

Exploring borders in open air

By Kate Singleton International Herald Tribune

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MARZAMEMI, Italy In times when hype so often prevails over substance, there is something both refreshing and encouraging about a small event in a small place that reaches out to a wide and variegated audience. This is the case of Cinema di Frontiera, the Borderline Film Festival that is taking place this week in Marzamemi, a tiny fishing village in the southeastern tip of Sicily.

"Our aim is to address the question of frontiers, borders of the mind as well as the land," explains the writer-director Nello Correale, who founded the festival five years ago. "Even our choice of venue is significant. Marzamemi is the southern extreme of Western Europe, which we perceive as something reliable, a known quantity. Yet it lies farther south than Tunis, and the name of the village derives from the Arabic: 'Marza' meaning 'port' and 'memi' signifying 'little.' Here our confines are the Mediterranean, which in centuries past was a liquid path of trade and cultural exchange rather than a barrier."

For five days (July 25 to 30), Marzamemi has become southern Europe's largest outdoor cinema. The principal auditorium is Piazza Regina Margherita, the main square, bordered by fishermen's dwellings and abutting the handsome Villa Dorata. Shaded by a huge fig tree, the villa's inner courtyard offers a further venue for a competition of short films and for a variety of encounters, including meetings with actors and directors and book presentations.

The curtain rises as the sun goes down. From 9 p.m. the warm evening air cushions the hush of an expectant audience, the whirl of 35 mm film and soundtrack or live music. The competing feature films, with their borderline focus, are alternated with golden oldies, including a couple of rare silent movies for which ad-hoc groups provide a musical accompaniment.

On Monday evening, it was W.F. Murnau's "Taboo." Made in 1931, it is a fascinating exploration of the conflict of instinct and ritual when love contravenes the laws of society. The live music composed and played by the Ensemble Darshan subtly expanded on these themes.

The competing feature films are of the thought-provoking variety that win at film festivals but rarely get a look when it comes to commercial distribution. They come from a wide range of countries and represent remarkably varied social and economic conditions.

Since the film-lovers who flock to these evening events are of diverse provenance, including vacationers enjoying southeastern Sicily's coasts, history and gastronomy, Cinema di Frontiera manages to heighten awareness of films that would otherwise pass largely unobserved. The uniqueness of the occasion is heightened by the pleasantly informal participation of directors such as Francesco Saponaro and the actors Peppino Mazzotta and Luca Zingaretti, the inspector and commissioner in the popular TV series "Commissario Montalbano."

There was cause for introspection on Tuesday evening with the screening of "Saimir," a film directed by Francesco Munzi that deals with current compromises for future aspirations between a teenage Albanian immigrant in Italy and his people-trafficking father.

The film shown on Wednesday evening, "The Syrian Bride," a French, German and Israeli co-production directed by Eran Riklis, uses wit and discernment in its focus on the dilemmas facing a young woman from the Golan Heights with Druze affiliations who is destined to marry a Syrian television star she has never met.

This edition of Cinema di Frontiera is also providing audiences with a fascinating glimpse of life and cinematography in two countries that are distant for different reasons: South Korea, which is far away but to some extent familiar through its films, and Libya, which lies just across the water but is practically unknown.

"After years of regime films with a distinctly anticolonial bent, Libyan directors are now experimenting with quieter, more poetic films that should widen our perception of a country with whom we readily engage for trade," says Correale. "Barriers don't really benefit anyone."

