

Jury Review

50 Years of the Ecumenical Jury at the Film Festival in Locarno

Adaptions and Transformations

In 2023, the Ecumenical Jury marked its 50th anniversary at the Locarno Film Festival in Switzerland, an event founded in 1946 and now in its 76th edition. The Ecumenical Jury has thus long been a fixture at the festival.

Thanks to artistic director Giona A. Nazzaro and departing president Marco Solari, who served for 23 years, the Ecumenical Jury has maintained a respected position at the festival. The jury is featured prominently in the program book, as the second of the independent juries. Nazzaro and Solari actively participated in various celebrations during the Ecumenical Jury's anniversary year. These events comprised a reception, an ecumenical church celebration, and, as a particular highlight, a panel discussion with Academy Award-winner István Szabó.¹ The internationally acclaimed director received a lifetime achievement award from the churches' film organizations. Simultaneously, the monograph *Menschenbilder in István Szabós Filmwerk* (Schüren, 2023) by Ingrid Glatz, festival delegate and co-president of Interfilm, the International Interchurch Film Organisation, was published. The book delves into analysis of religious motifs and theological themes in Szabó's body of work; its launch was impeccably timed and appropriately celebrated.

These celebrations primarily took place within the church community and marked significant moments during the festival. But the contribution of an ecumenical jury to a festival is not evident to everyone. Members of other juries and festival attendees such as the International Federation of Film Critics, who were viewing entries in the same cinema, approached the Ecumenical Jury with inquiries such as, "What exactly do you do at the Lo-

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUI6QmO3BLY> [accessed 13 December 2023].

caro Film Festival?” These moments provided an excellent opportunity to discuss the responsibilities and activities of such a jury.

The Ecumenical Jury at the Locarno festival had four members. Two members, Micah Bucey and Petra Bahr, represented Interfilm, a Protestant organization (<https://www.inter-film.org/>), while the other two members, Joachim Valentin and myself, represented the Catholic film organization Signis (<https://www.signis.world>). This year, the Ecumenical Jury’s main prize was awarded to the Italian fiction film *PATAGONIA* (IT 2023), by Simone Bozzelli, and a special mention was given to Radu Jude’s *NU AȘTEPTA PEA MULT DE LA SFÂRȘITUL LUMII* (DON’T EXPECT TOO MUCH FROM THE END OF THE WORLD, RO/FR/KR 2023).

Bozzelli’s film is distinguished by its artistic quality and a courageous narrative that unfolds as a phoenix-from-the-ashes story, also interpreted as a metaphor for revelation. The focus of the jury’s deliberations was how the film communicates values of humanity in a world in crisis, where love is still possible or the only way to survive. The discussion also noted the depiction of human interactions, the care individuals show for one another, their engagement in communities, and the values they either embrace or reject. Additionally, the award recognizes the impact the film has on its audience and how it prompts society to aspire to something better. This perspective is encapsulated in the jury’s statement, which highlighted the transformative power inherent in the narrative:

Yuri leaves his sheltered life to follow the alluring energy of Agostino onto the open road, both must confront the open wounds and scarred histories that have made them who they are and attempt a dangerous journey toward a new horizon: *PATAGONIA* hovers precariously between violence and tenderness, obsessiveness and self-discovery, inviting viewers into a space of ambiguity, a place where transgression just might lead to transformation.²

Many films in the 2023 Locarno competition demonstrated exceptional artistic accomplishment. *PATAGONIA* was recognized by the Ecumenical Jury not just on ethical grounds but also for its artistic quality, with its cinematic portrayal of the challenging relationship of a gay couple, presented as an emotional rollercoaster. The narrative explores human complexities,

2 <https://tinyurl.com/rw3ub4yk> [accessed 12 December 2023].

achieving a delicate balance between good and bad. It recounts almost insurmountable obstacles between two individuals and suggests that the only true solution is a new beginning founded on love.

Parallels can be drawn between biblical stories and *PATAGONIA*, where a new and improved world emerges from complete destruction, reminiscent of the story of Noah's Ark or the Apocalypse. The narrative negotiates social and moral values, sensitizing its audience to existential questions around life and death and to the responsibility each individual and community carries for their fellow human beings.

The value of the Ecumenical Jury's work lies in its substantial contribution to audience awareness of spiritual, social, and ethical values while maintaining a commitment to artistic quality. Its involvement not only promotes public discourse on the role of film in conveying religious narratives and motivations but also underscores within film festival debates how religion adapts to new challenges and undergoes transformations in new contexts. Lastly, the jury members, myself included, found value in engaging in numerous discussions with curious and critical festival attendees about why such a jury should exist. We found a welcome opportunity to explore the role of churches in the public sphere, illustrating the diversity within these institutions.

Bibliography

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Filmography

NU AȘTEPTA PEA MULT DE LA SFÂRȘITUL LUMII (DON'T EXPECT TOO MUCH FROM THE END OF THE WORLD, Radu Jude, RO/FR/KR 2023).

PATAGONIA (Simone Bozzelli, IT 2023).