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## BERLINALE TALENT CAMPUS 2010

- by Joe Cohen -

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As a young film director, straight out of film school, it can be a daunting task finding your feet. The world of meeting commissioners, broadcasters, producers, financiers and studio execs is just about to begin and the bubble of creative nurture and self-exploration is coming to an end. At least, that's how it feels for me. The present economic climate doesn't ease the daunting task of making your first short after film school either, let alone your first feature. 'It's not a good time' seems to be a very popular phrase at the moment. With this in mind, I was very excited to be selected for the Berlinale Talent Campus 2010 as part of the Berlin Film Festival. It was exactly what I needed coming out of an intensive two year documentary directing course at the National Film and Television School. This year, out of 4,700 applicants, the Talent Campus offered 350 places for young directors, producers, cinematographers, editors, composers, actors and journalists.

The Talent Campus is part of the annual Berlinale, but it is easy to stay within the confines of the Campus and not have much to do with the official film festival. However, like many people on the Campus, I had already decided to make the most of both the Campus and the film festival. It would be campus by day and film festival screenings by evening, and parties of any sort by night. That is what I had planned.

I arrived in Berlin a day early, as I had wanted to see some films before the start of the Campus, and to take a nostalgic walk around the centre. I am not a stranger to the city. I ran off to Berlin in 2001 when I was 18 and had just finished school. I had heard about the nightlife, the transformation of the city, the creation of a new art scene zone in Berlin Mitte, and I wanted to experience it. At 18, it was the perfect place to discover yourself, within a city still in flux, finding itself at the same time as I was struggling to do the same.

9 years on, and I hadn't been back very often, it was like walking into a film, stepping into a past dimension as I walked past my old flat and drank tea in an old café I used to frequent. That evening I went to the Zoo Palast cinema in West Berlin to watch *El Mal Ajeno*, the new film by Oskar Santos Gomez, with Alejandro Amenabar as producer. The direction itself was good, but it was let down by a terrible story and script, whereby a doctor finds himself the wielder of a bizarre power to heal others through his touch. As the plot thickens, he is forced to make the decision of either saving the world or saving those closest to him. It was the classic moral utilitarian dilemma; Do you kill a child in front of you if you know that the death will save a thousand lives? My answer has always been no, much like the answer of the doctor in the film. But the story verged on the ridiculous at times. My first film at the festival was a huge disappointment. However, throughout the rest of the week, I was so busy with the Campus that I only managed to see one more film, *Howl*, by Rob Epstein in which James Franco plays Alan Ginsberg. *Howl* was a brilliant film, James Franco gave an incredible performance as Ginsberg and the film, shot like a documentary, packed such a huge punch as I realised just how relevant the poem is to this very day.

All the 'Talents,' as we were being referred to, were put up for the 7 days in a large youth hostel on Tor Strasse, in Berlin's Mitte district. I thought this was a great idea, as it provided an excellent place to meet people and to carry on discussions from the previous days. On the very first night at the hostel, I met Manizhe, a wonderful lady from Pakistan. We immediately got on very well, talking about the films we had made and about religion - my Jewish background and her Muslim background. I had made a friend on the very first day.

The first event of the programme was entitled 'Cinema Needs Talent,' which was a panel discussion with filmmakers Stephen Daldry, Isabel Coixet and Mike Medavoy. The discussion focused on the need to work with the right people and to make the right creative collaborations. Isabel Coixet explained how she had madly wanted to work with Pedro Almodovar, and when she finally got to work with him, she said it was a nightmare, mainly because great filmmakers do not necessarily make great teachers. In her case, they were so different and Almodovar would be constantly asking

her to do things in his way, and it wasn't the way she wanted to do things. She explained that she is very shy and often all her characters have this introverted side to them, whereas Almodovar is this huge personality and his characters often reflect this, being overly dramatic and extroverted. Stephen Daldry talked about the fact that he has always had a very good working relationship with his producers, and that things have generally gone very smoothly for him. This was a little frustrating, as any filmmaker, experienced or inexperienced, knows just how difficult it is to make films and how easy it is for many things to go wrong, which is bound to put a strain on working relationships. As young filmmakers it is helpful to realise that even successful directors get things wrong occasionally and to hear about practical tips for resolving problems.

The next Campus event I attended was another panel discussion entitled 'Shooting Suspects: Trusts and Risks in Documentary.' This was a really great event which saw documentary filmmakers Fredrik Gertten, Laura Poitras and Anat Zuria talk about the balance between building strong trust and taking risks with their protagonists. Anat Zuria showed a clip from her latest film 'Black Bus' which was presented at the Berlinale, about two young women who have tried to leave the ultra-orthodox Jewish environments they grew up in. The clip showed one of the protagonists who has managed to successfully leave the community behind talking to another ultra-orthodox woman who has not managed to leave the community and is talking to her with her back to the camera about the difficulties she had experienced being coerced into marriage.

There was an interesting question from the audience as to how the director managed to protect the protagonists in the film from exposure. It turned out that the main protagonist was fine and safe and that she had essentially taken the risks to expose herself on film. However the lady with her back to the camera, apparently someone in the community recognised her and her voice, even though attempts were made in the edit to change the sound of her voice. She denied that she was in the film, and the accusation was never substantiated. However, the director was saying that this was a terrible moment for her when she realised that she might be responsible for the harm of another person. The discussion went on to include issues of ethics and honesty when making documentary films, and the session really went to show again the huge dilemmas making documentary films and whether you put someone at risk by filming them, and at what point do they or the film take priority.

At every morning throughout the week of the Campus, there was a 'Rise and Shine' breakfast hosted by different sponsors and institutions. As well as the hostel, this was a great place to meet people over a large breakfast and it was also a test in resourcefulness as the clever few managed to make sandwiches for lunch. Over the breakfasts, I met filmmakers from all over the world as directors, cinematographers, producers, editors etc, and it was great to chat informally about the different stages of our filmmaking careers and different projects. People go to the Talent Campus for different reasons and at different stages in their career. Some people go with a project that they are looking for extra funding for, or people to work with them on it. I was going mainly to meet people and broaden my group of creative contacts, and to find producers who would be interested in working with me on future projects. To this extent I think it was very successful. But the Campus is really what you make of it. The old phrase always holds true – the more you put in, the more you get out.

Another networking event which happened on the Sunday night was the 'Dine and Shine' event, not to be confused with the similarly inspired 'Rise and Shine' breakfast events. The dine and shine event was specifically to put Talents in touch with industry experts and professionals. It was a clever concept as hundreds of people sat down to a delicious three course meal in blocks of colour coding. At the end of the first and second course, depending on which colour block you were in, you had to move to a different colour section of the hall, the aim obviously so that you have the opportunity to meet more than one 'expert' throughout the course of the evening, each course lasted around an hour, giving plenty of time to get to know each other. At the end of the second course, it was just as well that I was sat opposite Manizhe the lady from Pakistan that I had met at the beginning of the week, seeing as the expert that I was sat next to was a film lawyer and was briefing me on some of the finer details of entertainment law, which, as important as it is, doesn't really get my mind racing. It didn't matter however, as the food was so good and Manizhe and I continued our conversations about religion and our next projects, including the feature film that she is planning with her husband. Its all about who you get to know, rather than who you know in the creative industries, and I went out of my colour zone to speak to a producer from a UK production company. It was this kind of opportunity that the Talent Campus is really great for, putting us together with producers and execs in such a fun environment that makes them more aware of who

you are, depending on your resourcefulness and ability to introduce yourself. Fed and watered and more than slightly tipsy, I returned to the hostel, preparing to face the next few days armed with a few headache tablets.

On the Tuesday, there was an event with the directors of the new compilation movie 'Revolucion,' entitled 'Mexican Filmmakers Joining Forces.' *Revolucion* is a portmanteau film consisting of 10 short films from the top Mexican filmmakers of our time including Gael Garcia Bernal, Mariana Chenillo, Pablo Cruz, Fernando Eimbcke, Amat Escalante, Diego Luna, Gerardo Naranjo, Rodrigo Pla, Carlos Reygadas and Patricia Riggen. They were all there at the event, talking about their shorts, where they all had to use the theme of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary marking the Mexican Revolution. They were all talking about their individual films, but also they were talking about cinema in a broader sense. Their films have all dealt with different subjects, some about Mexicans living in Mexico, some more about different histories, and others about Mexicans living outside Mexico, but they all try to say something important about the state of Mexico as it exists now. It struck me that these filmmakers were doing something remarkable. That in many western countries, filmmakers see themselves as competitors and individuals making a mark on the world, but rarely come together as a group and try to say something meaningful together. Carlos Reygadas, director of *Japon and Silent Light*, spoke about his friend who explains to him that whenever he goes to the cinema, he gets annoyed. He gets annoyed when he watches a bad movie, because it was a bad movie, and there are plenty of them around. However, he also gets annoyed when he watches a good movie. He gets annoyed because he wasn't the one that made it. I can relate to this very much, especially coming out of film school with a lot of debts to repay, there is this urgency and competition surrounding your work. I feel that if I am not making amazing films this very moment, I am losing out, and that whenever I see a great short film, I think why didn't I come up with that great idea. Carlos went on to say what a horrible state that is to be in, that when we watch good cinema, we should be happy because it has contributed something great to the history of cinema. We need to remind ourselves, those that love cinema, the very reasons why we make films and to celebrate the achievements, both ours and other's when those films are successful.

This for me was like therapy. It is so difficult making films, and it is quite easy to get sucked into an almost ruthless mentality in order to get your films made. But had I forgotten just exactly why it was that I had to make films? Why it was that I couldn't possibly do anything else with my life? Had my post graduation film/film school angst really set in that bad? Yes, perhaps I had forgotten about the churning of my stomach when I watched the final scene in Chen Kaige's *Farewell my Concubine*, when the character of Dieyi, played by the tragically late Leslie Cheung, draws his sword for the very last time. Or perhaps I had forgot my own inner escapisms and desires after seeing Bertolucci's *Stealing Beauty* and *Last Tango in Paris*. Perhaps I had forgotten the feeling of electricity after seeing Claire Denis's *Beau Travail* when he dances to 'The Rhythm of the Night,' and perhaps I forgot the tears in my eyes as Lai Yiu-fai starts weeping into a dictaphone in Wong Kar Wai's *Happy Together*. Or perhaps I had forgotten the shock but delight at the exposure of the AWB in Nick Broomfields 'The Leader, His Driver and the Driver's Wife.'

If I had forgotten all this, hearing Carlos Reygada's inspirational thoughts brought me back down to earth. It made me remember the very reason why I have to make films. It is because I love every aspect of the moving image, and I want to make films not only to say things about the world in which we live, but also to work alongside other filmmakers, working together to enhance all our work and to encourage others to do the same, and I look forward to the day when this will happen. And in the meantime, focusing on my passion and love for the medium, and my desire to tell good stories about people from many different walks of life, the rest will follow.

So the Berlinale Talent Campus for me was a huge success. Not only did I make many contacts for potential collaborations in the future, I also had a great time in a great city and I made a lot of friends, which I will certainly stay in touch with. And most importantly, I rediscovered my love of cinema, my commitment to such an amazing artform, and I learnt to relax a bit amidst the post film school blues and the economic down turn, and to look at every opportunity with eyes wide open and as if the glass is always half full. I encourage every young filmmaker to take advantage of this opportunity and apply.

**Joe Cohen**  
**February 2010**