GLOBAL FILM INITIATIVE
Making A Reel Difference

Susan Weeks Coulter says she has no formal film background. That doesn’t mean she isn’t qualified to chair the Global Film Initiative, a private, non-profit organisation she founded. Coulter’s experience with the Peace Corps, as a public educator and in the banking industry along with an entrepreneurial spirit has proved more than enough to give her a firm foundation for this major undertaking.

By Lynn Ewbank

Every new enterprise starts with a vision. Where did Coulter get the vision for the Global Film Initiative? The seeds for GFI were sown in a long conversation Coulter had with two young professionals in Beijing. One was Noah Cowen, a Canadian who is now with the Toronto Film Festival, who helped Coulter found GFI. Three months later, GFI was able to open its doors thanks to mentoring by the Hubert Bals Fund in the Netherlands (www.filmfestivalrotterdam.com/eng/hubert_bals_fund.aspx). Founded in 1996, the highly successful HBF has funded nearly 600 films by filmmakers from developing countries. Supported by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch non-governmental development organizations FICV and NICE, the DOEN Foundation and Dutch public broadcasting network NPS, the HBF has close to €1.2 million at its disposal annually.

Early one rainy evening in October, I was able to catch Coulter by phone. She outlined the manner in which the Global Film Initiative seeks to implement its goal—to promote cross-cultural understanding through film.

First, the Global Film Initiative makes grants to stimulate the local economy and film industry. Each year 10-20 grants of up to $10,000 are made to filmmakers in developing countries. Why are Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Australia, and New Zealand ineligible? According to Coulter, these countries already have very active and well-financed film industries. The GFI goal is to seed those without such a foundation. The exception, Coulter says, is India. While India has a solid film industry, independent film is still unable to find a voice. So, GFI does consider films from India that have “a different subject matter.”

Coulter says GFI receives about forty submissions of scripts and storyboards yearly and evaluates them twice a year. What does GFI look for? GFI supports films that promise artistic excellence, exhibit accomplished storytelling and offer Americans perspectives on
daily life around the world." What is Coulter's definition of good storytelling? Like in the U.S., a beginning, middle, and end. She went on to say, "Strong oral traditions, for example African stories. Complex stories, heartfelt, complete, with deep characters and interactions that make sense.

Coulter warns that stories written by outsiders often lack authenticity and are filled with artificial dialogues. An example she used was a German's vision of being African or another film in which the dialogue seemed more like that of French café society. GFI is interested in "culturally authentic stories with universal themes which don't pander to the U.S., and are created for release in their own country."

When asked, "What has compelled you to tell this story?" the typical GFI applicant might say, "This is my life and I must." The grants vary, and Coulter says it is "cyclic." Recent applications have included new countries to GFI like Ghana and Costa Rica as well as countries from which grants have been awarded in the past like Argentina and Brazil. A film from Mozambique, which received a grant in 2005, is just now out. That the Initiative aims for regional balance is seen in the grant recipients for 2005 which include filmmakers from Uruguay, Argentina, Malaysia, Zambia, Mexico, Indonesia, Turkey and Peru. Filmmakers can use monies received from the Initiative to "complete initial production and to pay for post-production costs, such as laboratory fees, sound mixing and access to modern editing systems."

Coulter says it's a great benefit when filmmakers can return home with their GFI grant and say, "The U.S. says this project has merit. Can you help?" That's a beginning step. A Whisky went on to win two prestigious awards at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival. After premiering at MoMA in December 2004, Whisky was included in the Global Lens tour. Following Global Lens, First Run Features took over distribution.

Third, GFI has a distribution program. The Travelling Series makes sure developing world cinema is accessible across the U.S. in collaboration with MoMA, the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, eight to ten films are chosen from GFI's granting and acquisitions programs. Launched as Global Lens in New York in 2003, the films visit about fifteen major cultural institutions annually. Film host partners are chosen based on outreach excellence, education programming and regional balance.

Coulter says the Initiative is always looking for unique partners, cultural institutions willing to be the local champion of the Initiative. Films are available to partners for a two-week period. Tickets can be offered free for high school students or at a low charge for a local school.

In 2004, the Initiative linked with First Run Features, a New York-based distributor of foreign films, to distribute Global Film Initiative titles in North American theatrical, semi-theatrical, television, cable, and home video markets. This arm of the GFI applies to provide a steady stream of money back to filmmakers, quarterly or annually, in the hope of helping fund their next project. More information about First Run Features is available at www.firstrunfeatures.com.

Fourth, through their education program, GFI seeks to create new audiences. Three or four films are selected and high school level lesson plans and discussion guides are created. With the aim of exposing American youth to cultures different from their own, GFI brings one filmmaker to each location where the films are shown.

An Algerian filmmaker who was a Muslim came to Los Angeles for a screening. "He was a basket case," Coulter said. "It was initially difficult to put the talks together, audiences were reluctant."

Under the leadership of a talented high school teacher who GFI seeks out and scripts, audiences and filmmakers begin to communicate with each other about what has happened in the film. While the films are from different countries and cultures, they have "universal themes—revenge, love, honouring parents, courage, fear. The commonality of humanity is that we see more alike than different." The end result? American youth come away with respect for those who are different. They learn what people in other countries are "just different," not wrong.

One question that seems to come up repeatedly in the education program is, "How do we know what they are saying in subtitles is what they are really saying?" Coulter says, "All rights are reserved. There are several opportunities. Are you an individual or corporation that would like to give to support the Initiative? GFI welcomes donations. For more information e-mail donation@globalfilm.org.

Maybe you would like to bring GFI films to your town. Yet: What is the best way to make an impact? Check out our screening guide at www.globalfilm.org/partners.htm for ideas on what local institution in your area might qualify as a host. Are you an educator who would like to use films from developing countries to expand the cultural understanding of your students? Basic educational materials including lesson plans and discussion guides are enhanced by presenter's guides, fact sheets, curriculum maps that meet NYSED standards, as well as subtitile lists.

More information is available at www.globalfilm.org/education.htm. Educators who would like to purchase films and study guides for classroom use, contact First Run Features Films at 1-718-489-8000 or visit www.frrf.com.

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