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Programming for Short Film Festivals: An Interview with Massimiliano Nardulli



Interviewed by Dina Iordanova

This interview gives a glimpse into the profession of being a programmer for short film festivals – a niche-type occupation requiring specific expertise and skills. The short film festival programmer is part of the ‘knowledge economy’ as they operate on the basis of a highly specialized, time-sensitive, and extensive knowledge of a part of the global film production that only a few are closely familiar with. Generally, these programmers navigate the range of short films made by up-and-coming filmmakers (many of who will be the high profile cineastes of tomorrow) and short film festivals that feature this specific type of work

(most of which never come to the theatrical circuit nor air on television), and match them across borders.

In the summer of 2017, I had the chance to serve on the jury of NexT, a 15 year-old short film festival in Bucharest, Romania's capital. After the festival, I asked questions of NexT's main programmer, Massimiliano Nardulli, a true industry insider whose career so far is fairly representative of the way this group of specialized festival programmers put together their professional portfolio. The following is based on responses he gave to my questions.

Massimiliano Nardulli was born in Rome and studied film and literature at the old La Sapienza University, graduating in Arts and Sciences of the Spectacle with a thesis on Argentinian director Adolfo Aristarain. Still a student, he created a small cine-club in Rome – and this is where he first got involved; his formal programming career was launched in 2006. Now, around forty years of age, he has worked as a short film programmer for more than a decade.

Short film festival programmers often work for several festivals at the same time; a 'job' is being put together by securing several engagements. In line with this pattern, at the moment Nardulli works as a programmer for several festivals around Europe, some of which are specialized in shorts and some of which have a dedicated section. His current portfolio includes three festivals in Romania (NexT, Timishort, and Divan), Winterthur in Switzerland (where he is one of eight programmers), and Amérique Latine Biarritz in France.

It is relatively rare that a short film programmer would work for one festival only. In Massimiliano's career history there is only one such period — the years at the Brest European Short Film Festival in France (2011-2015) where he was artistic director and the sole programmer. Indeed, it is predominantly in France where such opportunities for full time

work in programming exist; in most other countries the few jobs that evolve around programming do not amount to full time employment but only offer part-time coverage. It is during this period of stability — working full time at Brest — that Nardulli started assisting a number of new festivals (or festivals that needed troubleshooting) on a volunteer basis (and thus becoming part of the ‘grey’ economy of programming where labour remains unpaid and unacknowledged).

‘Having a full-paying job for my programming in a ‘rich’ western country made me uncomfortable,’ he said, ‘so I invested my free time to help festivals in Europe as guest programmer or advisor on programming.’

He advised several up-and-coming short film festivals, such as the Tirana International Film Festival in Albania, Piemonte Movie and Arcipelago in Rome (Italy), as well as others. He also collaborated on developing several special programmes for festivals around Europe too (Mecal, Short Waves, Clermont-Ferrand) as well as worked with various embassies and national cultural institutes.

Nardulli finds it particularly exciting that most of those festivals have a different focus and, respectively, feature diverse kinds of films, even if programming overlaps may happen. In his view, NexT (Romania) and Winterthur (Switzerland) are more interested in what may be described as ‘challenging’ films, seeking to discover new talent and covering all kinds of film (animation; experimental; feature shorts). Timishort, in Romania’s second city Timisoara, is more audience-friendly – the main task there is audience development, in a place where people no longer go to watch films in a public setting, especially shorts. Divan, on the shores of the Danube in Cetate (Romania), is focused on films made across the Balkans. It aims to be audience-friendly as well – in showing shorts and features, and often evolving around food — but occasionally plays more challenging films as well.

Beyond these, there is also project-based work that makes Nardulli's day-to-day transnational involvements even more diverse. He is in charge of the workshop part of a festival that aims to make people from different countries of the Balkans work on the same project. The festival in Biarritz (France) is focused on Latin America, an area where he uses his early specialization and takes pleasure to 'dig very deeply into what is happening in short film in the area, and to find such a large number of talent that will be revealed later in short or feature also in Europe.' (To this I would like to add the geographical proximity of Biarritz to the large festival in the Spanish city of San Sebastian, a festival that, with its *cine en construction* section, which is often credited with launching the global careers of new Latin American filmmakers). In collaboration with others, Massimiliano Nardulli also curates the Torino Short Film Market, the first market for short films in Italy, held during Torino Film Festival. He helps with the selection for the market and advises buyers, festival programmers, and distributors.

Massimiliano started working for NexT in 2015. At the end of 2014, shortly before Christmas, he received a call from Yvonne Irimescu, the director, saying that they needed someone with experience in short film programming to complete the team. For the 9th edition of the festival, in 2015, there were three programmers, and then, in 2016, the current programming team was formed — the young Romanian Oana Ghera, in her 20s, and Massimiliano Nardulli. The plan is to help Oana, who initially started on an internship and as volunteer, become the main (and perhaps sole) programmer of NexT. For that purpose, Massimiliano is sharing his extensive festival contacts and experience with her, and gradually lets her take responsibility for the programme. 'Oana has all the good skills to keep NexT going for the next ten years,' Massimiliano remarks. He himself has been trained in a similar way by colleagues – mainly by those at the Arcipelago Festival, Massimo Forleo and Stefano Martina.

Another transnationally-set project is LIM: a creative screenwriting lab where filmmakers and writers are invited to develop a 1st, 2nd or 3rd feature film, on a limited budget. ‘I really believe in storytelling and in an ethics that seeks to create a wave of films thought, written, and directed in the context of a low budget system.’ Nardulli’s role at LIM is to look for (and find) the new filmmakers who have a script in need of further development. He is in charge of the selection, he sets up and coordinates the expert juries that read the projects at different stages; he also reads all projects himself. In practice, this is another sphere of activity closely linked with short film — it’s here that most of the time new talent makes their first steps.

‘The fishing for talent coming from short films paid off especially well this year where all sixteen of the funded projects originated from directors who had made shorts and were now debuting in full length features. Low budgets can help a lot to increase the creativity of filmmakers and scriptwriters, so at LIM we try to find these people and help them.’

A special feature I would like to highlight is the extensive language competencies that programmers like Nardulli possess. Whilst I converse with him in English, at NexT he was presenting the films in competent Romanian. In addition to his native Italian, he is fluent also in French and in Spanish. This type of extensive command of languages seems to be characteristic of most other programmers, who operate on an equally transnational basis. ‘I’m used to switching language a lot when I’m working,’ Massimiliano confirmed. ‘I try to write, talk, and even think in the language of the people I have in front of me...’

I wondered if taking up residence in Romania was mainly for financial reasons and asked Massimiliano if he feels isolated being based in Eastern Europe. His answer was: ‘I decided to move to Bucharest when I finished working in France in 2015. I needed a place where I could feel like home, and South and Eastern Europe are the places I belong. It was not really for financial reasons even if, of course, living in Eastern Europe for a freelancer is much

easier than renting a flat in London or Paris... The main reason for my decision, however, was that I needed a place to feed my soul, and France and Western Europe are very far away from my vision of life. I never felt isolated or far away from the centre of my activity here; I can easily jump on a flight and go wherever I need... In fact, it is much easier to do so than when I was living in provincial France. I think Eastern Europe is a great place to live and work, much more interesting and rich than people generally think.'

'I already did and do some film production, and I am consultant script advisor... I'm also in charge of talent scouting and the selection for LESS IS MORE (<http://lim-lessismore.eu/>). I don't know what future will bring, let's see... Even if wonderful, programming is exhausting... I don't rule any options out.'

Nardulli regards the short film festival circuit as a place for experimentation where the creators are free to explore new forms of cinema. Today, many festivals are focused on finding new talent and helping young filmmakers. However, he believes that the big festivals have a decisive influence: 'in reality they do not particularly care about short films because they are focused on full length features and on making money.' In Nardulli's view, there are too many films, or too many "empty" films: full-length features that are very well done, very professional, but with no soul... The short film circuit is much smaller than the feature film one, but short film directors and producers seem to be growing more and more stressed about their work, and this is not good at all. The relationship between large international film festivals and the specialised festivals for short films, according to Nardulli, is marked by the annoying attitude of 'big fish eating small fish.'

I asked Massimiliano to comment on my observation that there seem to be more Italians active in the global festival programming circuit than others, and he confirmed that he also shares this impression. His explanation for so many Italians being engaged in film festival

programming abroad was that within Italy the festival situation is not particularly good. There are only a few good festivals left, and at some of them the veteran programmers are ‘glued to their chair’ and fear generational change – a picture that replicates the situation of the Italian film industry at large. The Italian national film awards, for example, has maintained the same voting group over a really long period of time, and none of them are really an expert on short films. Nardulli is looking forward to seeing what the new Turin Short Film Market will bring to the Italian film industry landscape. He hopes that positive developments in Turin may bring some Italians back, if the situation improves in the coming years.