

Creating socially responsible filmmakers through training



By Tibebeleslassie Tigabu

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia - For around three weeks filmmakers from all over Ethiopia working in government, private media organizations, all the film associations, AA University, AA City Culture and Tourism Bureau, Walta, GEM TV, and private film schools together with independent filmmakers were gathered to take a training on how to make socially responsible films.

The training was divided in two; about 40 film makers participated in the first part which began on September 22 and covered the theoretical side of the issue. Twenty filmmakers participated

in the second part, an intensive practical training.

With the theme of promoting tolerance and mutual understanding, this training was organized by the Ethiopian Film Initiative in partnership with Addis Ababa University and sponsored by UNESCO.

"We have been giving trainings before, but it wasn't on a big scale like this one," says Deborah Ghirmal.

Many trainers like Dawit Abebe, a lecturer in the AAU Film School; Ermiyas Woldeamlak, director of 'Abtyewu'; Keith Bowers, a former documentary commissioning editor at the BBC; Paschal Schmitz, a producer and director; Damian Armstrong; and Richard

Miller, a director of photography, shared their experience and thoughts on how film makers should use the powerful medium they have to influence society positively.

"I found a lot of talent in Ethiopia, and one thing that really came across in the workshop is how eager people are to learn....never have I had a class or workshop which is so receptive to what we had to offer - and couple that eagerness to learn and the energy the filmmakers have with the richness of culture and the stories to tell here...I think the Ethiopian film industry has a bright and exciting future," said Director of Photography Richard Muller.

One of the training activities was a pitching exercise where filmmakers put their film on paper and the trainees were grouped in many groups to present in any way they can in a limited and short period of time.

"Many filmmakers should know that they should be able to sell their films; they should be convincing when they explain. As

we witnessed many of the trainees didn't have the experience, so they were bushing around, saying one thing over and over again and using wrong words, but the second group was better from the first and the same goes to the later groups," Deborah commented.

The first part went on like this for four days. Next came the practical part for which 20 trainees were chosen. Priority was given for people who came from the regions and for people who hadn't had this kind of opportunity before.

In the two week long program, they made four short documentary films entitled 'Team Spirit', 'Beyond Tolerance', 'Breaking the Barriers', and 'Dancing for Unity', which cover issues like cultural tolerance and religious tolerance. One of the films shows a Muslim girl who is a singer opposed by her parents who do not want her to pursue her dream.

As Deborah recalls, "Many of the trainees were happy. And as we know there are technical trainings here and there for filmmakers, but this kind of training is rare, so they

were excited. Many of the trainees who came from the government-owned medias didn't have experience working around the clock, so they got an experience working around the clock."

One of the trainees Ato Melaku Alemayehu, Publications and Information Officer at the AA Culture Bureau, also commented on how he felt about the training: "As filmmakers, one should be aware of what socially responsible filmmaking means. There is no opportunity to know that such responsibility should be incorporated with the profession. It was really a gap-filling exercise."

The training will continue on a bigger scale for the way forward.

"The training was important in many aspects. They were able to meet deadlines when they did the short films, being punctual. And the other part was the filmmakers stayed together for three weeks and they shared experiences from one another," explains Deborah.

On the closing day of the training, the four short films were screened to the filmmaking community, international organizations and cultural institutes, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and Addis Ababa University. The films will be further screened to many more audiences and at different film festivals here and abroad.