

5 years with Belt and Road Film Week: Conversation, collaboration

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On Chinese movie review site Douban.com, more than 1 million viewers have given ratings to the Lebanese drama “Capernaum,” a film about a 12-year-old boy suing his parents for neglect.

Many of the most-viewed comments date back to June 2018, way before the movie’s release in China or its 2019 Oscar nomination for best foreign language film.

Most watched it during a screening at the inaugural Belt and Road Film Week during the 2018 Shanghai International Film Festival. That was immediately after “Capernaum” debuted at the Cannes Film Festival, where it won a Jury Prize.

Its Chinese distributor attributed the film’s surprising success as a sleeper hit partially to Chinese film festivals, which led to a word-of-mouth effect via social media platforms such as Douban.

The film, which was officially released in China in April 2019, earned more than 370 million yuan (US\$51.7 million) in China. That contributed to the majority of its global box office of US\$68.6 million, which made it the highest grossing Arabic film of all time.

That is a success story hard to repeat in the highly competitive Chinese market with increasingly more demanding audiences and a greater variety of films, but nonetheless encouraging to the organizers and participants of the Belt and Road Film Week, which runs alongside the Shanghai International Film Festival.

The film week celebrates its fifth anniversary at this year’s SIFF with the theme “Conversation,” as China’s Belt and Road Initiative enters its 10th year.

“We really look forward to resuming in-person conversations about cinema between international filmmakers, film festivals and the film industry through our events at the film week,” Jin Yangguang, director of the film festival’s forum department,



“Safe Place” won this year’s Media Choice Award for Film at the Belt and Road Film Week. — Photos by courtesy of Shanghai International Film Festival



“Six Weeks”

told Shanghai Daily.

“It really pleases us to see films from countries less familiar to Chinese audiences be screened through the Belt and Road Film Week. We are able to provide another mechanism through the Belt and Road Film Festival Alliance for films and filmmakers that may not have been selected through

the (Shanghai) festival’s mechanism. Through these films, we have built a loyal fan base from ground zero.”

This year, the film week showcases 20 movies from countries, including Chile, Croatia, Iceland, Iraq, Israel and Kazakhstan. Eight of the films competed for Media Choice Awards and the Audience Choice Award. Six of them are also screened in another five cities in the Yangtze River Delta region.

“The movie works differently with different audiences. I’m very curious to see how it works here,” said Juraj Lerotic, director and lead actor of “Safe Place,” which won this year’s Media Choice Award for Film.

“I appreciate programs like this, which are harder to curate.”

The Croatian film follows a family after one brother attempts suicide, and his mother and younger brother seek to save him, as they deal with unsympathetic doctors, officers and the others involved. Lerotic plays the younger brother in the film that is autobiographical to some extent, drawing from the actor-director’s own experience of losing his brother.

Like Lerotic, many filmmakers attending the events mostly look forward to the screening and interaction with

the audience, especially viewers from such a different cultural background.

“A film about a Swiss family going to Mexico seems to have nothing to do with a country like China, but I do believe it has a lot to do with it,” said Andrés Kaiser, director of “Time Theorem.”

“That’s the magic of cinema — to let you know that there is somebody in another part of the planet who also has a life and some kind of problems, as well as joys and love, and that you can identify with them.”

Ten years ago, the Mexican director found thousands of photographs and hundreds of 8-millimeter and 16mm movies taken and made by his grandparents. He had wanted to make a movie from those archive images since, but did not know how.

“Now I finally made a movie from my grandparents’ footage,” he said.

Carina Lam, who traveled from near-by Hangzhou, is one of the loyal movie fans who pay special attention to the Belt and Road Film Week.

“I’m always excited about the Shanghai film festival, especially the re-screening of masters’ works and screening of works you do not see elsewhere,” she said. “There are always masterpieces that you are dying to see on the silver screen again. And there are always new movies that give you bigger surprises.”

“I was amazed by quite a few films from the Belt and Road Film Week before, especially the Chinese film ‘A First Farewell’ and the Polish movie ‘Silent Night.’ You get to see movies from countries that are not regular guests of film festivals, or maybe I just didn’t pay enough attention to their films. Either way, it’s nice to see these movies and get a sense of the country.”

That is the purpose of the Belt and Road Film Festival Alliance behind the film week. With members from 48 countries and regions and 55 film festival institutions, it aims to make recommendations of films and promote exchanges among filmmakers.

Egyptian filmmaker Amir Ramses had his film “Curfew” screened at