

# **CANADIAN FRANCOPHONE FESTIVALS ROUNDTABLE**

## TOGETHER AGAINST COVID-19

**April 30, 2020**

### **SUMMARY NOTES**

#### **BACKGROUND**

Further to a survey aimed at clarifying the needs of Canadian film festivals in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Telefilm Canada took the initiative to bring festival directors together to share online experiences and available solutions. This approach follows on from discussions of the Francophone festivals co-development group initiated by the director of the Festival du cinéma de la Ville de Québec, Ian Gailer, in cooperation with Telefilm. It is aligned with Telefilm's positioning as "partner of choice" and its desire to foster greater collaboration between Francophone festivals and other festivals in English Canada. The Anglophone festivals met by videoconference on May 1.

The virtual meeting was attended by 40 people. Sophie Therrien, Project Leader, National Promotion and Communications, delivered the welcoming and introductory remarks, and Francesca Accinelli, Director, Promotion and Communications, led the session. Six presentations were made, in the following order:

- Marie-Elaine Riou (Festival REGARD)
- Philippe del Drago (FIFA - Festival international du film sur l'art)
- Géraldine Le Chêne (Festival Vues d'Afrique)
- Ségolène Roederer (Gala Québec Cinéma)
- Catherine Légaré-Pelletier (Festival Plein(s) Écran(s))
- Manuel Badel (Solution Featurely)

#### **ORGANIZING AN ONLINE FESTIVAL**

Festival REGARD, FIFA and Vues d'Afrique were forced to reinvent themselves to take their events online on short notice. A difficult decision for Festival REGARD, which also had to take down the interrupted festival. With no time to spare, they had to choose a platform, reorganize tasks, adapt to Internet rules, transpose the festival's concept to the Web – ensuring viewing time before handing out awards, for example – and decide which of the many activities to take online and which to abandon. FIFA focused first on the availability of films, involving the rights holders. After that, it sought to preserve its established relationship with the public, then to put in place the necessary conditions for video Q&A sessions with the directors. Professional meetings calling for face-to-face encounters were abandoned. Vues d'Afrique had been wanting and planning an online presence for several years, and had made a first attempt seven years ago. In April 2020, it was able to present more than 50% of the announced program. FIFA, too, had been thinking about an online presence all year. Festival REGARD had to learn from scratch. In all three cases, they had to move quickly and adjust as they went.

## CHOOSING A PLATFORM

The partnerships already established with platforms and broadcasters made all the difference. Without them, it probably would have been impossible to succeed with such short lead time.

Festival Regard was able to count on its usual partners: Télé-Québec's Fabrique culturelle, Crave, the documentary website Tènk and Unis TV. FIFA chose the Vimeo platform, having rapidly concluded that there was not enough time to organize video-on-demand viewing. The shift had to be made in 48 hours. Vues d'Afrique held initial discussions with its two broadcaster partners, Quebecor and TV5unis.ca, and, after considering their respective "Francophonie" positioning, chose to go with TV5unis.ca. The festival's youth programming, which was not part of the agreement with the broadcaster, was shown directly from the Vues d'Afrique site.

Marie-Elaine Riou of Festival REGARD stressed the need to address the client experience by simplifying navigation via a single home page that provides access to the various partner platforms and ensures sponsor visibility. Providing a FAQ is important in order to guide users, to help them connect and to limit the number of questions.

Philippe del Drago of FIFA learned several lessons from his experience. The choice of Vimeo complicated the collection of taxes per province and the related accounting. Digitizing films on a server requires high bandwidth, which is not always available when working from home. Broadband is also needed for the connection between the server and the distribution platform. The devil is in the details. He also pointed out the need to consider poor connection capacity in Canada's outlying regions. A positive offshoot: FIFA has established contacts with some thirty festivals in Canada, Europe and even the Middle East, some of which are seeking to benefit from its newly acquired expertise.

## AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

The first three presenters testified to successful experiences. For Festival REGARD, the "REGARD en prolongation" selection, which offers ten exclusive films from the latest edition on the Fabrique culturelle platform, had 26,000 viewings in 10 days, compared to 5,000 last year. The presentation of part of the programming on the Festival Plein(s) Écran(s) site, in the announced order, drew double the usual audience. For FIFA and Vues d'Afrique, the number of viewings and the development of new audiences exceeded what would have been possible in theatres, owing in particular to expanded distribution across Canada. Vues d'Afrique recorded 50,000 unique views of 25 minutes or more on TV5unis.ca and a total of 500,000 views for the entire festival. FIFA met with good success in Toronto and Vancouver, backed by an online ad campaign. In all, 123,000 viewings on Vimeo.

It remains to be seen whether these results are one-off or will lead to lasting structural change. Festival REGARD noted that the Q&A sessions via Facebook Live were more rewarding than those held in a room. The FIFA public responded enthusiastically to the invitation to send comments and feedback to the directors of the presented films. They received hundreds of messages and were very touched by that. Festival Vues d'Afrique set up its convivial Baobar space online, allowing festivalgoers to get together at the end of the day around musical, comedy and DJ performances.

FIFA came close to reaching its targeted ticket sales, which were up by 50% before the lockdown, by selling \$30 passes for 180 films during the 13 days of the festival. Phillippe del Drago voiced concern about the great quantity of content offered free during the lockdown, which, in the end, could work against the cultural community.

## MANAGING DISTRIBUTION RIGHTS

All of the programmers took care to reconfirm – especially with winners – that the rights were cleared before putting the films online, limiting the time to the festival dates or a few weeks more for the winning titles and restricting distribution in Canada by geo-blocking. The response was generous and enthusiastic, in a spirit of solidarity. Festival REGARD did not attempt to put everything online so as to avoid hurting the career of films slated to screen in other festivals. FIFA managed to put 75% of its programming online – 180 of the 240 films – after consulting with the other festivals awaiting the films. In the circumstances, the premiere requirement was relaxed for films that had already been distributed online. Vues d’Afrique was obliged to reconfirm everything in two weeks. Of the 100 selected films, 55 were shown digitally during the ten days of the festival, at a rate of 11 a day for a period of 48 hours.

## GIVING BACK TO SPONSORS

Festival REGARD lost some sponsors hit by the lockdown, while others expect to be compensated at the next edition. The relationships have been maintained in all cases.

## WORKING WITH THE BROADCASTERS

As regards the cancellation of Gala Québec Cinéma, Ségolène Roederer explained that the shift to virtual has redefined the collaboration with Radio-Canada. Since a major televised event will not be produced this year, SRC’s communications and Web teams are putting their expertise into promoting the Iris Awards so that the virtual prize giving will have the same promotional impact for Quebec cinema. There will likely be a series of actions rather than a single high point. The announcement of the nominees on Facebook Live was well attended. The virtual juries were just as efficient as in-person juries. Contrary to the last five editions, the SPRINT Gala designed to promote the event by presenting a selection of nominated and winning films online will carry all of the activities.

## PROMOTING HOMEGROWN SHORTS

Catherine Légaré-Pelletier of Festival Plein(s) Écran(s), which takes place entirely on Facebook, explained how the platform, with 34,000 subscribers and 3.7 viewings, has joined forces with cancelled/postponed regional festivals by offering to host and promote their programmed shorts. Each partnership is forged in a spirit of exchange aimed at serving the region where the festival was supposed to be held (the features are aired on Télé-Québec’s Fabrique culturelle). The films are available on the Festival Plein(s) Écran(s) page and the partner’s site for free viewing for a period of 24 hours. The Facebook platform makes it possible to transpose various components of the partner festival: Q&A sessions, fixed viewing hours, public voting, commented screenings, live sessions. Since Plein(s) Écran(s)’s founding four years ago, the team has mastered all aspects of Facebook, such as changes to its algorithm and exploitation of its rich audience data. The platform supports the distribution of original versions with subtitles in several languages, respecting the presentation order established by the programmers so as to replicate the theatre experience as closely as possible. Plein(s) Écran(s) can offer year-long showings of the partner festivals’ shorts, which would extend the festivals’ presence and could encourage audiences to return once the crisis is over.

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## AN ADAPTED ONLINE SOLUTION

Manuel Badel presented the Featurely project, which is currently seeking financial partners for the pilot phase. This is a rights management module that links to existing platforms following the video-on-demand model. The interface handles three functions: ticketing, traceability and view tracking, which serves to personalize audience relationships. This simplifies rights management and accounting. The data is available in real time on a dashboard, making it possible to promote a less-seen film to boost sales or to personalize sponsor visibility.

The access parameters permit all scenarios: jury and professional viewings, capped number of viewings, geo-blocking. Titles can be searched by keywords combining artificial intelligence and manual intervention to respect the programmer's intention.

The audience, whether in the context of a video-on-demand platform, a festival or a professional market, benefits from a digital concierge that, among other things, allows for individual transactions and a fully personalizable experience via the ticketing system. Featurely aims to stimulate audience engagement while providing online festivals and initiatives with a monetization tool and a secure traceability and rights-holders payment system adapted to Canadian content.

Developed by a team that combines extensive industry experience with advanced technological expertise, Featurely is a digital solution for an increasingly digital environment. Featurely is not intended to replace events. It is a long-term solution, an ad hoc alternative or a complement to encourage new business models all year long (interaction with target audiences, diversified offerings for sponsors, generation of new revenue).

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