

Opening Eyes in Sierra Leone: The Opin Yu Yi Human Rights Film Festival

Written by Celia Turley, festival producer and programmer and Sabrina Mahtani, festival co-founder

How We Started

Opin Yu Yi was started by Sierra Leonean filmmaker, Idriss Kpange and human rights lawyer, Sabrina Mahtani. We were in Burkina Faso at the FESPACO film festival and were impressed at how a country with many challenges had successfully put on one of the greatest film festivals in Africa. We also felt that Sierra Leone, emerging from a decade long war, similarly deserved such a film festival where people could be exposed to stories and thoughts from all over the world.

We feel that visual storytelling has the power to inform, inspire and stimulate debate, encouraging people to open their eyes to local and global human rights concerns. Film is a particularly powerful tool in a country such as Sierra Leone with low literacy rates. We also wanted to create a film festival to support the emerging film industry.

After FESPACO, we came back to Sierra Leone, wrote proposals and budgets and tried to pitch our idea to

as many people as possible. We had meetings with various local and international NGOs and Embassies. We depended a great deal on voluntary contributions to make our dream a reality. We finally secured around \$3000 and with that shoestring budget planned our festival in 3 weeks! It was exhausting, with many sleepless nights. However, the first festival was a great success, with over 2500 attending and much positive feedback. We are now planning our 4th edition and each year the festival has grown; we have developed our team and partnerships, are constantly learning, making mistakes, and improving.

Our Festival

The first ever human rights film festival in Sierra Leone took place in February 2012, around 20 February to mark World Social Justice Day.

We held 5 screenings including:

- Youth day screening
- Screening at Globe Cinema, the only working cinema in Freetown
- Screening with Journalists for Human Rights targeting media professionals

- First ever screening at Kroo Bay, one of the largest slums in Freetown

Successes of the 1st edition:

- Around 2, 500 attendees
- Showed a variety of international and Sierra Leonean films focusing on a wide range of human rights issues, such as women’s rights and environmental issues
- 98% of people who filled out feedback forms stated they would come again
- Received partnership or support from the British Council, British High Commission and Christian Aid, Sierra Leone Film Foundation
- Launched a human rights film competition, with prizes for Sierra Leonean Film Makers
- Invited to attend a workshop for global human rights film festivals at the Cine Droit Libre Film Festival in Burkina Faso
- Longstanding established film festivals, such as One World, Ciné Droit Libre and FIFDH Geneva, have provided us with technical support and advice¹

The 2nd edition was held in Freetown in March 2013. We were able to:

- Expand the festival to nine screenings and travel from the East to the West of Freetown. This enabled us to conduct the first ever human rights film screening in the East End, one of the poorest areas outside of the capital.
- Increase our audience to around 4500 attendees

- Include a screening for students at Fourah Bay College (University of Sierra Leone) and a further outdoor community screening in Lumley
- Include “Sabi Yu Rights” / “Know Your rights” sessions at University of Sierra Leone and with panelists from various civil society organisations
- Hold three special panels
- Showcase special musical performances at the Opening and Closing ceremony with social justice musicians, such as Sorie Kondi (a blind folk musician) and the Walpolians (a disabled musical group)
- Screen shortlisted films submitted as part of the human rights film competition and award prizes to Sierra Leone filmmakers

The 3rd edition built upon the 2nd edition by:

- Increasing our audience to over 4,800 attendees
- Showcasing thirty films and seven panel discussions on topics such as “LGBTI Rights” and “The Role of African Filmmakers in Social Change”
- Creating a central festival in social change, human rights film competition and award prizes to Sierra Leone filmmaker screening in the East End, one of the poorest areas
- Launching the Sierra Leone Women in Film (SWIF) network to support underrepresented women in the film industry, so we decided to create a network to support training, mentorship, networking and to provide a greater platform for women in the film industry. The SWIF network is very much in its infancy but we hope that it will continue to grow and we



Celia Turley, producer & programmer, is interviewed by an Opin Yu Yi volunteer Mary Alpha. Photo: Archive of Opin Yu Yi.

would like to see it include specific trainings and exchanges from women filmmakers across the world.

Programming: What Films to Screen

Opin Yu Yi programs with a particularly open interpretation of human rights cinema. Our festival selection includes long form documentary, fictional features, animated shorts, reflective observational portraits, punchy campaign films and calls to action. We try to select films that defy the expectation that human rights film can be only dreary and depressing, whilst also seeking to avoid the white-washing that can be inherent in the pressure to deliver a programme of only “feel-good, positive stories”. Sierra Leone is a dynamic and ever-developing country defined by more than its tragic past. We want to promote the diverse stories told by and about the country, not simply those that focus on the horrors experienced during conflict or the immediate aftermath. Of course, many of the human rights violations that play out in Sierra Leone today are part of the legacy of war—from high levels of sexual violence to youth disaffection and corruption. Though this will never be our exclusive focus, these inevitably are addressed at some point within the annual festival programme.

Of key importance to the Opin Yu Yi programming team is that we strike the balance between finding films that speak to local audiences whilst also challenging storytelling expectations and what cinema should look like. The range of movies that normally

make it to Sierra Leonean audiences is limited. The few existing cinemas in Sierra Leone rarely show films, having been primarily co-opted these days for the mass broadcast of European and English premiere league football. The same is true for the informal video halls that have proliferated across the country. Pirate DVD sellers roam the streets of Freetown and other urban areas but distribution is patchy and titles stick to the most profitable fare—Nollywood melodrama, American action flicks and Sierra Leonean productions from local stars comedian Sara D Great or the multi-talented director/producer/actor Jimmy B. Slow broadband speeds make streaming a broader range of cinema via the internet a challenge. Most of the films available within Sierra Leone therefore stick to conventional narrative formats and this shapes the expectations of many Sierra Leonean audiences. In response to this context, the Opin Yu Yi programming team is determined to also introduce films that are more ambitious in form and content to Sierra Leone. This is a process of trial and error. Not every event can be a crowd-pleaser, but we’ve had some great successes with films such as Kenyan feature, *Nairobi Half Life* or the provocative documentary, *Call Me Kuchu*. In the case of *Nairobi Half Life*, Sierra Leonean audiences enjoyed the fast-paced and amusing narrative. *Call Me Kuchu* was a successful screening in a different way. It was not uncomplicated entertainment; much of the content was challenging to local Sierra Leonean audiences. The powerful twist in the film really showed the dangerous repercussions of state-sponsored prejudice and the

moving testimonies of the gay and lesbian characters struck a chord. Many people approached the Opin Yu Yi organisers afterwards to say that the film had made them think a lot and question many of their judgments about LGBT people. By showing a variety of types of film, we are contributing to growing cine-literacy and appreciation of the diverse forms of cinema encapsulated within a modern film culture in Sierra Leone.

A key goal of Opin Yu Yi is to support the development of Sierra Leone's fledgling film industry. As such, a main programming consideration for us is to prioritise films which are made by Sierra Leonean filmmakers. We also host a human rights film competition in which we welcome open submissions from filmmakers across the country to submit music videos, short fictional films and documentaries that address human rights issues. At the beginning of every screening event, a selection from the Human Rights Competition films is shown. This ensures all audiences will have a chance to access Sierra Leonean social justice storytelling from established or emerging filmmakers.

The Opin Yu Yi programming team also aims to prioritise films by other African filmmakers. Images of Africa have long been dominated by the outsider's eye and the history of these visual depictions is an unpleasant one. Racist stereotypes, tropes of savagery and otherness have dominated, giving clear indication of the prejudices of those that have made them, and allowing for very little "truth" to be gleaned about

the myriad lives and experiences of people in Africa. The circulation of such imagery has contributed to the ideological justification behind all manner of contentious interventions in the continent, from the "civilising mission" of early missionaries to contemporary neo-liberal development agendas. Therefore, for Opin Yu Yi, is making a space for a cinema in which Sierra Leonean and other African filmmakers are free to represent themselves, determine their own agendas and work to construct an ideological space in which diverse ideas are explored and realities are documented. Showing examples of excellent films by African filmmakers may also act as inspiration and influence to local filmmakers still developing their creative practice. This year, we showed *The President*, by Cameroonian filmmaker, Jean Pierre Bekolo. It reflects on the themes of corruption and poverty and was in fact banned in Cameroon for its subversive questioning of President Paul Biya's thirty-two year rule. Such an inspiring piece of work prompted one of the most interesting panel discussions at Opin Yu Yi 2014, in which local filmmakers discussed the role that African filmmakers have to play in challenging power.

Another principle that drives the programming of Opin Yu Yi is the aim to prioritise those films which speak to the most pressing human rights concerns in the country, or reflect on pertinent social justice issues happening at a global scale. We believe that films are catalysts for conversations and we program with an eye to finding films with powerful contextual relevance, films that can prompt discussion on essential



The logo for OpIn Yu Yi is visible on posters and festival T-shirts. Photo: Archive of OpIn Yu Yi.

social concerns. An example of this is our screening of the West African premiere of Jessica Vale's film, *Small Small Thing*, about young Liberian girl Oliviah Zinnah and the medical complications which follow her brutal rape at the age of seven. Like its neighbouring country, Sierra Leone is gravely affected by sexual violence towards children. In post-conflict Sierra Leone, more than seventy percent of the sexual violence cases seen by the International Rescue Committee were girls under eighteen, according to a 2013 report by Save The Children.² As such, showing such a film and raising discussion on the violence it depicts is a necessary starting point for local reflection on these issues. The film was screened in the impoverished East End of the city where gender-based violence is particularly prominent, and followed by a Q&A session from leading activists on these issues, including panelists from the Family Support Unit, LAWYERS (the female lawyers association) and Ministry of Gender and Social Welfare. Through such events we hope to engender a culture of collective responsibility where these topics are constructively addressed in a public forum.

Long term, we aim to build a wider viewing panel whose opinions will contribute to our final programme, including other local Sierra Leonean film professionals, activists and human rights lawyers. This will help to ensure that our programme speaks to a number of different agendas and we can benefit from the knowledge and expertise, ensuring our festival stays current and relevant.

Promotion

Opin Yu Yi engages with a range of different promotional platforms in order to try and reach as many people as possible. Radio is still the most popular channel for information and entertainment for Sierra Leoneans and so much of our resources are used in advertisement placement on a range of popular radio stations that speak to different geographical areas and types of audiences. Television advertisements and trailers screened on "Sign Africa", large audio-visual screens across the city, also help to raise the profile of the event. As the film industry grows in Sierra Leone, the walls of the city are increasingly pasted with movie posters and Opin Yu Yi joins the display in lead up to the event with mass poster-ing for the event across the city. Large banners are also placed at key transportation locations across the city, such as the Cotton Tree roundabout in the centre of town. Word of mouth promotion is also highly successful in Sierra Leone and by visiting local schools, colleagues in civil society, community groups and other locations, direct invitations to events are a surprisingly reliable way to grow audiences.

Our current promotional model requires that we spend a considerable amount of our resources on advertisement. In other contexts this would also be combined with having a well thought out press strategy. However, in Sierra Leone the low wages of journalists mean that many try to supplement their wages through a "commission-based model of journalism",

a pay-to-print approach, in which there is an expectation that organisations should pay journalists to write any story. Beyond this challenge, cultural and arts journalism takes up little space on most media outlets. Our organisation's unwillingness to engage with these practices means that there is a barrier to our achieving much press coverage.

Despite this, in 2014 for the first time, Opin Yu Yi experimented with a programme launch, releasing significantly more information about the films due to screen three weeks before the event through a small press conference, where select journalists were invited to hear about the festival, review the programme and ask any questions. We also published the programme in select newspapers and online.

Journalists had little response, however, our online launch was much more successful. Facebook was used as a key site in which each screening event was promoted with some success. It is with pleasure then, that in receiving feedback from audience members about why they decided to come to Opin Yu Yi 2014, 15.8% of the audience stated not a general love of film, but an actual direct interest in a specific element of the programme, a desire to see a particular film or see content which addressed a topic of interest.

Travelling Film Festival

In November 2013, we decided to take the festival to the provinces where 80% of the population live

and where there is minimal access to film or human rights information. It was challenging to organise as our team is based in the capital, several hours away. We did a number of "scoping" trips and formed partnerships with civil society groups who assisted us. These included human rights organisations, such as the Sierra Leone Human Rights Commission and Timap for Justice, as well as youth organisations and associations of filmmakers.

We did the first travelling festival on a shoe-string budget. Outreach was central and the team spent a few days before the festival outreaching to schools and doing live radio programmes. Screenings in communities can be easier in terms of getting people to come, as communities are small, which makes it easier to spread information by word of mouth or community radio.

All the screenings were outdoors and we used community fields that were both less expensive and also could hold many people. There were a number of technical challenges as we had to build the screen for each event, hire equipment up country and have good generators. We even had a freak rainstorm at our first screening! People still came, but we learned from that experience that we need to prepare for all eventualities.

For future travelling festivals we hope to obtain a mobile cinema van and spend a longer time before the festival doing outreach and building partnerships.



Children play in Lumley Grassfield as the festival team sets up a screen for the evening. Photo: Archive of Opin Yu Yi.

Key Lessons

- *Planning is essential.* This is especially the case as the festival grows. At least 6 months of planning in advance of the festival is critical.
- *Outreach is vital.* People need to know about the festival, understand what it is about and want to come.
- *Funding is difficult* Partnerships with a range of stakeholders (media, multimedia, graphics, etc.) are useful to try and get free or discounted services. In the beginning, it is possible to do a lot with voluntary support but as the festival grows it is important to be able to secure sufficient funding for outreach and to pay the team well in order to professionalise the festival.
- *Admin is important.* It is necessary to have good accounting practices, a list of contacts and suppliers, a good evaluation system, etc.
- *Teambuilding is essential.* As the festival grows, it is hard to do on a voluntary basis and a few part time

staff are essential. Supporting and building your team are just as important as putting on a great festival.

- *Build partnerships.* Building partnerships with civil society, media, filmmakers, donors, etc. is central to making your festival successful and relevant.
- *Anticipate Complications.* You always need to think about what can go wrong and have a back up plan, for example a back-up generator or people to help trouble shoot.
- *Solicit Feedback.* Continually involve your partners and team in evaluating and thinking about the festival so you can learn and improve.

Filmography

Nairobi Half Life (dir. David ,Tosh' Gitonga, 2012).

Call Me Kuchu (dir. Malika Zouhali-Worrall and Katherine Fairfax Wright, 2012).

The President (dir. Jean Pierre Bekolo, 2013).

Small Small Thing (dir. Jessica Vale, 2012).