

# BOOK REVIEW

**Endri Keko's *Ditari i një kinoregjisori (Diary of a Film Director)***, ed. by Ilir Keko and Teuta Keçi (Tiranë: Muza Printing, 2024)

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With the recent publication of Endri Keko's *Ditari i një kinoregjisori (Diary of a Film Director)*, Ilir Keko and Teuta Keçi continue their labor of love and respect for the cinematic legacies of Endri and Xhanfise Keko, two of the pioneers of the "New Albania" Film Studio (*Kinostudio "Shqipëria e re"*). This meticulously crafted volume of over 600 pages overarchingly consists of personal journal entries made by Endri Keko, from the time of his studies at the Moscow Studio for Documentary Film (1950-1952) until his final written remarks, made but a few short months before his death in April of 1989. The work is a

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tribute not only to Keko as a maverick in the growth of non-fiction film in communist Albania, but also to his personal attributes, those of a man held in love and esteem in both public and private life.

*Ditari i një kinoregjisori* is prefaced by brief observations by Endri Keko himself, which were originally published in 1989 in *Nëntori* (*November*) as an introduction to the publication of selections from the documentarian's memoirs. Keko attests to the importance of the written word as a vehicle for organizing his thoughts and preserving his recollections. He explains that his initial efforts to create a memoir had been published in 1978 in *Tribuna e gazetarit* (*Journalist's Tribune*) and had been warmly received, perhaps due largely to the simplicity and lack of embellishment with which they were written (p. 5). Encouraged by the initial, favourable reception of these efforts, Keko continued to publish selected memoirs in the journal *Skena dhe ekrani* (*Stage and Screen*) over the course of the better part of the 1980s. The 1989 publication of memoirs in *Nëntori* constituted his final work to appear in print. Keko died on April 8 of the same year.

The journal entries per se are preceded by a lengthy chronology, which focuses primarily on Keko's activities in the partisan movement, most notably highlighting the extent to which he integrated both art and revolutionary spirit. Keko was an expert guitarist, and one notes the importance of music as an art form for a man who would become so instrumental in the reconfiguration of another art in Albania. The photos that accompany this chronology illustrate at once the enthusiasm and pride with which Keko participated in the partisan movement and

his love for music.

The diary per se opens in 1949 with Keko's observations on his selection to be a member of the cohort of six young future film professionals to be trained in Moscow. He discusses at length his years in the Soviet Union, focusing on his work with such noted film directors as Ilya Kopalin, the inner dynamics of the group of Albanian students, and his burgeoning relationship with Xhanfise Çipi, who was soon to become Xhanfise Keko *and* also the chief editor of the "New Albania" Film Studio. The studio would open its doors soon after the return of the cohort in 1952. A noteworthy insight provided by Keko that has rarely, if ever, been mentioned in discussions of the cohort is that none of the members had completed their secondary school education. This observation attests to the sheer determination and openness of the young film professionals who would play such a key role in the development of the *Kinostudio* enterprise. Keko's journal entries continue to trace the early days of *Kinostudio*, his close professional contacts with the Soviet Union, and his cooperation with China following Albania's breach with Moscow. The reader learns first-hand about the documentary film world of Albania at diverse moments in the country's political and cultural history. Toward the end, the entries grow increasingly personal. The final entry is dated 31 December 1988, written during Keko's final illness. In the closing entries, Keko discusses his health and physical weakness, expressing gratitude to his life companion, Xhanfise, for her love, companionship, and assistance during this trying period.

Carefully selected photographs, which are interspersed throughout the actual memoir entries, provide visual insights into

Keko's studies in Moscow; the early years of *Kinostudio*; Keko's work on the production of numerous documentaries; the director's professional associations, both domestic and international; and, finally, private moments with the Keko family. The photos are supplemented by reproductions of documents authenticating virtually all of the above, and these attest to significant strides in Albania's cultural and film worlds. *Ditari i një kinoregjisori* thus provides the reader with illustrated insights into the persona of Endri Keko, a groundbreaking film professional who brought documentary film to new levels of excellence as the *Kinostudio* sought to transcend the limitations of communist Albania's initial newsreels of the 1940s.

The memoirs are accompanied by insights by Endri Keko's son, Ilir; journalist Ben Andoni; the late poet, writer, and politician Dritëro Agolli; and the late director of Albania's first feature film and later chief of *Kinostudio*, Kristaq Dhamo.

The volume is an excellent companion piece to the 2008 publication of Xhanfise Keko's *Ditët e jetës sime (The Days of My Life)*, which was also overseen by Ilir Keko and Teuta Keçi. This earlier collection of reflections by Endri Keko's widow provides a counterpoint to *Ditari i një kinoregjisori*, and together, the volumes offer readers a roadmap through the film world of Albania's communist period, with its shattering shifts and reconfigurations over the course of Albania's changing political landscape. It is necessary to stress that Endri Keko died some two years prior to the fall of communism and Xhanfise Keko, for her part, retired from film and did not continue to work in the new transnational context of Albanian cinema during recent decades. Thus, both artists worked exclusively during the communist era,

and their insights into this period are most illuminating. *Ditët e jetës sime* was published in the wake of an international surge in interest in the films of Xhanfise Keko following increased academic attention devoted to her films, the inclusion of her work in Mark Cousin's 2013 documentary, *A Story of Children and Film*, and the 2014 restoration and international screenings of *Tomka dhe shokët e tij* (*Tomka and His Friends*, 1977) by the Albanian Cinema Project. The volumes written by Endri and Xhanfise Keko cover much of the same territory, including discussion of their respective childhoods, their studies in Moscow, the early days of *Kinostudio*, and the growth of the Albanian film world.

There are, however, noteworthy differences between the memoirs. Each book offers a divergent prism into Albania's cinema world. Hence, it is of special significance to consider the two sets of memoirs together. Xhanfise Keko's writings are the memoirs of a woman, who began as a ticket seller in a movie theatre, studied to become *Kinostudio*'s leading film editor, and transformed herself into the country's chief proponent of the children's film in Albania. Her writings, moreover, are far more personal than Endri's. Like her husband, she explores the couple's early days together in Moscow and the camaraderie of the cohort members. These topics are also discussed by Endri. Yet Xhanfise accentuates far more the private context of the Keko family, openly discussing her life in the wake of her husband's death and the profound impact that the loss of her son, Teodor, had on her later years. Like the publication of Endri's memoirs, *Ditët e jetës sime* is enhanced by photographs which document both Xhanfise Keko's activities in the film world and

her family life. As the memoirs close, Xhanfise Keko asserts that, despite having retired from the film world, the cinema had never left her. *Ditët e jetës sime*, like Endri Keko's memoirs, can be viewed not only as an exploration of the private side of one of the most formative figures of Albanian cinema, but also as a testament to the inner workings of *Kinostudio*. Unlike *Ditari i një kinoregjisori* though, Xhanfise Keko's memoirs, with the exception of an introduction by her son, Ilir Keko, do not include testimonies from colleagues and friends. The book is written exclusively in her own voice. *Ditët e jetës sime* is one of several volumes that attest to both Xhanfise Keko's expertise as a film director and the love and admiration her child actors have held for her.<sup>2</sup>

As groundbreaking as the recent academic and film work on Xhanfise Keko have been for an international understanding of the *Kinostudio* period, it must be remembered that this director of children's films did not live and work in a vacuum. Her husband, Endri, had championed the development of documentary film at *Kinostudio*. The release of *Ditari i një kinoregjisori* will anchor his contributions into the rarely studied arena of non-fiction film in Albania. It is essential to stress that

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<sup>2</sup> *Ditët e jetës sime* is but one of several books that pay tribute to Xhanfise Keko as *Kinostudio*'s foremost woman director. In 2012, Teuta Keçi and Ilir Keko edited *Teta Xhano (Aunt Xhano)*, Tiranë: Lilo Printing & Publishing), which documents the indelible impact Xhanfise Keko had on the child actors who had the opportunity to work with her. In 2014, Ilir Keko and Genc Përmeti edited what could be deemed a companion volume to the restoration of *Tomka and His Friends. Tomka dhe shokët e tij: Koha e njerëzimit e një filmi/Tomka and His Friends: The Time and People of a Film* was published in Tiranë by Lilo Printing & Publishing.

Endri Keko was the only member of the Moscow cohort to be initially trained as a film director. This attests to the importance placed by *Kinostudio* on documentary film during the earliest years of the enterprise. In Moscow, Keko had had the opportunity to work closely with Soviet director Ilya Kopalin, who is perhaps best known for his films covering the Yalta Conference and Yuri Gagarin's venture into space. Such mentorship allowed Keko's work, which had initially followed suit with many of the standard Albanian documentary fare of the 1940s, to come into its own and find its own voice. Keko is especially recognized for the power of his visual imagery, and a good number of the illustrations presented in *Ditari i një kinoregjisori* document the attention he paid to the proper photographing of subject matter.

The volume further substantiates Keko the documentarian's innovations. Keko's memoirs describe his 1955 film, *Letër nga fshati* (*A Letter from the Village*), which anticipates *Kinostudio*'s transition from documentaries to dramatized features only two years later. The film's form is hybrid. A framing device introduces a young village man writing to his friend, who has travelled to Moscow to study, informing him of the diverse transformations that have been made in their home village. The documentary was, perhaps, of considerable personal significance to Keko, in that it is set in the region of Korçë, where Keko spent his formative years. In 1957, Hysen Hakani's *Fëmijët e saj* (*Her Children*) would mark Albania's transition into dramatized films. Like *Letër nga fshati*, it is a hybrid film that frames a call for the vaccination of children in Albania's remote countryside within the dramatized story of a woman whose son has been bitten by a rabid dog, ultimately dying due to his mother's reliance upon folk

medicine. Keko's film, moreover, anticipates Albania's first feature-length dramatized film, Kristaq Dhamo's *Tana* (1958), in that it depicts the engagement of a young woman from a cooperative farm to a young man from a neighbouring farm. *Letër nga fshati*, moreover, is reflective of Albania's political affiliations at the time. One of its prime themes is the Albanian-Soviet friendship. Not only does its protagonist write to a friend who is studying in the Soviet Union, but, moreover, the film follows a visit with the collective of a Soviet delegation, during which the Soviets and Albanians dance in celebration. *Letër nga fshati* is visually engaging and underscores the marked development of the documentary film during the early days of *Kinostudio*. Keko was undisputedly the most influential individual in this transformation.

Keko's memoirs are replete with little known facts that enhance the reader's understanding, both of *Kinostudio* as an institution and of the director himself. For instance, one of the most noteworthy revelations of the book's first few pages contradicts most historical accounts of the life of Endri Keko. Earlier publications, including Abaz Hoxha's extensive encyclopaedia of Albanian cinema, identify Endri Keko's birthplace as Dardhë, a village in the Korçë region.<sup>3</sup> The memoirs prove otherwise. Although Dardhë was indeed the director's ancestral home from the mid-eighteenth century onward, the reader learns that Andrea (Endri) Keko was not even born in Albania! A family history documents six generations of the Keko family, with Endri being mentioned as the only child that had

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<sup>3</sup> Abaz Hoxha, *Encikopedi e kinematografisë shqiptare*, Tiranë: Toena, 2002.

been born abroad. Kerko's parents had actually taken up residency in Millinocket, a small town not far from Bangor, Maine, where his father had taken a job in a paper mill. *Ditari i një kinoregjisori* provides not only Keko's sloppily written birth certificate, most likely drafted by a town clerk and recorder who struggled, not only with Albanian names, but also, with English itself – Albania is written as “Albinia”! This is followed by photos of Endri as an infant and small child, one depicting his mother with her two older children in the winter snow in front of the family home in Millinocket. Keko remained in Maine until 1930, when his family travelled back to Albania and resettled in Dardhë. His father, however, was forced to return to Maine only two years later to support the family.

The volume is enhanced by tributes from two of Keko's close friends, Dritëro Agolli and Kristaq Dhamo, penned in 1989 following the documentarian's death. Agolli offers anecdotes from the many years of professional collaboration and friendship with Keko. He speaks specifically of the director's undaunting energy and his love and enthusiasm for his craft. Of equal importance, he draws special attention to Keko's humour and genuine warmth. Agolli further describes the sharp wit of the director's mother and the friendly banter she shared with her daughter-in-law, Xhanfise. Summarizing his relationship with Endri Keko, Agolli writes: “We were like brothers – bound by a thousand threads of friendship and love. We often travelled together throughout Albania – on foot, by car – and in the homes of villagers, he knew how to win their affection and hearts” (p. 558, my translation). Agolli's tribute is followed by a filmography, and lists of honours, awards, and titles that had been

bestowed upon Keko by the Albanian government, both during his lifetime and posthumously.

The final tribute presented in *Ditari i një kinoregjisori* is that of Kristaq Dhamo, who foregrounds not only the importance of Keko's films, but also, his work as a writer of memoirs. Regarding the latter, Dhamo writes:

“But what increased our respect for these writings and their author was the freshness of thought, the ability to recount things just as they had happened, viewed from an age and a time that permits itself both self-irony and self-criticism, as well as mature judgment and critique.” (p. 587, my translation)

Dhamo articulates the importance of Keko's work, placing it within the broader context of *Kinostudio*'s humanistic vision. He articulates: “Our national cinema has forged a healthy tradition in its effort to place the human being at the forefront. Endri always strove to portray the great historical shifts of our country through people and the thoughts they carried” (p. 589, my translation).

*Ditari i një kinoregjisori* concludes with 38 pages of photographs devoted to Keko's family life. These are arranged chronologically from the documentarian's marriage to Xhanfise in 1952 to a photograph with his two sons taken in 1989.

It is necessary to note that the book bears no ISBN number. Rather, it was issued by a printing house instead of a publisher. To those who wish to explore the artistic and private world of Endri Keko, this is actually of little consequence. What is most important is that Keko's own words have been made available,

and these offer unprecedented insights into an undisputed leader of documentary film in Albania, both on professional and personal levels. Like Xhanfise Keko’s *Ditët e jetës sime*, the published memoirs document the multidimensionality of the complex world of the “New Albania” Film Studio. Readers must be grateful to Ilir Keko and Teuta Keçi for affording them such a rare opportunity.

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