

# Rising in the east

Locarno's Open Doors co-production lab will this year focus on the up-and-coming South Caucasus region. **Martin Blaney** reports

“We had been keeping an eye on the region,” says Open Doors director Martina Malacrida about the choice of the South Caucasus — the border region between Asia and Europe comprising Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia — for the 11th edition of Locarno’s annual co-production lab, which supports film-makers from countries where cinema is vulnerable.

Left for dead after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the film industry in the region has suffered due to lack of financing and problems with distribution — both internationally, but also within the region because so few cinemas survived.

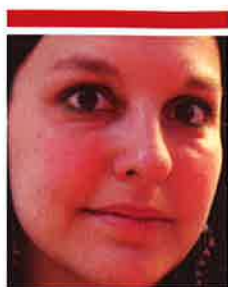
But there have been signs of revival, thanks to the Golden Apricot film festival’s Directors Across Borders co-production forum in Yerevan, Armenia, the activities of the independent production sector in Azerbaijan, and a drive towards higher professional standards for local film-makers in Georgia as propagated by Tamara Tatishvili, the former head of the Georgian National Film Center.

This year two Georgian films enjoyed prime slots at the Berlinale: Zaza Rusadze’s *A Fold In My Blanket* as Panorama’s opening film and Nana Ekvimishvili and Simon Gross’s *In Bloom* in Forum.

“Especially in the last few years, we have noticed a rising activity in Georgia, but also in Armenia and Azerbaijan, and so decided that 2013 was the perfect year to focus our whole attention on this region,” adds Malacrida.

A total of 104 projects from the region were submitted for this year’s Open Doors: 40 from Georgia, 36 from Armenia and 28 from Azerbaijan.

The final 12 selected projects include films from new talent as well as established directors such as Georgia’s George Ovashvili, whose first feature *The Other Bank* won over 50 international awards, and fellow Georgian director Rusudan Pirveli whose debut



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Open Doors

Open Doors will cover Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia



feature *Susa* was selected for Berlin, Rotterdam and San Francisco.

The line-up also includes four feature documentaries: Alexander Kvatashidze’s *See You In Chechnya*, Arzu Gulijeva’s *Naked In Baku*, Nino Gogua’s *Madona*, and Nika Shek and Sarik Hovsepyan’s *Long Gardens*.

Malacrida says the selection committee “noticed themes related to the post-Soviet conflicts in the region, and the relationship between past and present through the folkloristic traditions. The genocide is a leading subject among the Armenian film-makers in the run-up to the 100th anniversary in 2015. And, in all countries, we see particular attention given to women and their [changing] role in society as well as social hardship, and issues related to identity, sexuality and youth.

“In actual fact, in most of the cases, we are confronted by universal problems that are also addressed in European productions,” adds Malacrida.

## Open Doors past and present

Since its launch in 2003, Open Doors has showcased works from Cuba, Argentina, South East Asia, India and, most recently, sub Saharan Francophone Africa in 2012.

Drawing on the experiences of previ-



Alka Raghuram’s *Burqa Boxers* was at Open Doors in 2011

ous editions of Open Doors, the organisers have decided to be “more restrictive” this year in the selection of potential co-producers invited for one-to-one meetings with the representatives of the 12 projects, “to identify those who are truly interested in the region and in the possibility of co-producing with the South and the East”.

Consequently, a limit has been set of 50 producers (as opposed to 70 last year), with a large contingent from France and Germany, but also, given the specificity of the region, from Russia and Estonia.

Indeed, German and French co-producers are already attached to some of the selected projects: Arizona Films’ Guillaume de Seille and 42 Films’ Eike Gorecka are on-board George Ovashvili’s Open Doors project *Khibula*, while MPM Film’s Juliette Lepoutre is a co-producer on Rusudan Glurjidze’s *House Of Others*. Estonian producer Ulo Pikkov has also been working with Azerbaijani film-maker Arzu Gulijeva on the development of her feature documentary debut *Naked In Baku*.

Also new for this year will be the



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**Golda Sellam,  
Célestes Images**

introduction of two half-day workshops giving the teams the opportunity to discuss the prospects for their projects in the European market with key industry players — from film funders and producers to distributors and sales agents.

The projects will compete for a \$52,600 (CHF50,000) award funded by Open Doors in collaboration with the town of Bellinzona and the Swiss production support fund Visions Sud Est. Two further awards are offered by France's CNC (Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée) and ARTE.

As in previous years, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) is supporting the organisation of the Open Doors event, but this is not the first time the SDC has been involved with the film-making community in the South Caucasus.

In 2001, the agency initiated a programme to revitalise the region's feature film production and entrusted the Swiss training institution Focal with creating the AVANTI programme to provide creative, legal and technical support to the region's film sector.

This subsequently led to the establishment of the non-governmental organisation Independent Filmmakers — South Caucasus (IFA-SC) in 2006, which consolidated the achievements of AVANTI for the following three years, again with support from the SDC.

Since then, the European producer training organisation EAVE has staged mini-EAVE workshops in the region and Germany's Robert Bosch foundation placed a special emphasis on the South Caucasus in its training and networking activities.

#### **The EAVE connection**

Locarno's co-production lab has collaborated with EAVE ever since the launch of Open Doors in 2003, and 2013 is no exception, with more than 25 producers who have passed through the Luxembourg-based programme attending as potential co-producers for the 12 projects showcased.

This year, they include such EAVE graduates as France's Jean des Forets (Petit film) and Stéphane Zajdenweber (f2.8 pictures), The Netherlands' Denis Vaslin (Volya Films), Russia's Natalia

Drozd (CTB Film Company) and Alexei Sokhnev (Tau Pictures), Estonia's Riina Sildos (Amrion), the UK's Alex Thiele (65 Wilding Films), and Ukraine's Olena Fetisova (Interfilm).

While the number of co-production markets around the globe increases annually, Locarno's Open Doors has become a major fixture on the international film industry's calendar.

The 2011 edition dedicated to India has already seen the completion of Sourav Sarangi's *Char... The No-Man's Island* which was selected for Busan's documentary competition in 2012 and screened in Berlin's Forum in February.

Producers Golda Sellam and Samanta Gandolfi Branca of Lugano-based Célestes Images boarded Alka Raghuram's documentary *Burqa Boxers* which they have co-produced with the US-based Junoon Pictures and France's 24 Images and is currently in post.

"As a co-production platform, Open Doors is unique because there are prizes and financial support — from ARTE, CNC and Vision Sud Est, which enable the directors and producers to go ahead with their projects," Sellam notes. "The only drawback is the co-production system in Switzerland, which does not facilitate the co-production deals."

Germany's Weltfilm boarded two projects presented at Open Doors last year: Laza's documentary *Pieces Of Lives* (Madagascar) and Jean-Pierre Bekolo's *The President* (Cameroon), while Burkina Faso's Michel K Zongo is working with Michael Bogar's Perfect Shot Films and Canadian producer Catherine Drolet of Films de L'Oeil on the development of his feature *La Sirene De Faso Fani*.

In addition, Mauritian director David Constantin is set to begin shooting his feature *Shadows Of The Sugarcane* in October 2013 with Paris-based Antoine Segovia of Atopic as co-producer (Segovia was also a co-producer on Raya Martin's *Independencia*).

"The particular nature and strength of Open Doors is, on the one hand, the fact that it has a different national focus each year," Malacrada suggests. "On the other hand, it selects and deals with the most problematic and difficult regions and countries. The most important thing for us is to provide visibility to cinema which is still vulnerable, but, in our opinion, full of potential." ■