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"The Girl on the Train"

Ciao, Bella**The Taormina Film Festival intends to lure Hollywood types using its location as well as its content**

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Taormina Film Festival**Dates:** June 13-20**Opening-night film:** "The Proposal"**Closing-night film:** "Revolution Revisited"

When Deborah Young took over as executive director of the Taormina Film Festival three years ago, she knew it had little chance of competing with such well-established, deep-pocketed behemoths as the Festival de Cannes, Sundance and Toronto as a top film marketplace. If the festival hoped to capture

Hollywood's attention, it would have to exploit its beauty by publicizing the wonders of its showcase venue, the Teatro Greco (Greek Theater), a 2,000-year-old amphitheater overlooking the Ionian Sea.

"They put up this huge screen and you see the volcano (Mount Etna) in the background and the sparkling lava, with the moon and the sea," says Silvia Bizio, a Los Angeles-based correspondent for the Italian newspaper La Repubblica who serves as a consultant for the festival.

"The effect is extraordinary," Young adds. After director Michael Bay watched his action blockbuster "Transformers" unspool at the Greek in 2007, "(He) told us it was the best screening of his life."

Director Norman Jewison echoes the sentiments. He describes the screening of his 1973 film "Jesus Christ Superstar" at the Greek Theater in 2000 as "the most incredible experience." "Everybody was lighting candles and dancing in the aisles," he says. "It got standing ovations. And I think it was really the venue and the fact that we were under the stars and that moon."

In February, Young, who also is The Hollywood Reporter's chief international film critic, flew to Los Angeles and made the rounds of the studio marketing departments with Bizio, selling them on the idea of using the 55th edition of Taormina as an international launching pad to rollout their big summer films. They showed them photos of the spectacular venues and told of its glory days in the 1960s, when it was the most glamorous festival in the world alongside Venice and Cannes.

"It was a famous vacation destination in the '50s and '60s," Bizio says. "It has a beautiful sea and there are a lot of amazing five-star hotels. But not many people think of it as a possible junket location, and that's one of the things we've been trying to change."

Young added extra sizzle to the sales pitch with the announcement that Taormina would be expanding across the island of Sicily this year, with open-air screenings in three other spectacular locales. In the town of Palma di Montechiaro, films will be projected on a big screen set up in the Piazza Santa Rosalia while guests watch from their seats on the giant staircase leading up the Chiesa Madre (Mother Church). In Syracuse, screenings will be held at the 13th century Castle Maniace; in Palermo, in an 18th century botanical garden.

All four cities will be connected via a live satellite hook-up provided by fest sponsor Videobank for a 45-minute nightly prescreening program featuring noted Italian conductors and talk-show hosts introducing the evening's films and interacting with special guests in the various locales. In recognition of the expansion, the festival will henceforth be known as the Taormina Film Fest in Sicily.

"It's totally unique and I expect several important film festival directors to come by and take a look at us, because it's a model that could be easily exported to places like Brazil," Young says.

Whether the expansion had any effect on Hollywood's involvement in the current fest is debatable. This year's most notable studio entries will be Warner Bros.' "The Hangover" and New Line Cinema's "Ghosts of Girlfriends Past," which will screen in Palermo as part of the Young American Cinema section. The Hollywood film community will also be represented by actress Jessica Lange, who will be on hand to accept a Taormina Arte Award and introduce her HBO film "Grey Gardens," and a closing-night screening of a reworked version 1985 historical drama "Revolution" (retitled "Revolution Revisited"), starring Al Pacino and Nastassja Kinski.

That's better than 2008, when the list was topped by "Street Kings," starring Keanu Reeves, but not as impressive as 2007, when it had "Transformers," or in 2000, when Tom Cruise came with "Mission: Impossible II."

The problem is everyone wants a piece of the Hollywood action, and Taormina is rarely first in line to take its cut.

"We're competing with some pretty big cities," Bizio says. "Sometimes we have films that are promised to premiere in

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London, for example, so we can't have a premiere right before London."

Taormina's wooing of Hollywood hasn't come at the expense of filmmakers in the region. Since taking the reins at the festival, Young has put an added emphasis on Mediterranean cinema, each year highlighting the works of a different country. This year, France will be feted as a "guest of honor" with a program of contemporary French films. It will also feature tributes to French actresses Catherine Deneuve and Dominique Sanda, who will both receive the Taormina Arte Award at the Gran Gala France on June 19.

Deneuve's latest film, "The Girl on the Train," will be screening in competition along with 21 other Italian and international premieres in the three juried sections -- Mediterraneo, Oltre il Mediterraneo and Sicilian Shorts.

Homegrown filmmakers will be represented in the festival's business and market section Spazio Taormina, which will unite about 25 producers, distributors, buyers and festival directors from around the world to view the latest in Sicilian audio-visual production in closed-door competitive screenings. The development of up and coming Sicilian talent is promoted through Campus Taormina, which will unite students from the universities of Palermo, Catania and Messina for a series of daily meetings and workshops with established Italian talents in a variety of cinematic fields.

"It's designed as part of our program to bring young people to the festival, and so far it's been extremely successful," Young says. "Last year, Campus had 350 university students from Sicily enrolled. This year, we're already up to 600."

More significantly for Taormina, the overall number of films will be increasing, from 30 last year to about 60 this year thanks to the fest's expansion into other Sicilian towns. Young expects attendance to increase, too.

"Just in the little town of di Montechiaro, we're expecting 3,000 people every night," Young notes.

In spite of all this encouraging news, Young still has her work cut out for her. Even a big fan of Taormina like Jewison admits that it wouldn't be his first choice to launch the international release of a new film.

"I'd head to Toronto, to tell you the truth," Jewison says.

While Taormina may fall short as a marketplace by Hollywood standards, Bizio insists it's still a great place to take care of business.

"It's a really good networking place because it's so low-key," Bizio says. "There's not the usual kind of pressure that sometimes you have in festivals. You have time during the day to enjoy the sea. In the evening, you go for a drink at the Timeo, which is a five-star hotel that overlooks the bay with the volcano in the background. Then everybody goes to the Greek Theater and sees the movie. Afterwards, they go for dinner, and it's always fantastic food. I mean, what's there not to like in Taormina?"



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