



Washed up: 'Who Killed Cock Robin?' has Barrett (Barrett Miller) living a precarious existence in Butte, Montana

## Island of resistance

**Kieron Corless** investigates the political rumblings at Slovenia's Isola festival

In its four years of existence, the Isola film festival in Slovenia (known locally as Kino Otok, literally Cinema Island) has been building a formidable reputation. The minority of attendees who arrive more or less direct from the clamour of Cannes are even more grateful than the rest of us for the quiet fishing-town location, the relaxed atmosphere and the manageable schedule: the programme's relatively small size means that more often than not audiences spill into local cafés to enthuse about the same film, a rarity at bigger festivals with a more labyrinthine choice.

A particular spirit pervades Isola, partly thanks to the beguiling setting – who could resist late-night outdoor screenings with viewers huddled under blankets in the old town square? – but principally because of the quality of the programming and the friendliness of delegates and staff. Guests such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul and this year Abderrahmane Sissako testify to the openness and sense of purpose with which the organisers pursue their aims. There's also a resolve to resist the ambition to grow and so dilute what has been created.

Recently the festival has also

unwittingly become a more politicised entity: an island of resistance, as one critic coined it. To an outsider, such Slovenian films as *Gravehopping*, *Labour Equals Freedom*, *Tuning* and *Spare Parts* have seemed indicative of a flourishing arthouse scene, underwritten by the excellent work carried out in Ljubljana's cinemathèque. But the three-year-old right-wing government has decimated every element of the system. "It's going from bad to worse," says Isola's programme director Koen Van Daele. "The conservative government is pulling out the roots of everything that was put in place. There are as good as no new films being produced and for the first time since independence the national film fund is directly intervening in terms of content. If a project isn't considered nation-reaffirming or edifying, they simply won't support it. It's very reactionary and the destruction is already at an advanced stage."

None of the festival staff, it turned out, had been paid for six months, and a sense of embattlement percolated into the programme. Themes of injustice, of individuals or communities struggling against the system kept recurring, notably in headline films such as Sissako's *Bamako* or Vittorio de Seta's *Letters from the Sahara*, which drew attention to the west's warped relationship with Africa. Running in tandem with the main programme was a strand

featuring film artists such as Boris Lehman, Jacqueline Veuve, Slobodan Valentincic and Jonas Mekas; resistance here took the form of lone operators pursuing deeply personal projects well outside the mainstream.

There was much else to celebrate. Brilliante Mendoza's *The Teacher* explored the impact of a literacy campaign on one extended family on the eve of the 2004 Philippines elections; Travis Wilkerson's *Who Killed Cock Robin?* revealed a formally innovative and leftist American voice still denied a distribution outlet in Britain; the reflexive games of Hackney-based novelist/film-maker Xiaolu Guo's *How Is Your Fish Today?* blended documentary and fiction in the story of a blocked screenwriter. (Her accompanying short *Address Unknown* tells of an émigré's return to a much-changed Beijing – "like a 40-year-old man who's just started taking cocaine".)

These were all good films, but the last screening I attended, of the first film for 12 years from little-known Austrian director Peter Schreiner, was something akin to miraculous. Ostensibly a documentary about the disappearance of the Plodar dialect, still spoken in the village of Sappada in northern Italy, *Bellavista* became an almost dreamlike meditation on memory, language, landscape and the inner conflicts of one particularly fascinating individual. Perfect film, well high-perfect festival.