

## Ouagadougou Prepares Africa's Oscar Night

Written by Rudi Prinsloo

Sunday, 08 March 2009 03:00 -

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Ouagadougou was gearing up Saturday to hand out Africa's answer to the Oscar, the Golden Stallion of Yennenga, after the eight-day Pan-African Film and Television Festival (FESPACO).

Thousands of filmmakers, actors and filmlovers from all over the continent descended on the dusty capital of Burkina Faso this past week for Africa's biggest film fest.

Over 300 films, shorts and documentaries were screened, although this year many festival goers and locals grumbled that free open air screenings -- which gave previous festivals a good helping of local charm -- were banned.

With cinema's closing all over the continent and filmmakers complaining that the public is abandoning homegrown films, festival organisers decided to ban open air movies to lure people back into cinemas.

But with ticket prices between 300 CFA francs (45 euro cents, 57 US cents) and 1,500 CFA francs (2.28 euros, 2.87 dollars), most residents of Burkina Faso, one of the world's poorest countries, simply cannot afford the movies.

Forty-six percent of Burkinabe live on less than one euro (1.25 dollars) a day, according to national and UN statistics.

The result of the new policy was that cinema goers were mostly festival participants or western film fans who travelled to Ouagadougou for the event.

Only the real crowd pleasers like the new film of Burkina's box office king, director Boubacar Diallo's "Coeur de Lion" (Lionheart), an historical drama dealing with the slave trade, managed to draw in the local crowds.

In all 19 films from all over Africa are competing for the coveted Golden Stallion.

Among the favourites to win is "Teza," a blood-drenched epic of Ethiopia under the brutal rule of Haile Mariam Mengistu in the 1970s and 1980s, by director Haile Gerima. On Friday the film already won a UN- and World Bank-sponsored special prize.

The Ecobank-sponsored Ousmane Sembene prize, named after Senegal's famed film pioneer, went to South Africa's John Kani for "Nothing but the truth". Adapted from a play, the film explores a librarian's experiences with racism in South Africa during and after the apartheid era.

"La Maison Jaune" (The Yellow House) by Algerian filmmaker Amor Hakkar, also tipped as a possible Golden Stallion candidate, on Friday received the Signis prize of the World Catholic Organisation of Communication.

The sweet film with breathtaking shots of the Algerian mountains tells the story of a farmers family who tries to come to terms with the death of the eldest son.

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Another Golden Stallion favorite from Algeria is "Mascarades" (Masquerades), a comedy about a boy who invests an imaginary rich suitor for his narcoleptic sister.

Finally there is awards buzz about another South African film dealing with the post-apartheid era.

"Triomf" by Zimbabwe-born director Michael Reaburn shows the disintegration of a poor Afrikaner family against the backdrop of South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994.

The closing ceremony of the festival, where the top prizes will be announced was to start at 4 pm (1600 GMT) Saturday.

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