

The Homeless Film Festival is an artistic initiative which seeks to raise awareness about the situation of groups at risk of social exclusion and people who experience homelessness, utilizing the theatre and cinema as means for empowerment. This article expounds upon the different creative elements that comprise the festival and what can be gained from the whole.

THE HOMELESS FILM FESTIVAL: RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT THE SITUATION OF PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

By **Alberto Gaston**, Emaus Solidarité/Homeless Film Festival



The Homeless Film Festival is an artistic initiative which seeks to raise awareness about the situation of groups at risk of social exclusion and people who experience homelessness, utilizing the theatre and cinema as means for empowerment. This festival, born in the UK in 2011, is based around creating audiovisual short movies, which, combined with professional and amateur actors and producers, are screened to the public, helping them to reflect on the causes and consequences of homelessness. Having previously been hosted in different locations, in 2016 the organization Bizitegi, in close collaboration with the local authority, showed interest in the festival and started organizing it on a regular basis in Bilbao. In 2019, Emaús Fundación Social asked Bizitegi about the chance of hosting the event at San Sebastian, a city with a strong tradition of cultural events, such as, the renowned San Sebastián International Film Festival (SSIFF). In this way, and under the principle of respecting Emaús and Bizitegi's territorial scope, both organizations were able to start a collaboration, seeking synergies with the aim of increasing the impact of the festival and further improving social cohesion.

The festival has two main objectives, focused on two different audiences. On the one hand, it seeks to raise public awareness about the dramatic situations homeless people have to deal with in their daily life. In particular, the focus is on raising awareness among young people due to the transformative power they have in the construction of a fair and cohesive society. In this sense, the festival also promotes a debate about the causes of homeless and possible strategies to be implemented in the future in order to eradicate it.

On the other hand, the festival gives the leading role to homeless people, the ones who sadly suffer the consequences of living without a home and who are too often invisible to society, which ignores them and neglects to grant them equal basic human rights.

Homeless people are empowered by taking part in the organization of the festival. Social workers ensure that there is a strong, positive working environment between homeless people and young people, to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experiences between both groups.

We believe in the power of cinema and audiovisual arts, because of its catalytic role when bringing young people closer to social exclusion situations as a way of offering a better understanding for situations of social exclusion. To this end, we host different exchange workshops for students between 14 to 16 years old and homeless people who already take part in Emaús social programs, to facilitate the sharing of first-hand experiences. The workshops are hosted not only in schools, but also in the social services Emaús manages, in order to improve the students' understanding of the context and the reality that later on they will have to translate to the screen.

The students, organized into teams, have to record and produce a short movie which will be screened at the Homeless Film Festival. In the festival the public can see also films made by other filmmakers, both amateur and professional.

During the Homeless Festival a play is also performed. It is a community theatre performance, built on the experiences and interests of the participants/actors, who take part in the social programs focused on homeless people. For instance, the groups [Kuskurum](#) (Bilbao), [Zenbatu](#) (Bilbao), [Mujereando](#) (Sevilla), [Yeses](#) (Madrid) or [Arrelísticos](#) (Barcelona), who have taken part in different editions of the festival, are all related to organizations which work in the field of social exclusion.



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The ongoing processes of the play and filmmaking allow us to sustain social participation spaces and thus, generate connections between students and groups who are at risk of social exclusion. These connections contribute to the elimination of prejudices and the empowerment of homeless people, encouraging their autonomy and building their confidence in advocating for their rights as citizens.

The day of the festival is the culmination of these processes. It is divided into two different sessions. The first one takes place in the morning, as all the participating schools watch the student-made short movies and one of the plays. This session is integrated into their academic routine, frequently as part of the social studies curriculum. During the afternoon, the Homeless Film Festival is opened to the public, with the aim of mainstreaming the contents. A forum is run in both the morning and afternoon sessions, to give a platform to the different voices of those who have taken part in the festival.

During 2020, because of COVID, it has not been possible to host the Homeless Festival as usual. In Bilbao, Bizitegi has decided to maintain the festival and stream it to audiences. In San Sebastian, it has been cancelled, but we have been able to maintain the awareness raising program with two schools, albeit adapted to health restrictions which has had an adverse effect on in-person exchanges. In fact, both schools and social programs are still trying to maintain “bubble spaces” and restrict personal contacts to the strictly necessary. To get around this, we have given homeless people the opportunity to record themselves and share their own experiences. They received tips on how to use the camera and some other basic instructions, which gave them space to express their creativity and merge with other artistic disciplines.

We hope that by the last term of 2021 (November) we will be able to host the Homeless Film Festival again, taking up the process in full, and contribute to improving social cohesion through the power of the arts.