

École l'Atelier Fiwè, the Bénin Film School

Jovial Italian Valerio Truffa describes himself as a cinematographic all-rounder: a director of photography, director, editor, script writer, artistic director and photographer. After frequenting the avant-garde plays of Majakowskij, Pirandello and Brecht in his adolescent years in Rome, his passion for technique steered him towards lighting and décor and the work, among others, of operatic and theatrical director Giorgio Strehler and Oscar and Academy Award winner Roman Polanski. Then, in 1977, he went on the shoot of *Hurricane*. "The encounter with Sven Nykvist, ASC impassioned me for cinematographic imagery," he says. The ensuing years have seen Truffa shooting and directing full length features across the world and, more recently, teaching cinematography.

Since marrying a Béninese woman in 1998, Truffa has been deeply involved promoting cinema in Bénin; a land little known to filmmakers. He established the Atelier Fiwè Workshop and the first Cinema Festival at Ouidah in 2003. The following year his project 'Allumez les étoiles' (Light up the Stars) took shape with the support of Bénin's Ministry of Education and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In October 2004, with the blessing of the Béninese authorities, he founded the Bénin Film School, l'Atelier Fiwè: a public establishment for higher learning devoted to cinema and television techniques. Admission is reserved to students with a Baccalaureate and a first degree/diploma. According to Truffa, the three year programme covers "theory courses, supervised work, practicals and internships in a professional milieu." *InCamera* asked him about his groundbreaking West African cinematographic initiatives.

Please see www.atelierfiwe.com for more information.



Q What is your vision for teaching at l'Atelier Fiwè?

A Cinema is first of all an art with a heritage that is constantly evolving. An exploit is not enough to make one's way in the artistic scene, so I conceive teaching in a way that early painters brought youngsters into their studios. My emphasis is on regular tutoring of fundamentals and my goal is to educate future filmmakers using an effective teaching method based on the assimilation and the mastery of different filmmaking techniques. The lack of trained technicians encumbers African cinema much more than the need for financial resources and l'Atelier Fiwè is addressing that need. When students leave here they will have an accurate mastery of their specialism.

Q How are your workshops structured?

A They are different from the institutional concept and are a departure from the idea of a closed shop; an elitist structure. Access to l'Atelier Fiwè is much freer; its space more convivial. The administration will be at Ouida, but classes will be held in Allada. We are busy installing the media library there, which will be open to the public.

Q How is the curriculum arranged?

A The first year is devoted to theoretical, artistic, scientific and technological fundamentals. This knowledge is deepened in the second year with practical work from conception to production in 16 and 35mm films, videos, photo reporting, studio and laboratory work. In the third year, students select a professional direction and prepare their qualifying dissertation. The work is a step towards applied research in creative art with a double goal - entry into professional life and a possible route into research.

Q How is the school funded?

A For the moment, finance comes from personal and private sources. It's a difficult path, but we don't compromise ourselves and we avoid hypocritical deals. UNESCO participated in the launch and has given lively support in an educational context.

Q What are your school's plans for the future?

A We are setting up partnerships with institutions in France and abroad to nurture the development of close outside ties. Eventually, we hope to assume a role of cultural influence, both locally and internationally. L'Atelier Fiwè is bringing a pulse to the development of cinematography in Benin. And Fiwè means 'this is where it's happening' in Benin's Fongbè language!"

