

Hans Hodel ? President of Interfilm

Hans Werner Dannowski

Interfilm has a new president as of April 2004. He is someone who had already contributed to the life of Interfilm for 15 years and who had expanded its work. When Hans Hodel was offered the presidency, he stressed that he would accept the office for a transitional period only, in order to give younger people the opportunity to grow into responsibilities and functions. The following affectionate words are offered in tribute to his commitment and work.

In school teaching and in advanced teacher training, Swiss theologian Hans Hodel was fascinated by film. It brought a range of important intellectual and spiritual topics into personal, social and political discussions. The idea of film as a seismograph of our mental and social condition provided a lot of explosive material for long discussions into the night. Such enthusiasm for film does not remain hidden.

Thus it was a surprise, but highly plausible, for Hans Hodel, when he was asked to succeed Theo Krummenacher as Director of the Office of Reformed Media and Film Commissioner in German-speaking Switzerland. It was a challenging job. Not only did it involve advanced training activities, documentation and parish contacts, but also a film distribution business and funding by the Swiss churches. Nevertheless, soon after taking up the office of Film Commissioner, Hans Hodel turned to Interfilm. My personal recollections of him begin from that moment.

A slender, well-dressed gentleman. One could not miss the Bern intonation in his speech. But if he really let loose with his Swiss German, one did not understand a single word! He knew what he wanted. International contacts were important to him; ecumenical work was a matter of course. He demanded a clear profile from Interfilm. But one thing was clear to all of us after only a few meetings: this man was an ingenious communicator. Whoever met him would never forget him. His *raison d'être* was constantly to search for and make new contacts. For him this has been a necessity of life.

Thus we very quickly made him the Jury Co-ordinator for Interfilm. To organise the juries at the many ?A?, ?B? and national festivals requires a lot of intuition and a thorough knowledge of people?s eligibility. WACC-Europe, of which he was a member, also quickly made use of Hans? easily recognised skill in this area, for instance, in its nominating committee for elections. And then we began sending ecumenical juries to more and more festivals.

This happened like this. The President of Interfilm at that time, if he attended a reception at the Berlin Film Festival, or of a group of distributors, or of a country, would leave after a short time. The Jury Co-ordinator, however, would stay diligently, not for the sake of the (usually) excellent meals and beverages. He indulged this vice on other occasions. He held conversations deep into the night until the morning. The next day he would report, for instance, that he met the Festival Director of Tokyo and of Buenos Aires, who had shown interest in the work of Interfilm. And that he raised the question if, eventually, Interfilm might succeed in organising an inter-religious jury at the Jerusalem Film Festival.

Thus Interfilm?s work at festivals grew from year to year. Hans Hodel repeatedly requested clear criteria for the jury decisions. We still do not have them even today and instead rely on the theological and aesthetic competence of the Interfilm members whom we appoint to juries. The local conditions at the different festival cities are also different. Sometimes there are only tangential points of contact between Cannes, Kiev, Moscow, and Montreal.

Broadening outreach

Another main area of work that increased enormously with the strong support of Hans Hodel. The

majority of Interfilm members (and most of its financial support) came from Germany and Switzerland. At that time we agreed to intensify work in other European countries where work in church film exists. This could only take place by means of a deepened content-focused, film-aesthetic and theological discussion. Thus emerged, under the banner 'Faces Of Europe - Europe's Face?', a series of annual Interfilm seminars, which seven today show results. We started in 1997 in Bad Segeberg near Lübeck. In 1998 we were guests in Nîmes and in 1999 drove to Riga. In 2000 we journeyed high into the North, to Örebro, Sweden.

Through the eastward extension of Europe, the great interest of Eastern European countries in the work of Interfilm became ever clearer. In addition to the Karlovy Vary Festival, juries were started at the festivals in Bratislava and Zlin. The seminar in Romanian Iasi resulted in a first contact with the Orthodox Church (2002), which was deepened and intensified in a marvellous meeting in the Orthodox Academy of Crete under the title 'Orthodox Iconography and Its Relationship with Film' with many participants from the orthodox area.

WACC assisted Interfilm in these investigations into unknown terrain and, here again, Hans Hodel was the crucial man on the Interfilm side establishing good and friendly contact between the two organisations, something that has deepened over the last few years.

Thus close these few observations that can only give an approximate picture of the new President of Interfilm. At his official departure from his principal office with Reformed Media in July 2003, which characteristically took place on a steamer on a three-lake cruise against the background of the Swiss mountains, I praised him as an impressive representative of an 'ontology of attraction'. To this day, I would not take back anything I said then.

Every institution lives on the basis of the law that human beings cannot exist without other human beings, and that a basic law of sympathy connects the part with the whole. Hans Hodel will, I am sure, continue to give many ideas to the world of cinema. He will maintain existing contacts and will establish new ones with people who, together with him, will continue the exciting dialogue between church and film.

Translated by Dr James Slawney.

Hans Werner Dannowski was President of Interfilm 1989-2004.