, the impossibly beautiful people, the photo calls... Pure glamour, right?

Not quite. My research into film festivals – which includes jury service – reveals quite a different side to this corner of the film world. While detailing the experience as an onerous task would rightly invite withering accusations of “first-world problems”, jury service at these festivals is actually hard work.

In recent years I have served on juries all over the world for a variety of film festivals – women's, shorts, documentary and A-list official. I was on the jury for the 15th [Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival](#) (YIDFF) in Japan, a respected biannual event that ran October 5-12, which has earned an excellent reputation for its formidable curation. It was a rewarding experience but was devoid of any movie-star clichés and glamour.



Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival was first held in 1989. Author provided
Instead, the festival offered exposure to an extraordinary array of documentary films. It also
provoked important realisations related to what film jury service really is about, beyond the
flash photography.

“Torture by movies”

Being a juror can be demanding, tiring work that requires long hours of persistent and
responsible viewing in a darkened auditorium. The closest to special treatment we got was
being allowed to bring bottles of water into an auditorium where no food or drink is normally
tolerated.

Outside, the festival is in full swing with all these exciting people, conversations and films going on. But as a juror you are not part of it all. You cannot pick and choose from the programme – you have committed to see all the films in competition. Enjoying the festival must be put aside until the compulsory viewing is over.

At some festivals where programmers have limited choices in terms of the films they can select, I have often thought of jury service as “torture by movies”. While this was not the case at YIDFF, about a quarter of the programme consisted of films more than three hours long. Tiredness mounts, insidiously. It’s not so much the sheer volume of viewing hours – a total of 40 hours over the five competition days – but more the emotional build-up and the perceptual exhaustion that lingers long after the event.

Knowing how the jurors come to feel, most festivals have a specially appointed assistant who is around to help with everything, but whose real responsibility is to supervise the jury members and make sure that they are in the screening room for the full marathon – day after day, film after film. A kind of movie “minder” without the boxer’s nose.

The most difficult aspect for me is the shortage of processing time. You’ve just seen a film that has taken you to a different world, introduced a whole range of themes, ideas and concerns, and has absorbed your attention for an hour or three. Normally, you’d leave, immersed in your thoughts, the images, emotions and impressions percolating in your head.

For the jurors, it works differently. One day we watched a challenging four-hour film chronicling eight years in the lives of a group of Japanese workers affected by asbestos poisoning (Kazuo Hara’s [Sennan Asbestos Disaster](#)). A host of moral issues were raised and some harrowing stories told. Yet the next screening was in less than 90 minutes. You have to

clear your mind before the next film. And you repeat the mind clearing a few times each day because each film deserves the same attention.

Building consensus

Jurors are not a group of buddies who move from festival to festival. Generally, juries are composed of individuals from different backgrounds and origins that know very little of one another. We meet on day one and, after the closing night, we may never cross paths again.



The jurors deliberate over this year's winning entries. Author provided

Within a matter of days, we must somehow agree on matters that touch on all aspects of our aesthetic preferences and put our ethical and political principles to the test. For the experience to be meaningful, the interaction within the jury needs to be based on acknowledging and respecting diversity. A lesser ego and a good sense of humour both help.

The jury at Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival had four members – myself, a Bulgarian-born British academic – a seasoned documentary filmmaker from Chile, a Japanese experimental artist, and a well-known cameraman from India. One woman, three men. A second woman – a famous documentary maker from Lebanon – was supposed to be the fifth member, but she cancelled due to illness. Would our choices have been different if she were there? Everyone brings their own experience, expertise and world view to the mix.

After 40 hours of watching documentaries, it took three hours of discussion to decide on the five awards. We used shortlists and rankings. As jurors, favouring those films that appeared on most of our lists was the easy part. The really intense debate was reserved for the films that fell beyond those unanimously chosen. In the end it's not about compromise but consensus.



The happy winners for 2017. Author provided

In retrospect, jury service is a delicate exercise in finding accord between people from different cultural and social backgrounds, who speak different languages and are of different ages and genders. And while it is never completely smooth sailing, each and every experience of jury service only strengthens my belief that where there is a will, people from across the world can engage with each other meaningfully and successfully – and help bring deserving film talent to new audiences.