

## Europa Cinemas Bologna Online Lab Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> – Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> August 2020

### Report

The first session of this edition of the Europa Cinemas Bologna Online Lab was moderated by **Irene Musumeci** (former Head of Marketing at Curzon, currently UK Marketing Manager at MUBI, London, UK), **Frédéric Cornet** (Director, Cinéma Galeries, Belgium) and **Jure Matičič** (Director, Mestni Kino Domzale, Slovenia).

The second session was also moderated by Irene Musumeci, together with **Marco Fortunato** (Programmer, Cinemazero, Pordenone, Italy) and **Monica Naldi** (Manager, Cinema Beltrade, Milan, Italy). This session was held in Italian, thus addressed only to Italian-speaking exhibitors.

16 exhibitors from 14 different countries participated in the first and 16 Italian exhibitors in the second session.



After a short opening and some logistical rules to get the most of this first Bologna Lab organized online, each participant quickly introduced him/herself. Irene showed a map with the participants' countries and their respective official reopening dates. Almost all countries have set a cinema reopening date, although not all venues in these countries have reopened yet, due to the current uncertain situation. For example, in Greece only outdoor/open-air cinemas are allowed to reopen since June 6<sup>th</sup>, but most of the local indoor venues may reopen only in October later this year. Denmark and Austrian cinemas are reopened since mid-May, whereas in Romania no date is scheduled whatsoever.

We shared a slide with the main challenges that participating exhibitors are facing. Many participants were worried about the lack of movies, strongly affecting their programming in a period when it is necessary to have driving films to attract and especially regain the audience. Another main issue underlined by European cinemas was how to survive with the reduced capacity dealing with the present security measures and how to make the audience feel safe under these conditions. Some other exhibitors felt the necessity to rethink their business model at a time when reaching the break-even per day becomes more than challenging. A shared concern among Italian exhibitors is the fear of the

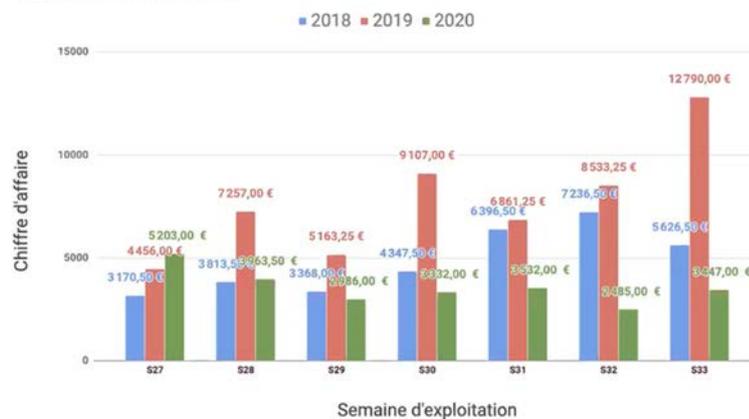
viewers to go back to the cinema and the complicated sanitizing procedures required by the public authorities.

Frédéric Cornet from Cinéma Galeries in Bruxelles, Belgium, focused his presentation on how to shape the cinema-going experience in a time of pandemic. His cinema reopened on July 1<sup>st</sup> and in the 1<sup>st</sup> week of reopening, it achieved +20% of visitors in comparison to the same period in July 2019. This positive result changed already the following week, -30% of visitors compared to 2019, as masks became mandatory even in the screening rooms on July 8<sup>th</sup>. Cinéma Galeries maintained their in and outdoor festival "heure d'été" even though the capacity has been reduced from the expected 300 visitors for indoor to the allowed 100 spectators maximum. Outdoor screenings had to be arranged with a restricted capacity of 200 people and wearing masks remained mandatory even outdoors. Frédéric explained that a main challenge under these circumstances was to deal with free screenings and an audience that would change their mind about attending the festival last minute. Nevertheless, he underlined that these moments where exhibitors get to meet the audience are very important and even though the situation is different and complicated, the enthusiasm of the audience kept him going. He mentioned as well a government support campaign, called "*J'Peux pas J'ai Cinéma*", which made tickets available for the audience at 1€ whereas theatres received an 8€ compensation. 50% of this compensation is designated for distributors, but only supported distributors received 50% of this ticket revenue. He underlined that it remains difficult to promote cinema's diversity under these conditions.

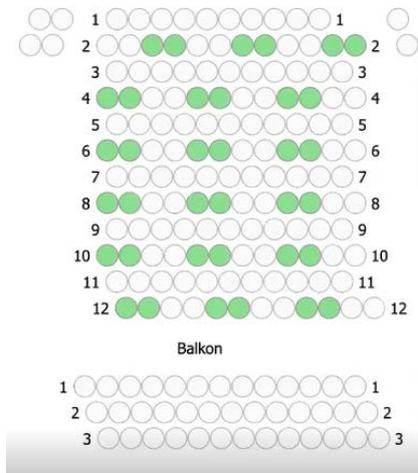


## Graphic evolution

Recettes après reprise (s27)



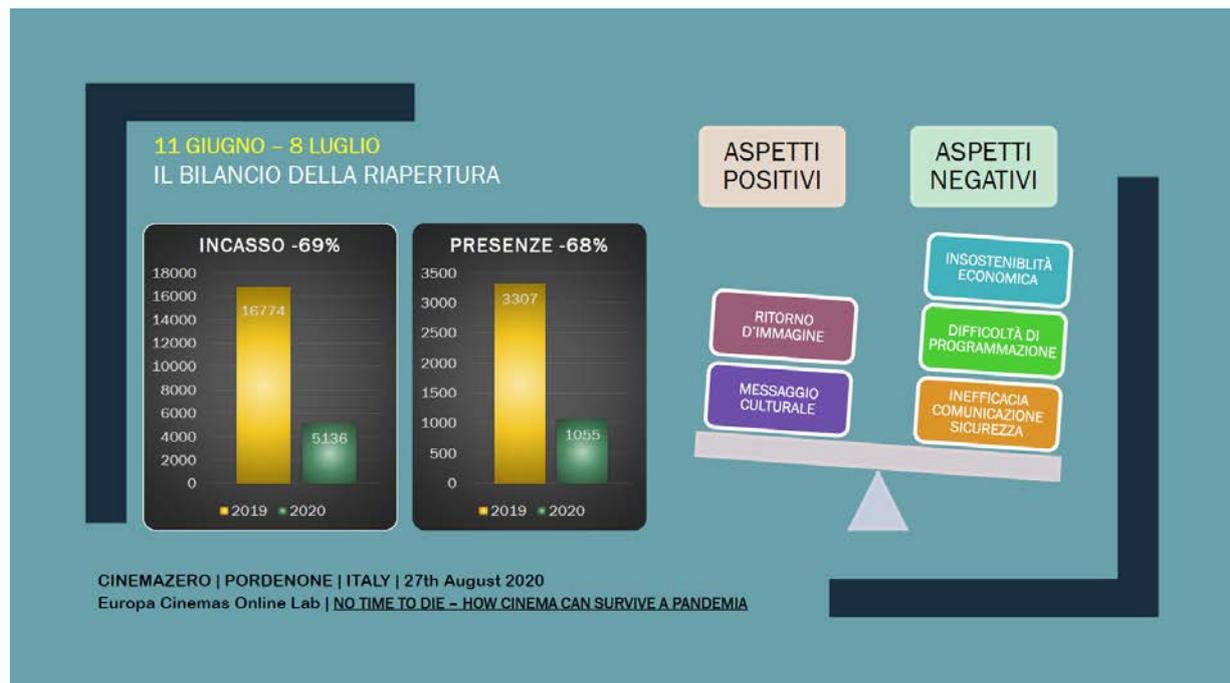
Jure Matičič, director of Mestni Kino Domzale in Slovenia, shared his experience on how to re-invent the cinema experience. His cinema remained closed from March 13<sup>th</sup> to June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020. Jure explained



that the testing period of the reopening was quite poor in terms of programming (mostly re-runs) and capacity (only 30-40% of seats available, which made the admissions drop 50-70%). Their main goal in this period was to keep in touch with the audience. They decided during summer to switch to open-air events to ease the restrictions (masks, disinfection and 2m distancing remained mandatory) and despite the lack of films, they managed to organize sold out screenings. Jure was quite optimistic about the autumn season, as the reopening of multiplexes gives access to new films even for the arthouse sector. Nevertheless, he remained concerned about the programming for Young Audiences and school screenings, which represent a third of their program. They have the ambition to bring cinema into schools without making them come to the

movies via new technical concepts as VoD. However, he underlined that it is important to make cinema remain the anchor point for film, which is a challenging aspect when having rules and regulations change constantly.

Marco Fortunato, programmer of the 4-screen Cinemazero in Pordenone, presented the initiatives launched during the lockdown and the pros and cons of the reopening. Cinemazero closed from 23<sup>rd</sup> February till 11<sup>th</sup> June. In these three months and a half, they were very active on social media, with campaigns to keep the audience engaged. In April they launched a VOD channel mainly dedicated to regional cinema and in May they took part in the national virtual cinema initiative #IoRestoinSala, involving around 100 film theatres across the country. The reopening unveiled several issues and required logistical measures, for example new and expensive procedures to guarantee the safety of the viewers (signage, temperature measurement, separation panels between the seats). By deciding to reopen as soon as possible, Cinemazero was successful in conveying a cultural message and had a positive image within its community for this brave choice. However, it was financially unsustainable,



programming was very challenging with very few new films released and the communication on the cinema's safety was not as successful as expected. Nevertheless the summer open-air programming was successful and useful to build the bases for the venue reopening at the end of August.

Monica Naldi, Manager of the single-screen Cinema Beltrade in Milan, showed the steps taken to prepare for the reopening on 15<sup>th</sup> June. Since cinemas had to follow many rules for the reopening, Beltrade decided to release a playful communication, with a graphic design and a video, by listing the official rules, make up new ones (like: go to watch a film at Cinema Beltrade once every 9 days) or writing them in foreign languages. The goal was to make the audience relax and smile in this situation. Beltrade was the first arthouse cinema in Milan to reopen from the first possible day, attracting journalists and gaining a lot of visibility. The results in June and July were quite optimistic, not very far from previous years. During the lockdown Beltrade opened its own VOD channel "Beltrade sul Sofa", proposing independent films on a pay per view basis. The audience could decide how much to pay for the film, thus supporting the cinema. The screenings online and later back on the big screen were accompanied by talks with cinema professionals on social media, to keep the audience engaged. Beltrade was also one of the promoters of an open letter signed by hundreds of independent cinemas and professionals asking fairer conditions in the cinema industry in Italy, given these particular conditions.

After a short Q&A and some exchanges on the presentations, the participants were split each day into three groups, based on the favourite topics of discussion they have selected in the preliminary questionnaire.

The chosen topics on Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> August were: Re-designing the customer experience for reopening, balancing safety and enjoyment; Devising programming strategies for reopening, addressing the lack of content and reduced capacity; Reopening logistics & business strategies; dealing with reopening costs & reduced income.

Frédéric Cornet facilitated on Wednesday the group focused on customer experience and audience perception of safety rules, trying to find a balance between making spectators feel safe in a cosy and welcoming place. The group agreed that redesigning the customer experience remains challenging as the rules and regulations keep changing. Their tip to keep the audience feel safe is communication and a clear outline of the safety measures undertaken in the cinema is key. To balance safety and enjoyment, Cinema Paradiso invited for example the spectators to arrive in a nice dress to get a free cocktail for the special screening of 'The Big Lebowski' which made the "coming back to the cinema experience" nice and funny. The group left one question open to be discussed in the whole seminar: How do you deal with people that refuse to respect the safety measures?

The second group on Wednesday facilitated by Irene Musumeci discussed about programming strategies for the reopening in times of lack of content and reduced capacity. A couple of cinemas focused their work on bringing back classics to the movies. Neues Maxim in Munich for example created an added value for the audience by reopening with a local film and inviting the director for a live Q&A to the cinema. The group discussed different issues for the arthouse sector as mixing arthouse and mainstream content or feeling slightly being forced to play a movie like TENET by Christopher Nolan, because of the lack of content, as it is the case in Denmark. Whereas Spazju Kreattiv in Malta decided to go with a new release, PINOCCHIO by Matteo Garrone, a sort of "semi-local" film. Part of their programming as well was bringing back a lot of alternative content, such as national opera, theatre, exhibition on screen and re-establishing collaborations with the Embassies in Malta, which allowed a more diverse and international programming. The group discussed as well drive-in cinemas,

outdoor screenings and how to adjust to the actual situation by doing some online programming or establishing partnerships with VOD platforms.

Jure Matičič led the third group on Wednesday which discussed reopening logistics and business strategies balancing reopening costs and reduced income. The financial situation among Europa Cinemas members is diverse and different depending on each country. Cinemas in the Netherlands for example have a strong public financial support, as the exhibitors received a government grant, being municipality owned may help to confront this difficult period as well, underlined a participant from Latvia. Whereas in Bulgaria, arthouse cinemas have a hard time reopening because they are not able to make any income with the present regulations. The group concluded, that public financial aid makes cinemas go safely through 2020; nevertheless, the main concern for most of them is confronting 2021, as it is still uncertain, if cinemas are able to break-even with the reduced capacities.

The selected topics of Thursday's session were: Re-designing the customer experience for reopening, balancing safety and enjoyment; Devising programming strategies for reopening, addressing the lack of content and reduced capacity; Developing strategies to get young audience and schools back in the cinema.

Group 1 on re-designing customer experience was facilitated by Marco Fortunato. Federico Babini from Spazio Alfieri, Florence explained that they asked an external consultant to take care of all the safety measures required by the authorities (viewers' names list, temperature measurement, online ticketing) and to release a protocol. The same initiative was taken by Marco Fortunato and Stefania Medda from Spazio Odissea in Cagliari. These measures were aimed at reassuring the viewers who are most afraid to go back to the cinema. Marco identified three types of audience: the most loyal ones who come to the cinema no matter what, the very afraid ones who don't feel comfortable yet to go back to the cinema at all and the undecided ones who would need some additional information and measure to be reassured. It's on this latter group that cinemas should focus on now. Stefania Medda agrees, like Beltrade, that a "lighter" and more playful communication to explain safety measures to the audience is a winning solution. According to Gabriele Ciglia from Cinema Nuovo in Varese the multiple measures to guarantee the safety can discourage a bit the audience who could see the cinema-going experience as too complicated and less spontaneous. High costs of sanitization are also an issue.

Group 2 on Devising programming strategies for reopening was facilitated by Irene Musumeci. The group participants discussed about the films they are currently programming or they will in the upcoming weeks. Social media communication, with sponsored posts was successful in attracting a larger audience for smaller films. The audience was very respectful of the safety measures. In order to attract the audience back, the exhibitors in this group prefer to focus on first release films, maybe Venice Film Festival movies, rather than programming classics. The presence of a guest is key to make a full house, especially at the very beginning of the reopening. Mauro Curiotto from Padua raises the issue of strict and unfair conditions of distribution in Italy.

Group 3 on developing strategies to get young audience and schools back in the cinema was facilitated by Monica Naldi. Fabio Amadei from Cinema Farnese in Rome showed a project he developed during the lockdown together with a nearby school: pupils had to attend an online course of film analysis, dubbing and a film quiz in order to create a short animated film on environment protection. This project aimed at keeping the contact with schools, when both they and the cinemas were closed. Mattia Giannone explained that in Switzerland school screenings are organised by the cantonal office for education, but so far they haven't received reservations from school because the main concern is the public transportation children need to take to reach the cinema. Group participants were very

uncertain about when they will be able to organise school screenings again and attract back young audience, given the current difficulties. Combining both an online and in-venue programming for schools and young audience can be a good solution.



The wrap-up sessions brought up that cinemas need to communicate the undertaken safety measures to their audiences by physical signs/notices, messages on the screen, newsletter or on social media. There are no limits in making the safety measures funny, creative and innovative, turning the present restrictions into a positive message, but setting things clear at the same time. Participants mentioned as well the importance of staff members' safety, which requires a good management to make employees feel safe in this difficult time, as well as spontaneous reactions to employees' health condition. Communicating on cinemas as safe places is key for a successful reopening.

The Wednesday's session concluded on a positive statement: the arthouse cinemas show a lot of flexibility to adapt to this challenging time and even though it puts the arthouse sector in a difficult situation, exhibitors feel reenergized and know where they are good at.

Furthermore, Thursday's session has been an opportunity for Italian exhibitors to get to know each other better and encourage them to continue sharing their reflections, in order to further discuss about the reopening and more local issues.

Lisa Püscher

Sonia Ragone