

Katherine Hoovestol

Stories have been a part of my life since before I could even talk. I grew up in a storytelling family, but I never felt like I had any kind of story to tell. I feel like when I say this it sounds self-deprecating or morose, but in a Norwegian family the storyteller is always the oldest family member, as there is an inherent structure and genre to every story that one must learn before they can take on that role. The storyteller's job, then, was not to come up with new stories, but to preserve the stories we already had. The thing that used to irritate me more than anything, however, was that I could never translate the stories correctly. My friends never seemed to like them in the same way I did, and I finally just gave up trying to tell a story that not only needed to be translated linguistically, but culturally as well.

That is what initially led me to international entertainment distribution, I think. There is a careful balance of trying to appeal something to a wider audience, while striving to maintain its integrity and original intent. For me, it has always been about getting the stories that matter to those that care about them. The Cannes Film Festival, then, is a platform on which filmmakers and distributors can find each other, and hopefully find enough people that care about the story they are telling.

I had expected to love the festival itself, if only for the market and panels. The films were actually not my main priority when I applied, but after listening to Eric Kohn talk about how you should always find films that challenge your way of thinking or belief system, I decided to try my best to see as many films as I could. I am so happy I did, if only because the way I view distribution has shifted since the start of the festival.

On the fourth day of the festival, I saw *And Then We Danced* and completely fell in love with the film. There were other films to which I related much more (*Give Me Liberty* had certain scenes where I felt like I was watching my family in the city where I grew up), and there were some that I thought were stunning masterpieces of cinema, but none struck an emotional chord with me quite as strongly as this film. I walked away from the theater with an intense love for both the story and characters, and as someone with a background in not only television, but more fundamentally just old-fashioned oral retellings of stories, that is always going to be more important to me than aesthetics or any of the other mechanics.

A few days later, I committed an Unspoken Evil and saw the film for a second time at the festival. I do not regret it though, as the lead of the film and the cinematographer ended up sitting next to me for the whole movie (and were laughing at me, but that is besides the point). That in itself was more than enough to make my experience all the more enjoyable. Later on in the festival, we all met the cast and crew of the film at the Queer Party at the AmPav, which was absolutely phenomenal. Once the euphoria subsided, a few of us lingered to ask the director, Levan Akin, what the distribution future looked like for the movie. He sadly told us that the United States was one of the only countries (along with the UK and Germany) that was holding out on distribution rights. Hearing this was not surprising to me, but was incredibly disheartening considering how much I (and so many of us on this trip) adore the film.

After speaking with Levan Akin, I have kept tabs not only on *And Then We Danced*, rather just American distribution in general. Between 2003 and 2017, non-English speaking films only made up 18.8% of the theatrical releases in North America, not just the United States. When these films are given theatrical distribution, they are generally only granted up to a quarter of the

screens by exhibitors that an English speaking film would be given, and this is a generous number. Thus begins the the devastating cycle of these films not grossing enough profit for the exhibitors to want any more, and the distributors then citing the statistics that clearly paint an America disinterested in foreign content.

Reading these statistics, I suddenly felt like that five year old kid again, eagerly telling my friends the Norwegian stories and jokes that I loved, only for them to give up before I could ever get to the punchline. I saw so many incredible films here, so many absolutely *authentic* films. That is what I loved more than anything about *And Then We Danced*: it was joyful in its own self-acceptance, and was committed to spreading its message of joy and acceptance not only to young Georgians, but to anyone struggling with coming to terms with conservative traditions that are often at odds with a modern love of one's culture. It was a film that I personally needed to see, and one that I can imagine others need in their lives as well.

To think that so many of these films will never reach more than a limited audience really pains me, especially being someone concerned with distribution and audience research. In that, I think my original assessment of what distribution is was a bit unfair: in this current media climate, we cannot accurately assess what stories people care about over others. There is too much of a bottleneck of control from the major distributors, whether that be distribution companies or even a company like Netflix or Hulu. We need to be promoting stories that have the chance to change someone's worldview, or even change someone's life. Only stories truly have that power, and storytellers need to be given a chance to have a wider audience. I don't think it's about reaching the people that already care: it's about getting the stories that matter to those who maybe didn't even know that they needed them in the first place.