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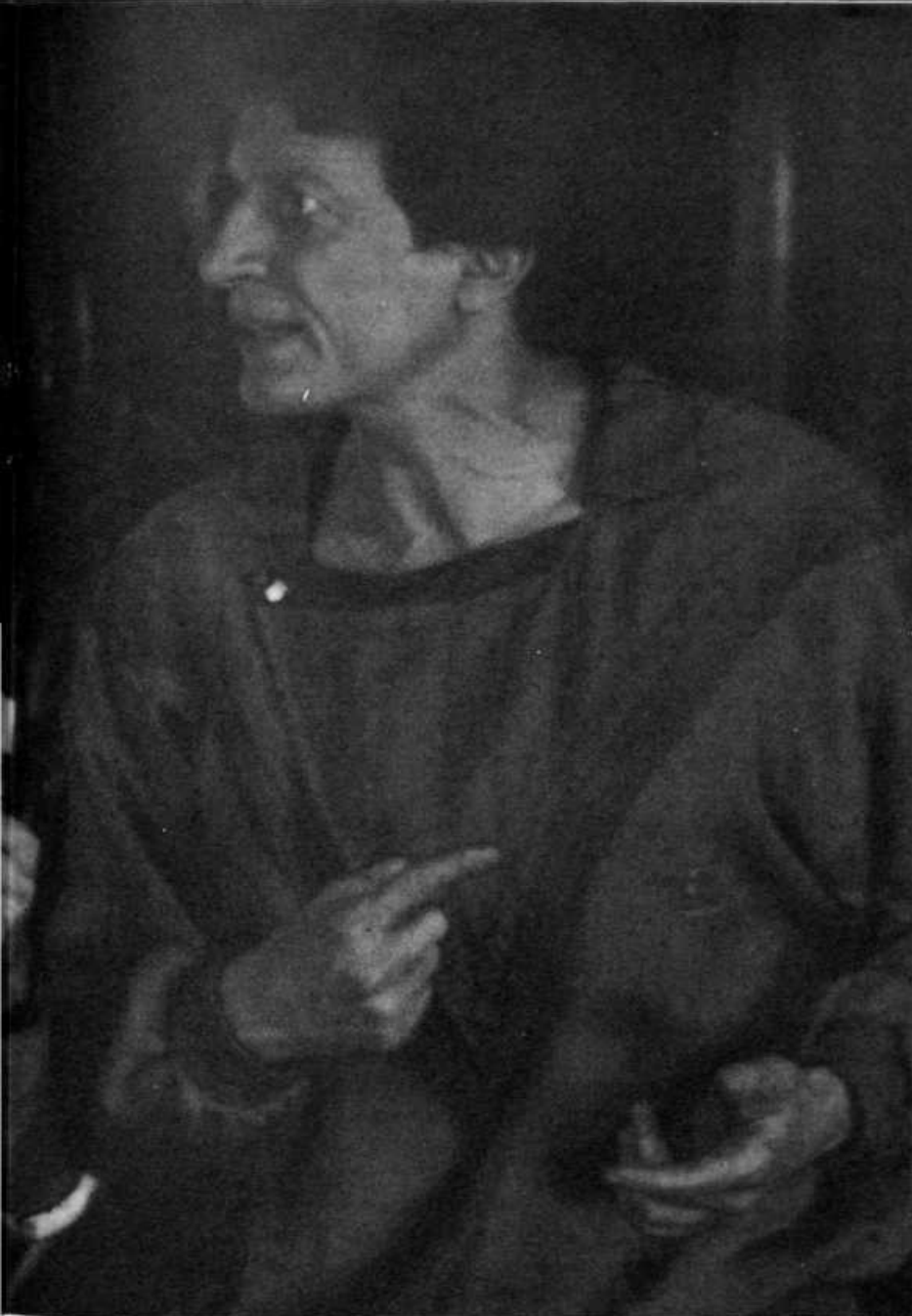


From Left: Rol Giraud, Michel Boujenah and Andre Dussolier in the French entry for the film festival *Three Men and a Baby*.

# FESTIVAL OF EUROPEAN FILMS

TOLU AJAYI

It had all started in mid November with its announcement at a mid afternoon press conference at the Goethe Institut Auditorium, Victoria Island, Lagos, by Dr. Dieter Stollwerck, the Institut's Director in Nigeria, and the Planning Committee's chairman - a film festival involving ten Western European countries was to take off on Monday, 21st November, 1994, with each country to have a day to show a film which it considered best reflecting its culture, or its transition from its old form to what it is today.



It was to be a film of serious depth rather than superficial entertainment, he emphasised, most preferably based on an old literature classic from the country in question. And then he stated the other purpose - with the advent of video, cinema-going was dying everywhere, and that included Nigeria, and they were also hoping to make a start in helping to revive it by this festival because it was sociologically important for a community to have an outlet for the psychological ritual of

collectively experiencing feelings and emotion about their lives and culture by sitting down and watching films together in a theatre, rather than watching videos individually in their homes. This has now been appreciated in Europe, he explained, and there was an active movement there right now to revive cinema-going - and this festival was in fact partly in response to this.

The ten countries to be involved were Germany, France, Italy, Netherlands, Greece, Spain, Denmark, Belgium,

Ireland and the United Kingdom. And on hand along with Dr. Stollwerck at the press conference were the representatives of the Netherlands, Mr. Peter Verbech, Counsellor at their Embassy in Lagos, who had in fact initiated the idea for the festival, Monsieur Pascal Ott from the French Cultural Centre in Lagos and Signor Caponi, Counsellor at the Italian Embassy. And then the specifics of the films.

And Signor Caponi had immediately taken over the centre-stage, telling anyone who would listen how Federico Fellini was one of, if not the greatest European film-director who had ever lived, (he had died a year ago), and how naturally, Italy's entry was going to be not only a film by Fellini, but also about Fellini. The Germans had mentioned Fassbinder, whose film, *Effi Briest* they planned to show, and Signor Caponi had almost made one feel it was sacrilege, mentioning the two in the same breath. And he had brought along prints of a pencil etching of Fellini, by you've guessed who, Fellini, to hand out to the press.

And that little lively but friendly rivalry about the film-directors, had in fact epitomised the festival. For it was a festival of directors, rather than actors and actresses - because sitting down and watching so many films in succession with obviously skilled and seasoned performers putting on their best, one tends to begin to notice the directors' work more than ever - the casting, the aptness and synchronization with the action.

The first day had been Germany's as the hosts, and it was indeed a pleasurable experience sitting out in the open air by the lagoon on the lawns of the Goethe Institut premises in the company of a hundred other people, Nigerian and expatriate, before the moderate-sized screen.

*Effi Briest* was a film based on a feminist

novel of the same name by nineteenth century German writer, Henri Theodor Fontane - the tragedy of a young girl of that name who was forced into a marriage with a much older man, Herr Instetten, with both her family, and husband having their own prestige motives for which they were merely using her, and indifferent to her sufferings, in fact campaigning for her ostracization by the whole community when she rebelled, until she had died a lonely and broken-hearted woman. Fontane had written the book in the 1890s (when he was already in his seventies). Another film version of it had been made before this one by Reiner Werner Fassbinder in 1974.

But the special bias for this version was because it was the closest to the book, with Fassbinder even interspersing the images and action on the screen with written, direct quotes, read by a narrator, from the book. And perhaps this had turned out to be a flaw for the film, for with Fassbinder following Fontane so strictly, his creativity as a director is terribly impaired, hampering the artistic fullness of his end-product. And moreover, Hanna Schygulla as Effi had lacked the aura of physical innocence and vulnerability that could have made the film more convincing, for she barely looks younger than her husband!

Belgium and The Netherlands had put in much more convincing entries with *Father Daens* and *The Assault* respectively. The casting for both films had been particularly good, with Jan Declercq as Father Daens, a priest rebelling against the existing political order, looking as burly and truculent as a wrestler, with physiognomy to match, against the background of his mid-looking superiors; and this is also matched by *The Assault* for the Netherlands, so much so in fact that if a prize was to be for the best supporting actor, it might have to go to a wheelchair ridden old man who used to live next door to the film's hero, before the young man's home was blown up by Hitler's police.

It had been towards the end of the Second World War, and a Dutch pro-Nazi sympathiser had been murdered by the Dutch Resistance as a collaborator. And as a reprisal, Hitler's police - the Gestapo - had blown up houses on the street of the murder, and taken and shot hostages, including the young man's parents and brother.

Only the boy had survived, and now a grown man and medical doctor by profession, he went back to visit his old home in an effort to soothe his troubled mind, by finding out who has been responsible for the collaborator's murder in their street, making them prime targets for reprisals, when in fact they had had absolutely nothing to do with it.

He met the next door woman, now old and grey, and her wheelchair ridden, stroke-stricken husband, whose speech had been totally impaired by the stroke, the ultimate vegetable who could now only nod non-stop with the mechanical melancholy of a doddery old doll. And this actor is so convincing in the role it is hard to believe they hadn't gone to get a genuinely doddery old man from some old people's home somewhere in Amsterdam for the role.

And generally too, it is this Dutch film that appears to succeed most in fulfilling the festival's stated aim at the press conference of a serious film of great human and national import and impact, because it is a collective soul-searching on the sacrifices individuals are forced to make for the collective survival of a nation. For the film's protagonist finally finds the man responsible for the collaborator's murder, and the man discloses that his brother too was one of the people that had been taken hostage and shot. And this makes it easier for the protagonist to forgive the Resistance man, and accept his untimely loss of his parents and brother as a worthy sacrifice for the nation's survival.

The Greek entry, *The Descent of The*

*Nine*, is also kind of national soul-searching effort, but doesn't quite succeed like *The Assault* because even though it showed us erstwhile neighbours and friends in bitter armed conflict in post-World War II Greece, it makes no effort to delve into their souls, and so becomes just another adventure story. But the casting is quite convincing, and the main scene of a bleak, desolate and inhospitable country-side, against which the whole action is played out, quite apt.

Spain's entry, *Senior Cayo's Disputed Vote* is also a political as well as human interest story, while Denmark's and Ireland's, like Germany's *Effi Briest* are feminist tales of woes.

Denmark's *Sophie*, directed by Liv Ullmann, like *Effi Briest* suffers from poor casting, with the heroine looking too mature and assertive for the role of a helpless and vulnerable young woman being forced into a marriage, while Ireland's *December Bride* is handicapped by an unnatural setting, the whole scene having a prefabricated air, devoid of natural people and places as its background. There is one scene, for example, where a gang of men beat up one of the characters for putting a woman in the family way without marrying her, and they are all dressed in tails and top-hats, as though going to a royal birthday party!

And then came the big day Signor Caponi had been telling everyone to expect, at the receptions in the Institut's hall after each film - Italy's, and Federico Fellini's. And he had now decided to precede the scheduled Fellini documentary-feature *The Interview* with another Fellini film *Three Types of Delirium* - a film the Italian director had made early in his career - and 'three types' because the other two were by French counterparts, Louis Malle and Roger Vadim. But of course, it was Fellini's night, and it was Fellini's part of the trilogy we had seen.



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The film was pure art - an aircraft revving to take off by an open door at an airport generating a maelstrom wind, turning the flapping habits of some passing nuns almost into wings, for them too to take off and fly?, for example - and in essence, a loosely connected concatenation of visual images and dialogue for the viewer to collate and interpret, like a complex modernist poem.

But alas, the audience were no poets, and neither were most of them familiar with the concept of art for art's sake, and Signor Caponi was surrounded at his reception after the film.

Some simply confessed they didn't understand the film, but others wished he had shown them something less intellectually taxing, and more entertaining, like *La Dolce Vita*, one of Fellini's more popular works.

Signor Caponi had walked away disappointed. How dared anyone react like that to Fellini? Sacrilegious! But here and there, he did run into pockets of people who liked and understood the film, in which Fellini had used a Ferrari sports car as a metaphor for the reckless drug-culture life-style some show-business people were living in Europe and America in his time.

The protagonist was an actor wandering

somnambulistically through his life and career.

'You could be a great actor,' someone told him.

'Yes - I could be; but I haven't worked in over a year,' he replied, implying that his drug use, or life generally on the fast lane was hindering his career.

All he wanted was a Ferrari, and he pestered his director till he gave him one. And he had immediately leapt inside proceeding to zoom recklessly through the night, from accident to accident. But Fellini still leaves room for hope, as the actor survives it all in the end, albeit badly battered.

There was also the main film however, *The Interview*, which was of great interest to the fledgling film directors in the audience, for it was a documentary-feature film showing Fellini at work.

And in this we see the master at work in the Cine Citta, a film village in Rome surrounded by high rise apartment buildings. And we soon get to learn his chief aide is a man named Maurizio Mein, as we hear him shout repeatedly, 'Maurizio! Maurizio!', for him.

And we later see the same Maurizio on a train, trying to persuade complete

strangers he thinks could fit their next filming project to come to the studio for a screen test. They are not usually short of candidates however, as we also see a queue of people eagerly convincing him of their aptitude, one even arguing that she's sure to be a natural for a role, because her whole ancestral line from her great grandfather downwards had done some acting, even if only in the village square.

And then we see Fellini set off in the company of equally famous compatriot and actor, Marcello Mastroianni, and Sergio Rubini, the young actor who plays him as young man, on an unscheduled visit to Anita Ekberg, a sex symbol of the '50s and '60s, who though Scandinavian, has lived in Rome for decades, and had co-starred with Mastroianni in possibly Fellini's best known film, *La Dolce Vita*.

Ekberg who lives in a tightly guarded palatial mansion, at first refuses to let them in, but finally relents after she is convinced of their identity on her gate intercom, and they are now shown watching a clip of their famous film, with Ekberg, now fat and ageing wiping off tears of nostalgia as she sees her old, much adored sex-goddess figure and beauty on the screen.

Some of the other organizers had in fact criticised the Italian entry behind Signor Caponi's back, as a departure from the stated mode of the films, not being serious enough, but the French had gone even farther out, putting on a plain, undisguised comedy, *Three Men and a Baby*, the story of a career woman who suddenly abandons her months old baby on its father's doorstep, with a note for the father - her former lover - that she has gone in pursuit of her career.

The father, an equally free spirit, was obviously unsuited for this, and the audience had rolled with rib-bending laughter at his efforts, with his two friends.

But in a way, *Three Men and a Baby* is also a serious depiction of some changes in world view as widespread feminist agitation is making women all over the world bold enough to demand that the man help to take care of the baby too.

And that would perhaps account for the film's worldwide success, with an American version having been made - for this original French version made in 1985 by Colins Serrau has all the marks of a low budget effort, with poor lighting and colour. But even these haven't been able to stop the actor's and director's talents from making the film in its total effect touch something very deep and universal in the human condition.

And the British entry too, shown on the last day - Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* - did have its comic and melodramatic elements, but what perhaps lifts it out of the ordinary, is the magnificent directing of Kenneth Branagh.

For not only did the zoom, wide-angle, focus and scene interact with consummate skill and purpose but he was also able to put together a rapid succession of visual images aptly synchronized to stirring music.

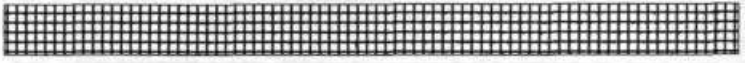
Belgium's Stijn Coninckx had had a similar opportunity in *Father Daens*, with a scene in which the police had ridden roughly into a crowd of demonstrators to snatch the corpse of a child worker killed in a factory accident, but had failed to convey the horror and brutality graphically enough, allowing his camera to stand still, if not go to sleep on the scene.

United Kingdom had the largest attendance with close to three hundred people, but the Republic of Ireland had done surprisingly well - considering that it doesn't have a cultural centre in the country - coming a close second and drawing a bigger audience than even France and Germany. But the attendance

each night may generally be said to reflect the number of nationals each country had in Nigeria, along with the friends and connections they had made among Nigerians.

Hence, Germany, France, Italy and UK, who have active cultural centres in the country, (even though Italy recently closed its own), had naturally attracted the largest number of people from the Nigerian arts community - artistes with whom they interacted in the past

obviously. But other public figures had looked in too, on particular nights. Like political activist, Beko Ransome-Kuti of the Campaign for Democracy, who came with his entourage on the Netherlands' night in coincidence with his nephew, Femi Anikulapo-Kuti, Fela's son, who had also come that night, and again on the UK night, that had also had Performing Musicians Association of Nigeria (PMAN) President, Mustapha Amego in attendance. [GR]



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**Other Supports from British Council Nigeria to the Festival.**

- Ms Amatu Braide and Mr. Tar Uko to attend the Africa '95 Zimbabwe workshop in Victoria Fall from 7 to 16 May 1995.
- Ms Ndidi Dike to attend the Yorkshire Sculpture park workshop August 1995.
- Professor S. I. Wangboje to present the key papers on Africa Artists: School, Studio and Society at the Centre for African Studies, School of Oriental African Studies University of London 24-29 September 1995.
- Professor Femi Osofisan to present a paper at the Royal African Society Conference 29 September to 1st October.
- This conference will also be attended by Professor Uche Okeke and Professor Niyi Osundare.
- We are also contributing towards putting together the White Chapel exhibition.
- Mr. Chika Okeke, Mr. Jari Jacob and Dr Bruce Onobrakpeya are contributing to the text of the White Chapel exhibition.
- This production is Nigeria's drama entry in the africa 95 artiste show-case. The production cast in the UK will also comprise of British artistes.