

SPECIALE In conversation with Selvaggia Velo, director of the River to River Florence Indian Film Festival.

By Monia Acciari

'In Conversation with Selvaggia Velo' is a brief interview with River to River Florence Indian Film festival director Selvaggia Velo. These following set of questions aims to look at the rationale and evolution of this Festival, since its inception.



Fig. 1

M.A.: *Selvaggia thank you for your time and for accepting to be interviewed. I would like to explore with you how this festival changed in the years, how it engaged with the sociality of the city, but also how it speaks about the globalization of Indian cinema. I would like to start with a question, which seeks to look at the beginning of this festival. Could you tell us more about the idea on which this festival emerged? And also, how much the evolution of Bollywood cinema in Europe triggered the necessity of promoting also other Indian cinemas?*

S.V.: The first edition of the festival took place in October 2001, nearly as an experiment and a challenge. I had organized before the 2001 an exhibition of Indian movie banners and a few other events, which were exploring the rich visual world of India. Through these events I understood that there were no Indian film festivals in Europe: so I said to myself "why not..?" and I gave birth to River to River. Having an Indian film festival in a country like Italy, where hardly any Indian film gets released is quite difficult. India and its artistic expressions are still seen here a little bit like exotic and kitsch; therefore all that regards India is not yet totally absorbed by the entertainment industry of Italy. Of course there is curiosity a more awareness now in people who now have travelled more than before, who have tried Indian food and have seen also a few Bollywood films, but compared to other European countries, here in Italy the situation is very different and less open to such cultures.

M.A.: *Having been part of the audience of the Festival, I would like to ask you a bit more about the space of River to River and specifically about the choice of Florence as the principal hosting city for this festival.*

SPECIALE *How Florence meets the requirements and throughout the growing Indian industries? Also, what is the scope of a brief 'marathon' post official festival in Rome?*

S.V.: The Festival is in Florence simply because it is where I live, so on the occasion of the first edition the most natural thing to do was to have it in my city. Florence is a small and beautiful city, known all over the world. I also believe that through this festival, I can contribute to the internationalization of Florence through different points of view. Regarding the smaller events called "best of River to River" which will be held in Rome and in Milan (from February of 2015) aims to take River to River and the films it presents during the December's event, throughout the country. The scope is to allow these films to travel in the North and in the South of the country, in the same way a film would travel from city to city carried around and shown to a large audience. The festival aims to bring awareness and show people a piece of India and its cinema.

M.A.: *Selvaggia, could you tell us a bit more about the challenges of being a Film director of a specific type of industry – such the one from India - within the current Italian panorama? I would like to know about the cultural and social challenges you normally face while organizing this event.*

S.V.: As I was mentioning before, Italy is a magnificent country but very, very difficult when it comes to working within the cultural and artistic field. There is very little money for culture and the country does not invest in it enough. Taken into account that now it is a complicated economic situation for everyone, certainly Italy is very touched by such economic difficulty and the challenges are many. Furthermore, here hardly any Indian films get released so proposing Indian cinema is undeniably something unusual. There are of course more and more people who are interested and connoisseurs, but the process of awareness and appreciation is very slow. But at the end of the day, I feel that being a film festival director is interesting also because it is not easy and unusual. When the selection is done and the festival is at its opening day, it is a wonderful sensation, against all odds!



Fig. 2

SPECIALE **M.A.:** *While observing the diverse socio-cultural aspects of River to River, I was interested in understanding from your experience as director of the festival, how this festival engages with South Asian communities in Italy?*

S.V.: In Florence there is not much of an Indian community there are mostly Bangladeshis and Srilankans. However, in other parts of Italy there are large Indian communities. We do not screen Bollywood films often but just at times, so the Indian audience isn't so large. Of course, when our main guest was Amitabh Bachchan – in 2012 – a very large Indian population living in Italy attended the festival. It was amazing, like being in India! In this regard, however, there is still a lot to do.

M.A.: *Following the creation of River to River in Italy, Europe somehow began placing attention to non-Bollywood industry, in this light other international festivals began to take place. Could you comment on the way River to River and other European festivals are currently networking?*

S.V.: I am friend with quite a few film festivals' director in both Europe and India, and we exchange information and personal views on films. Sometimes we also exchange ideas on the festival's formatting, and other organizational aspects. This is important and I feel there should be no competition between film festivals, but always a co-operative attitude.

M.A.: *Observing River to River, appears as the festival set a trend in cultural awareness. Could you expand on this aspect, quickly looking at the history of River to River?*

S.V.: River to River has been the first festival of this kind in the world: and is the only one in Italy. I am sure that River to River in these past years built up a large audience, brought awareness and allowed Indian films to be known more largely in our country. In the past years we have shown many films, had plenty of guests from the industry and proposed a wider selection of films; winking also at Bollywood films. Our aim is to show the visual and filmic world of India in its 360 degrees, by including a vast selection of films that vary in style, perspective and approach.

M.A.: *Selvaggia, as you explained River to River aims to be a bridge that could bring the visual world of India into Italy; I would like to know if you believe that the festival could also act as a bridge to define international relations on the basis of political power and geographical spaces?*

S.V.: It would be a great responsibility. However, the Festival does not have any connection with international political power, and it prefers to be out of politic. In spite of this fundamental decision, River to River is an arena to showcase films produced in India or about India, on a large variety of topics. So, we have also screened many kind of films, that have a distinct social voice, that criticise human relations, or that are extremely politicised in their view; however the festival has never taken any position, but has provided space to artistically interesting artifacts to be screened.

M.A.: *I understand and respect the position of the festival, however i was wondering how such themes are later addressed within the Festival?*

S.V.: As I have mentioned, some of the films that are screened at the festival, rotate around political, cultural and social issues. Remaining neutral, and without taking any position, the festival organises a series of Q&A sessions where these films are debated, and a film is often dissected by the people involved in the realization of the film, or by the director itself, who often provides reasoning behind specific choices. We also like to collect the point of view of the audience, which often offers food for thoughts behind the factual event of the film.

Watching a film at the festival becomes through an experiential and open experience, where the

SPECIALE discussions are meant to largely debate the topics of the film viewed, and while these discussions take place, the world of the audience and the the one of the directors merge.

M.A.: *Selvaggia could you tell us a bit more about the future of this festival?*

S.V.: The Festival aims to be the first established hub in Italy, where to watch and fully experience Indian cinema, and I believe it is, in time, achieving this scope. Of course, I have to say that the enormous lack of funds in our country dedicated to cultural initiatives, makes this very difficult and often challenging. However I hope to be able to keep on going, and bring more and more awareness about Indian cinema and widely of its culture.