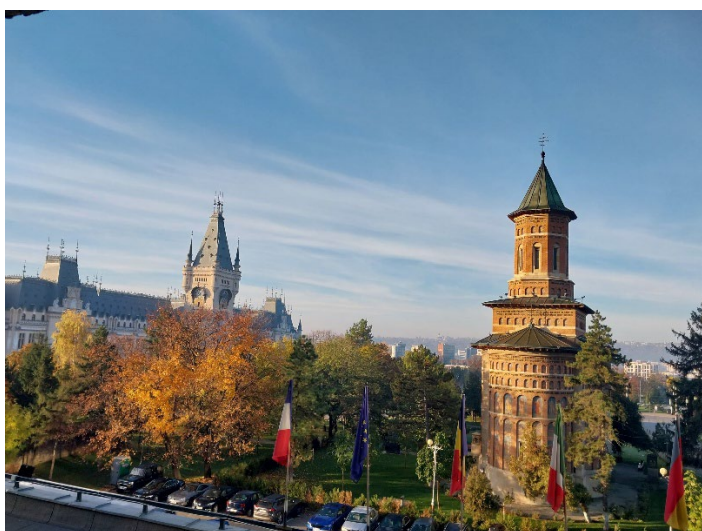


Quo Vadis International Film Festival

Report by Dr Milja Radovic



Settled in the autumn scenery, for the second time the picturesque city of Iași became the centre of art in Europe. The second edition of the Quo Vadis International Film Festival devoted to the theme of “*forgiveness*” hosted filmmakers, academics, professionals and artists from around the world. And the whole world fit in Iași, perhaps because of the theme, perhaps because of the perfect organisation and hospitality, perhaps because of the highest level of professionalism, or perhaps because of all this together.



Led by artistic director Elena Dulgheru, festival producer Cătălin Jeckel and executive director Violeta Gorgos³, the Festival offered a rich programme in different locations, enriching the

¹ “The view from Hotel Moldova. “Courtesy of Will Runyon Jr.

² The Metropolitan Cathedral, Iași (it is dedicated to Saint Paraskevi, to The Meeting of the Lord in the Temple and to Saint George). Courtesy of Chris Vlahonassios.

³ <https://quo-vadis.ro/en/team>

cinematic experience with artistic performances from music to art exhibitions, including academic presentations, interviews and Q&A sessions with the filmmakers and distinguished guests. The Opening and Closing Galas offered an artistic experience that conveyed the topic and atmosphere of the Festival. Case in point: Ana Munteanu's lyrical live sand drawing of the story of Jonah was projected on the cinematic screen and exceptionally integrated with the film music of composer Michael Paraskevas performed by the Liber Artis Orchestra.

Films

The Festival opened with the films of Amos Gitai: *Ana Arabia* (2013) and *The Book of Amos* (2014). Gitai's work, in the spirit of the year's theme, drew great attention with his two films: *Ana Arabia* as a unique story of the isolated Arabic-Jewish community in midst of the big city, belonging nowhere but inspite and despite everything continuing to live together, and *The Book of Amos* as an original cinematic masterpiece (and the only cinematic engagement with The Biblical Book of Amos). Known as an 'architect of cinematic space' or 'cinematic prophet,' Amos Gitai tirelessly questions the possibility of dialogue, community, war and peace, corruption and virtue.

By using a long single tracking shot the film translates ancient prophecy against corruption into a modern context. Gitai chose Prophet Amos as he was named after him, and because "the Prophet Amos criticised bourgeoisie, the 'fat cows of Bashan; who oppress the poor.'"

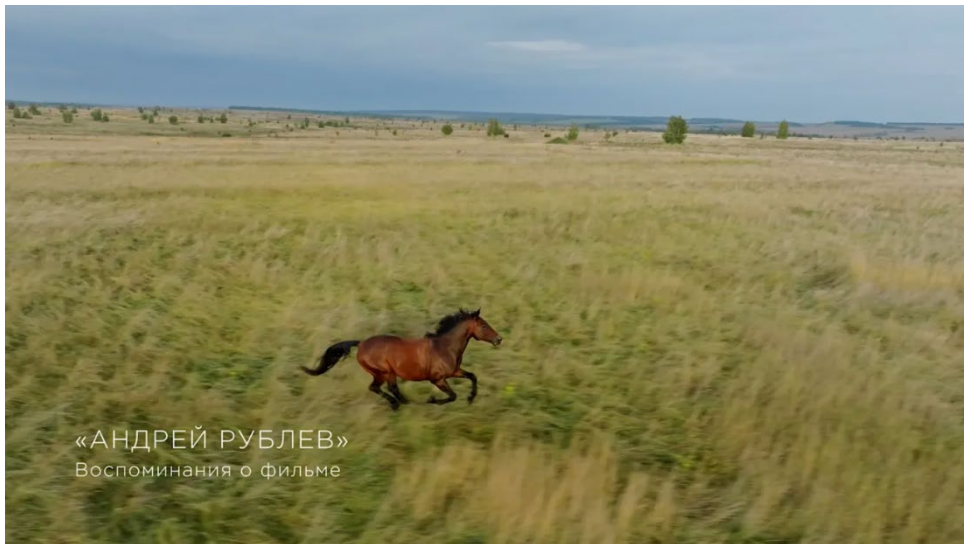


The Book of Amos

Gitai, interested in practical solutions to problems of society, composes poetic expressions acting both as a critique and guide: the biblical Book of Amos is recited by modern-day

protagonists cast against the mise-en-scène of war brings the practical dimension of the Prophet Amos to life. Amos Gitai received an award during the Closing Gala: The Quo Vadis Trophy from the Festival for his artistic achievements.

Another cinematic genius, whose personal presence attracted great attention and attendance, Andrei A. Tarkovsky, presented his two films: *Andrei Tarkovsky. A Cinema Prayer* (2019) and *Andrey Rublev. Memories of the Film* (2024).



Andrey Rublev. Memories of the Film.

The former, composed from archival material, unseen and unheard recordings of Tarkovsky, as well as from the different scenes from his films, “offers a rare and authentic insight into Tarkovsky's thought, spirituality and artistic conception” as well as his personal life, personality, legacy and beliefs. The latter offered a historical and contextual background and artistic and spiritual endeavours in creating the masterpiece *Andrei Rublev. Memories of the Film* must be seen to be experienced and understood. Andrei A. Tarkovsky, undoubtedly faced with the enormous task of creating the films about his father, successfully conveyed the meanings of poetic cinema – going one step further in creating a cinematic prayer, the prayer his father carried throughout his opus. In doing so, Andrei Andreevich Tarkovsky entered the book of great film artists, continuing the development of film language (also in documentary form) in a unique and distinctive way that can only be compared to the great poets. For this, Andrei A. Tarkovsky received the Quo Vadis Trophy – Award at the Gala.



The Quo Vadis Festival gave significant attention to non-mainstream filmmakers and their films, providing a tapestry of diverse stories and life experiences, tied with the theme of forgiveness. The artistic returns of Hadži-Aleksandar Đurović and Simon Scionka as well as Chris Vlahonassios, the director of ByzantFest, Australia, were warmly expected and welcomed. Likewise, the Festival hosted a number of known and (more widely) unknown works of filmmakers such as Diana Angelson Busuioc, Jasminka Marković, Ivan and Monja Jović, Alexandru Ionescu, Juan Manuel Coteló, Tod Polson, Mandi Hart, Cristina Chirvasie, George Dogaru and Octavian Budică, as well as actress, iconographer and kickboxing champion Christiana Mongol Budica, theatre director, writer and film-documentary essayist Cristina Chirvasie, and LA-based film composer Michael Paraskevas.⁴ The strong presence of artists and producers such as Trinitas TV (*Saint Nektarios. The Nectar of Forgiveness* by Mara Ionescu) showed that filmmakers, especially through documentaries (*Athos in my Heart* by Alexandru Ionescu) and docudramas are rediscovering geographical-spiritual spaces, creating at the same time a unique cinematic experience and engaging the audiences with existential topics such as *forgiveness* from a very special point of view.

The Festival hosted the European world premiere of the film *El Tonto Por Cristo* (2025) directed by Josh David Jordan. The Texan crew brought new aesthetics to the cinematic screen, conveying the experience of Christianity through its exploration of the life of a ‘fool for Christ’. Complementary music, sound, voice, excellent cinematography, unusual choices of engagement with cinematic time, montage and long takes offers a profoundly unique experience of the film whose aforementioned aesthetics is yet to be studied.

⁴ <https://quo-vadis.ro/en/quests>; <https://quo-vadis.ro/en/films-festival>



The films explored a variety of themes from holiness to spiritual deception, war and peace, abandonment, the trafficking of children, martial arts and indigeneous Alaskan society, never shying away from Christianity but with it addressing core issues and placing it as the foundation for original creativity and productive dialogue. All under the umbrella of the theme of forgiveness, as per Juan Manuel Cotelo’s work that “gathers moving testimonies from countries such as Spain, France, Colombia, Rwanda and Northern Ireland,” the festival, like Cotelo’s film, showed that forgiveness is “not only possible, but profoundly liberating and transformative.”

Who is Afraid of Dostoevsky? “Scara” by Vlad Păunescu

One of the strongest cinematic presences in the Festival was Vlad Păunescu whose film *Scara / The Ladder* moved audiences both to tears of disbelief and deep contemplation.



Set in 1980s Romania, the film – based on a true story – follows the life of the young actor Andrei Avram. From a provincial town, Andrei comes to the Bucharest Theatre where he is offered the role of Alyosha in the play adaptation of *The Karamazov Brothers*. The artistic-actor’s journey into ‘who Alyosha is’ turns into a very real dramatic quest of who the main protagonist Andrei is: Andrei’s somewhat Bohemian and impoverished lifestyle is a ‘time capsule’ through a series of Karamazov-like characters before real tragedies begin to emerge. The play, in which he puts all of himself (or so he thinks) is cancelled as unpleasant for the ruling party officials. We engage further with his turbulent life and relationships with others, poverty, fatherhood and marriage, and within the politically turbulent times that seemingly reach the peak with the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1989. Ceaușescu is quickly replaced by Ion Iliescu, causing upheaval and Andrei to question if “the same people continue to rule, and after them their children’s children” and which leads him to the decision to act.

Andrei’s act will result in tragedy: protests in the University Square were hit in the ‘mineriad’ – when the miners under orders of Iliescu’s regime stormed Bucharest. The miners ultimately throw Andrei from the balcony of the Nottara Theatre, beating him half to death and he survives by pure miracle. After a long and difficult recovery, Andrei receives another invitation to play Alyosha in *The Karamazov Brothers*, now returned to the theatre’s repertoire. The last scene shows Andrei who in a strange way becomes Alyosha, through his own turbulent life path

(where “he was tested” in the words of one of his colleagues). The transition from Andrei to Alysoha is completed once he utters to his wife that “he heard the voice, not in his mind but in his heart – and that he has forgiven them.” It is the end of the film which reveals that Andrei – in real life Dragoş Pâslaru – left his artistic life to become a monk.

As the Festival states: “*The Ladder* premiered at the Transylvania International Film Festival (TIFF) in 2021...and was well received by critics and audiences alike, praised for its candid approach to a tumultuous period in Romania’s recent history. At the 2022 UCIN Awards Gala, *The Ladder* received the most nominations, including for cinematography, costumes and set design...The title of the movie refers to the spiritual journey of the protagonist, each step representing a stage in his search for the meaning of life and salvation. Director Vlad Păunescu said the movie is an invitation to hope and reflection on one’s own existence and also an homage to the creator of beauty.”⁵ The mastery of Vlad Păunescu and the brilliant lead actor Eduard Trifa are not just an homage to Dragoş Pâslaru but to Dostoevsky (a real threat to totalitarian government) and to theatre, through a film that all in all “offers a profound insight into the transformative power of spirituality and art.”⁶

Lectures / Exhibitions

The Festival was enriched by the academic research and lecture by Dr Mina Radovic on Yugoslav cinema and Unexpected Films and who was awarded at the final ceremony for his work in preserving cinematic heritage and culture. The programme was followed by a screening of two films: Radovic’s *Lost and Found* (2014) and Tali Yankelevich’s *The Housekeeper* (2010) which beautifully focuses on a small community, an elderly Kiria Themis Pavouris who takes care of the community’s pillar Father John Maitland-Moir.

The International Exhibition “The Past is not Dead, It’s Not Even Past” curated by Austrian-Canadian Artist Daniel Domig and the author of this text, as the part of the FWF-funded Project Reframing Space: Film as History (previously exhibited at the University of Vienna)⁷ took place 3-5 November at the Metropolitan Museum – Way of the Cross and received great interest and acclaim.

⁵ <https://quo-vadis.ro/en/ladder>

⁶ <https://quo-vadis.ro/en/ladder>

⁷ <https://www.religionandtransformation.at/forschung/reframing-space-film-as-history/>



The Quo Vadis International Film Festival awarded the titular Quo Vadis Trophy to a number of artists and professionals for different achievements in cinema, with an equally interesting story behind the Trophy, each being uniquely hand made by the artist Emanuel Chiriac who conceptualised the design to embody the spirit of the Festival.



In 2024 the theme of the inaugural Quo Vadis Festival was *freedom*, while this year’s second edition is focused on *forgiveness*. The question is: how can we speak about freedom and forgiveness without understanding conflict? One of the most interesting insights was offered by actress, iconographer and kickboxing champion Christiana Mongol Budica: “I don’t perceive my opponent as an opponent. In the ring, in front of me is just a girl who has worked

⁸ Courtesy of Hadži-Aleksandar Đurović

hard, and I help her to show what she has prepared and she helps me to show what I have prepared. In the end we hug and become friends. In the beginning, in my conscience there was a conflict, a dilemma: would God be okay with my fighting? And I realized that, no matter what we do, there will be a conflict with God in us, we will always wonder whether that thing pleases him or not. But the fight in the ring is totally non-personal, I don't hit an opponent to humiliate her. There is no aggressor and victim in the ring, just two people putting forward an idea."⁹ Perhaps here is the hidden wisdom on which we are yet to contemplate and learn from the same.



Forgiveness is a difficult theme but it is also hopeful. To create a unique festival that will engage thematically and artistically with such topics is both bold and brave. Perhaps the secret of its success is to be found in humbleness and openness for diverse, even unknown films, taking risks while avoiding and refusing the provocateur tone, over-intellectualisation, marketing elitism and dogmatic definitions. Rather, the Festival seems to 'keep the gates open' enabling films to speak for themselves. Quo Vadis proved once again as not only a unique but absolutely necessary Festival in Europe. What more could we wish for? Next year's edition.

⁹ <https://quo-vadis.ro/en/christiana-mongol-budica>

