

It was with great sadness that I left my position as manager of the Durban International Film Festival last week. I have been involved in the activities of the Centre for Creative Arts for the better part of a decade, and have been enriched – as both an individual and a South African – in innumerable ways by the complex and often difficult discussions that have taken place under the banners of the four esteemed festivals that the centre hosts. It was not an easy decision to make, but I believe that my choice was the best one, for a number of reasons. The most profound of these is my hope that it would create urgently needed space for debate regarding the function of curation in the arts, and the influence of economic, political and institutional power in the definition of the cultural landscape of South Africa.

I have not wanted to assert my beliefs too strongly and publicly in the wake of my decision to leave, as I do not believe that my opinion is the last word, and my resignation stands as a statement enough in itself regarding my position on the need for fairness and consultation in gatekeeping processes.

Having been appointed by the University of KwaZulu-Natal to curate and implement the Durban International Film Festival, the onus was on me to commit to a complex engagement with numerous considerations, including industry development, knowledge of audiences, cultural relevance, aesthetics, politics, and intimate knowledge of the entirety of the pool of submissions, knowledge of the festival's role and history, to name just a few. Decisions regarding the programme are also not made in isolation, but in consultation with an advisory panel of approximately 12 people who represent a diversity of roles and interests. While the ultimate decision fell on my shoulders as the curator of the festival, I have not viewed this role as a position of power, but rather as a position of responsibility that compelled me to be as circumspect and considered as I was able to be in my decision-making.

The allegation of censorship has been raised following my resignation, and I believe it is misleading, and requires some clarification. Censorship as a concept implies a restriction of access to material, and I believe it is a very deliberate falsehood to imply that the decision not to screen *Shepherds and Butchers* on the opening night of the Durban International Film Festival amounted to censorship. In actual fact, the film was offered a prominent place in the programme, and there were discussions underway regarding the possibility of flying in the film's noteworthy talent in order to celebrate and publicise the film. The wilfully false claim that DIFF sought to prevent the film being seen is completely factually untrue.

The debate around censorship also obfuscates the fact that there were many contenders for the opening night, each of which presented its own complexities and potential for controversy. At the time of my resignation, a final decision had not yet been made, but it was a matter that was under very thoughtful consideration. I have been reluctant to state which other films were under consideration, because I do not think it would be fair to draw these films into a comparative debate. It has been falsely alleged in the media that I had an intention to screen a film on the subject of Nkandla in place of *Shepherds*

and Butchers but in reality, there was no film at all on the subject of Nkandla in the programme of DIFF when I left it in a state of near-completion. The programme, as it stood upon my departure, was composed of approximately fifty percent African content – a significant increase from previous years – and these films span many important subjects including landlessness, colonisation and decolonisation, indigenous rights, gender-based violence, contemporary political shifts, and racial identity, to name just a few.

It is no easy decision to select out of this range a film to elevate above others by selecting it for the opening night, which carries visibility for the film, and serves to set a tone for the ten-day festival to follow. *Shepherds and Butchers* is an important film in terms of a diversification of historical narratives, and a powerful comment on institutional perpetuation of violence. It is also directed by Oliver Schmitz, who is one of South Africa's most celebrated filmmakers. However, I do not believe that the film is either the most important or most relevant film to the context of contemporary South Africa, and I believe that among the selection of films this year lie more pressing, authentic and complex engagements with our very rich and often difficult realities as South Africans in an ongoing process of transformation. I would sincerely encourage visitors to this year's festival to engage in hypothetical discussion as to which film might have been selected in its place, as I have personally found this process to be an extremely fruitful entry point into exploring the details and intersectional complexities of South African life in the current moment.

*Shepherds and Butchers* stars Steve Coogan (a British actor with a convincing South African accent) and is dominated by the exploration of the psychological trauma of a young white Apartheid executioner. It also features the graphic depiction of numerous black bodies hanging by the neck, urinating and defecating themselves in the throes of death. The decision not to screen the film on opening night was not to deny the public the opportunity to see the film – I had offered the producers a gala screening to do the merits of the film justice – but because I believe that while the film has been popular among European audiences, screening the film in South Africa requires a greater degree of sensitivity to context, given the profound historical trauma that could be triggered by these images. The decision was in consideration of the idea that imposing the film upon a diverse audience, many of whom are compelled professionally to be present and who might be unprepared for images of violence upon black bodies within the context of a narrative elaboration of a white man's trauma, had the potential to be overwhelmingly emotionally distressing. Ethical considerations would strongly indicate against imposing this film on an audience with neither full informed consent regarding the content, nor the professional option not to attend. While the film received a rating of 16V, this does not necessarily imply that any person over the age of 16 will, by default, be comfortable with the film's representation of violence.

These considerations are now redundant, as the film has been unilaterally confirmed for opening night by Prof. Cheryl Potgieter in direct discussion with Anant Singh, whose

company Videovision has direct financial interests in the film. This decision was made without consultation with either myself or any member of the advisory panel, and without Potgieter having seen any of the other films that existed as possibilities for selection for this occasion, nor, as far as I am aware, has she even seen the film in question. My request for discussion on the matter was denied outright by Potgieter. This is characteristic of what I have experienced as the simultaneously neglectful, anti-democratic, and meddling approach of Potgieter to the Centre for Creative Arts, which has created an environment that is extremely inhospitable to the kind of work that is required to curate and implement a major film festival that exists to develop and promote a burgeoning art form on the continent. It also underlines the extent to which opportunities for youthful or challenging voices that are responsive to the immediacy of our world can be dominated by what I regard as the self-serving bullying of those who have command of institutions. This abuse is something that I was not prepared to facilitate and enable in my role as the manager of the Durban International Film Festival, specifically because it impedes emerging voices and inhibits the transformation of film in South Africa. In particular, the entire credibility of the Festival is undermined the idea that individuals could use their influence on Potgieter to destroy the integrity of the selection process and turn the Festival into a marketing front for their own films. I am unable to be part of this destruction of one of our major cultural institutions. Thank you to everyone who has offered supportive words over the last few days. It is wonderful to realise that this is not a stance that I alone hold.