

Festival goes underground to unearth political voices

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Film Writer

YEARNING for the storming-the-barricades political ferment of the 1960s? Wondering what to do when Sydney is shut down for the APEC meeting in September?

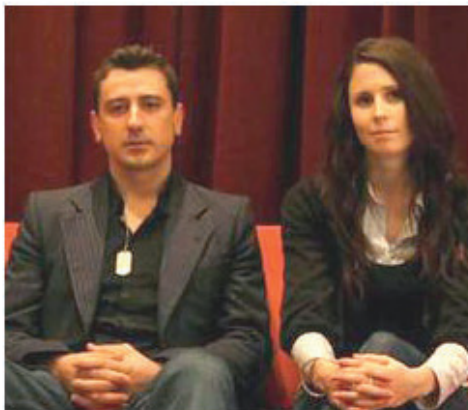
An enthusiastic band of former and current art school students has a festival for you.

Inspired by the feisty experimental film-makers of the 1960s and '70s, the first Sydney Underground Film Festival will have four nights of provocative and political screenings.

The co-directors, Stefan Popescu and Katherine Berger, have already gone too far for at least one potential patron with a promotional flyer that has John Howard in a Nazi uniform. It has prompted an angry death threat over the phone.

Berger says that holding the festival during APEC is a "happy coincidence" rather than a plan to encourage activism against the event.

She believes Australian films have become too conservative. "Because the industry is quite small, people are always fighting to get noticed. They tend to make films that are following a formula to get funding."



Good propaganda ... co-directors Stefan Popescu and Katherine Berger. Photo: Stephen Siewert

The festival, at the Factory Theatre in Enmore, is intended to encourage more political film-making - in both subject matter and a more experimental approach. "In Berlin or New York, they would turn their nose up at the idea now of the underground," Popescu says. "But here, we haven't really got a culture of resistance, of subversive art."

The festival has attracted almost 800 entries in a competition for what it calls subversive short films with a neat gimmick - offering a discount for entrants if they include a rejection letter from another festival.

"We're trying to create a nationwide alliance where we can nurture this culture of

alternative films," Popescu says. "Film has been used for really horrible things in the past, propaganda and so forth during Nazi times. I think it can be used for good."

"It's relevant now more than ever, with the war in Iraq, that we become overtly political."

The veteran director David Perry, who was part of the underground movement in the 1960s, applauds the push for more political film-making.

He was part of the Ubu collective that made and screened experimental films, stirring debate about censorship, before the industry's revival in the 1970s.

"I had this romantic notion that underground meant the French underground - fighting the Nazis," he says. "But the younger people saw underground as just being opposed to the prevailing culture [which was] extremely repressive and conservative."

Despite *Romulus, My Father* centring on an immigrant family and *Lucky Miles* focusing on refugees, Perry believes many recent Australian films have been disappointing for lacking an interest in politics. "There seems to be a serious degree of conservatism that has crept back into the system," he says.