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The Golden Leopards, take 60.

The Locarno International Film Festival, one of Switzerland's premiere cultural events, celebrates its 60th anniversary this year. It may also soon be moving into a new cultural and conference centre. By René Lenzin

Locarno is nothing like Berlin, Cannes or Venice. The annual film festival held on the shores of Lake Maggiore has neither the fame of Europe's showcase events nor their glamour. Locarno may award Leopard statuettes for the year's best cinematographic performances, but few Hollywood stars and starlets grace it with their presence. Despite this, or perhaps precisely because of it, the festival enjoys international acclaim and is considered one of the most important cultural events in Switzerland. The relative lack of Tinseltown hubbub along the Piazza Grande does little to detract from the fascination of the event, as the *NZZ* newspaper reported after the close of last year's festival. "Since it is drawn to Locarno for the magic of the location rather than Julia Roberts' smile, one can assume that the festival audience has once again survived this shortcoming unscathed," *NZZ* wrote.

This year, the festival celebrates a very special anniversary: it is being held for the 60th time. Frédéric Maire from western Switzerland is putting together the programme for the second year in succession, having taken over as artistic director from Italy's Irene Bignardi in October 2005. The audiences seem to like the cinematographic fare he serves them. Last year's festival attracted 4000 more visitors than the year before. A possibly record-breaking 78,000 people were counted on the Piazza Grande in the heart of Locarno alone, thanks in part to the fine

weather throughout the festival. Unfortunately, Maire's cinematic selection for 2007 had not been released when we went to press (see box).

For the past six years, the festival has been presided over by Ticino-born Marco Solari, an experienced organiser of tourist and cultural events. Amongst other positions he has held, Solari was the Federal Council's official delegate at the celebrations marking the 700th anniversary of the Swiss Confederation in 1991. He has overhauled the festival's finances, solved its chronic lack of funds and put it on a solid footing. The festival's budget of almost CHF 10 million is funded partly from federal coffers, by Ticino canton and local authorities, and partly by private sponsors. But at the recent annual general meeting, Solari said that the festival needed still more funding in order to keep pace with its international rivals. He's now hoping to get an extra CHF 700,000 for

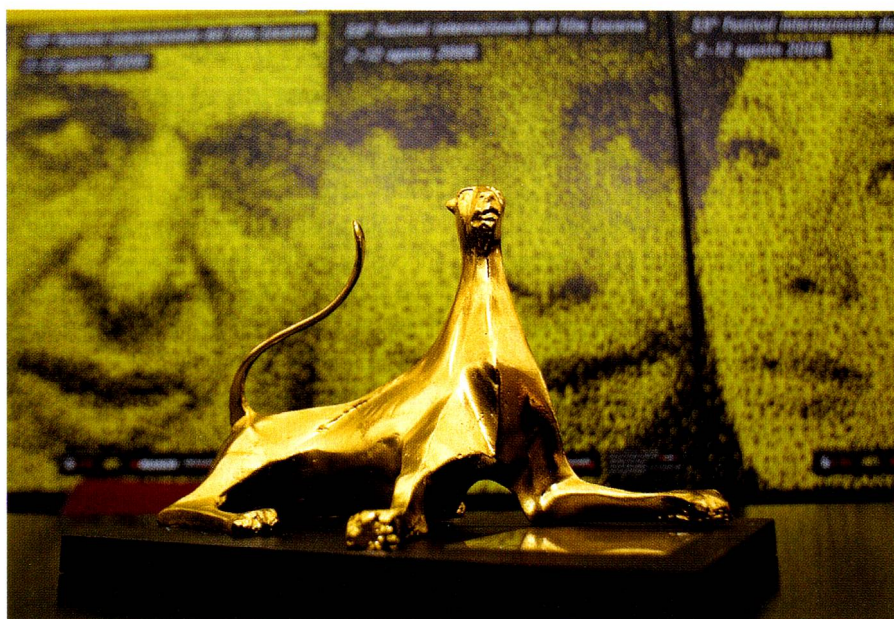
2008. Maire is also hoping to raise the budget by between CHF 500,000 and CHF 1 million. "That would give us a big boost," he said after last year's premiere as director.

A city without a cinema

The festival has an even greater problem finding suitable venues. Ever since Locarno's prestigious Grand Hotel closed its doors, regular festival-goers have been left feeling somewhat homeless. Maire is therefore planning something special for the big anniversary to ensure that the festival can once more offer what he calls "a nightlife centre". He's also worried about screening rooms. In April, Locarno's only cinema, the former Rex on Piazza Grande, was closed down. Although there were plans for a five-screen cinema complex, the conversion project was deemed unlikely to succeed, and subsequently shelved. Nevertheless, Maire still hopes to be able to use the old 500-seater cinema this year. He also has a converted cinema with three screens available to him in neighbouring Muralto.

The medium-term prospects are also good. At the start of the year, Locarno and Ascona agreed to build a joint cultural and conference centre, thereby putting an end to years of rivalry and scrapping plans for separate

projects that the two could ill afford or use to anything like capacity. The new centre is to be built on the site of Ascona's former airport, which lies conveniently close to the point at which the two municipalities now meet. What's more, it would be able to host both the Locarno film festival and Ascona's equally famous music festival. However, plans for the complex have yet to be finalised, let alone realised. Even so, the film festival has never been closer to getting its very own "movie palace". What better 60th birthday present could it hope for?



LOCARNO FILM FESTIVAL

■ The 60th Locarno International Film Festival takes place on 1–11 August. This year's honorary award will be presented to Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-hsien. According to festival director Frédéric Maire, Hou is "one of the most important representatives of the Taiwanese *nouvelle vague* of the 1980s". The programme had not been announced as this issue of *Swiss Review* went to press. Further information on the festival can be found on the official Web site: www.pardo.ch.

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