
Complicating Legacies

Restoring and Re-releasing the Films of Xhanfise Keko

ABSTRACT In 2020 the Albanian Cinema Project's restoration of *Tomka Dhe Shoket e Tij* (Tomka and His Friends, 1977) premiered on Turner Classic Movies in their "Women Make Film" series. This event marked the culmination of my work to bring the films of Albania's first female film director, Xhanfise Keko, into global distribution. A key aim for these projects was to begin to open up a space for Albanians at home and in the diaspora to address the silences that persisted around their years under an extreme, isolationist dictatorship. This article maps the project of re-education that I embarked on as an archivist, curator, and media historian. Now, with ACP shuttered and the benefit of hindsight, I reflect on the work of restoring and re-releasing Albanian films as a project of re-programming (double entendre intended) Albanian socialist-realist cinema for contemporary, global publics. **KEYWORDS** Albania, Albanian film, Balkan cinema, children in film, cinema under communism, female filmmakers, film curation, film festivals, film restoration, repertory cinema, socialist realist cinema, women in film, Xhanfise Keko

On August 6, 2023, the Arkivi Qendror Shteteror i Filmit (AQSHF, Albanian National Film Archives) posted an announcement to celebrate the anniversary of one of Albania's most beloved classic films. It consisted of a series of black-and-white photos from AQSHF's collections, alongside scans of the publication the *Albanian Film 1978*, an English-language publication produced in Albania and intended for international distribution (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). One woman stands proudly among the production crew, the film's director Xhanfise Keko. She holds her purse, but it is the assistant director who carries the trophy. This image may have led readers to infer that Albert Xholi was the film's actual director. The language of the Kinostudio in 1978 was further misleading, still favoring the collective voice to celebrate "the filmmakers." Yet the image suggests that men still dominated the scene.

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FIGURE 1. The description of the photo as it appeared on the AQSHF Facebook feed. Pictured (*left to right*): Vangjel Leka, the sound operator; Kicho Blushi, the screenwriter; Xhanfise Keko, the director; Albert Xholi, the assistant director; Arif Matjani, the cinematographer; Saim Kokona, the camera operator; Bashkim Asllani, the assistant camera operator. #filmishqiptarnebote, #beniecenvete, #giffonivallepiana, #kinostudioshqiperiaere, #xhanfisekeko.

45 years ago, today . . .

On August 6, 1978, at the closing ceremony of the VIII edition of the Giffoni International Film Festival in Salerno, Italy, the Albanian film *Beni Walks Alone* won the honorary award. The cup was handed over to the Secretary of the Albanian Embassy in Rome, Mr. Naim Furxhi, and was then sent to the Kinostudio where he handed it himself to the filmmakers.



FIGURE 2. Pages from the Albanian-produced English-language publication *The Albanian Film 1978* featuring scenes from Xhanfise Keko's best known film *Beni ecën vetë* (Beni Walks on His Own, 1975). Photo courtesy of AQSHE.

The publication also notes that:

40 states with 200 films took part in this festival from which only 45 films were accepted for competition. Among them were also the Albanian films “Ben walks by himself” and “Tomka and his comrades.”

Both films were directed by Xhanfise Keko, the first internationally recognized female filmmaker to emerge from Albania’s Kinostudio system. From 1972 to 1984 Keko produced eleven feature films that centered the trials and tribulations of Albanian children. Keko made her mark in fiction filmmaking but began her career in documentary film. She directed over twenty-five films in all, beginning with newsreel and documentary shorts for which she was not always credited. In the early 1950s, she left Albania for the Soviet Union to study filmmaking formally. Upon her return to Albania, Keko worked in the New Albania Film Studio, first as an editor of newsreels. She married one of the leading documentary cameramen, Endri Keko, and slowly moved from behind the editing bench to the position of writer and director. By the late 1960s, directors in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and Yugoslavia began to produce children’s films with political messages that subtly questioned the

systems in which they were working, while also staying within their respective state's circumscribed filmic grammars. Xhanfise Keko had access to some of these films during a brief period of heightened cultural exchange with the outside world that ended abruptly in 1972—after an annual song festival featuring Western jazz and rock 'n' roll was broadcast on Albanian television. Communist authorities used the event to completely clamp down on cultural freedoms. Several people who took part in the concert were imprisoned or sent to internal exile.

The 1970s were an abominable time to be an artist in Albania. Yet, Xhanfise Keko was able to press forward with her advocacy for a stronger program of children's film production in Albania. Was it the regime's desire to focus on the early indoctrination of children that enabled Keko to push her agenda? We will never know the answer to this question: until the end of her life Keko never addressed her methods for getting her films through the state censors. In her autobiography *The Days of My Life*, published toward the end of her life and only available in Albanian, Keko wraps up her ideology in a tidy bow: "We had one common goal in life: to raise a new generation, beautiful, educated, and wise, to serve Albania's tomorrow. Cinema and children remain two of my greatest passions."

Across their social media channels AQSHF identifies itself as "the sole custodian of Albanian film heritage." However, they have struggled to uphold this ideal, and several filmmakers with materials on deposit at the archives do not believe the state can or should claim this role. Each new political election brings new officials into the government who have enacted staff and budget cuts that make it extremely difficult for those working at AQSHF to manage the collections. This is why and how the Albanian Cinema Project (ACP) was formed in 2012.¹

As the cofounder and director of the Albanian Cinema Project, I worked alongside concerned cineastes and archivists from Albania, Switzerland, Croatia, Hungary, Bosnia, Slovenia, Italy, France, Austria, Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, Hong Kong, and India to put pressure on the Albanian government to take better care of their moving image heritage. A chance phone call in 2011 with Albanian American filmmaker Thomas Logoreci led to a visit to Tirana, Albania, and further collaboration with Albanian filmmaker Iris Elezi to launch this capacity-building project. ACP had the full support of the then director of AQSHF, Elvira Diamanti. From the outset we were vocal and established a strong presence in the Albanian media and international archival circles. Elezi, Logoreci, and I used

our networks to gain momentum within Albania and appeal to a broader international public.

ACP's long-range goal was to preserve Hoxha-era films that we believed needed to be reexamined and contextualized for contemporary publics to open a dialogue on a difficult past rather than sugarcoat the productions of a film industry forged under the oppressive socialist regime of self-proclaimed "dictator for life" Enver Hoxha, who ruled from 1944 until his death in 1985. Yet it took a while for these complicated and necessary conversations to emerge. The filmmakers still alive today who bridged the period of post-socialist and predemocratic Albania were open to dialogue and critique of their status under and after the regime, but the family members of filmmakers who were no longer living were hesitant to engage in critique. For better or for worse, the first two films that ACP chose to restore and re-release were directed by filmmakers who had since passed on. While negotiating access to materials with AQSHF and with the heirs, the adult children of the filmmakers expressed strong resentment toward the state and toward ACP's efforts. They struggled with residual traumas and feelings of both guilt and entitlement. Filmmakers and their families were given special treatment by Hoxha if they toed his party line. As ACP's presence grew and as the restorations began to circulate beyond Albania, the carefully constructed narratives of life under Hoxha began to unravel. While international audiences were more forgiving of their pasts, many Albanians who were not favored by the regime understandably harbored anger and pain.

We achieved rapid success because we were standing on the shoulders of Albanian filmmakers Fatmir Koçi, Kujtim Çashku, Artan Minarolli, Piro Milkani, and Eno Milkani. These filmmakers bridged the period of the repressive Kinostudio era of "dictator for life" Enver Hoxha's socialist regime (1944–1984) and contemporary European co-productions funded mainly by EU-sponsored EURIMAGES grant programs. These filmmakers had honed their craft in the latter part of Hoxha's regime and achieved critical international acclaim postdictatorship. They are the custodians and rights holders of their post-Hoxha era productions. While they do deposit a copy of their films at AQSHF, as this is the standard legal practice in Albania for any productions receiving partial state or EU funding, they are all personally and financially invested in assuring long-term preservation of and access to their work.

The tension between the state (as an entity that controls access to Albanian films) and the individual filmmakers and their families persists to this day. Blanket official public statements identifying AQSHF as "sole

custodian” cause these tensions to persist. The Albanian government’s continued use of totalizing language points to a continuation of regime-era culture within governmental and political circles. In fact, many of the individuals in positions of power in Albania in 2023 have direct ties by blood or party affiliation to their Hoxha-era counterparts.

In September 2020, during the height of the COVID pandemic, ACP’s restoration of the film *Tomka Dhe Shoket e Tij* (Tomka and His Friends, 1977) premiered on Turner Classic Movies as part of their three-month-long “Women Make Film” series.² TCM host Dr. Jacqueline Stewart introduced the film in conversation with the American female filmmaker Kimberly Peirce, best known for her debut feature film *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999).

ACP’s restoration of *Tomka Dhe Shoket e Tij* had screened to international acclaim at film festivals and in repertory theaters between 2014 and 2018, on VOD in the United Kingdom in 2014 via Filmhouse UK, and on the now defunct FilmStruck platform in Canada and the United States in 2017. But making it to TCM’s live broadcast as the featured program of the evening in September 2020 signaled to the Albanian National Film Archives, the Albanian film community, and the Albanian public that Albanian film had finally arrived.³ It didn’t matter that Albanians could not watch the film in their own homes that evening, as it had only been licensed for broadcast in the United States, or that many Albanians at home and in the diaspora believed that Keko (and all filmmakers under Hoxha) had colluded with the repressive state and were somewhat hesitant about celebrating this restoration and re-release. The Albanians who had suffered under the regime still had a bitter taste in their mouths due to the social and political indoctrination in which these films played a part. Yet, they knew the story by heart and felt a sense of nostalgia for their culture awakened by rewatching this film in a new context. With some understandably conflicting emotions, their hearts were now set on Tomka and his rag-tag group of pals endearing themselves to a wider swath of the American public than those who attend film festivals and special cultural programs featuring global archival cinema. At public screenings hosted by ACP in different countries, Albanians would show up and share that they attended the screening to see a film in their native language, or to introduce their children to some of the films that they grew up watching. Their nostalgia and longing for something from home was often tempered by a melancholy for a country that most had willfully fled—either under dire and dangerous conditions before the collapse of the regime, or in the years immediately following the establishment of democratic governance in Albania.

The mere fact that the TCM channel was available in 68.2 million homes in 2020 meant that this film had the potential to reach an audience 22.5 times larger than the entire population of Albania, which has hovered at approximately three million for the past two decades.⁴ With just a little over 200,000 Albanians (immigrants and US-born) now calling the United States home, the potential audience for this TCM event was 3,400 times larger than the Albanian American community. When put in these terms, it is no wonder that Albanians were feeling a sense of cultural pride. I too was swept away in the excitement of this moment. Although ACP had officially closed as a capacity-building project in 2018, I blasted this information far and wide on all the social media channels that I keep active for ACP (even today). Since 2012 I have devoted much of my intellectual, professional, and personal labors to increasing global awareness of Albanian cinema by advocating for film festivals to program their content and for media historians to analyze these productions and publish new scholarship on this underseen cinema.

When the night finally arrived, I sat in my living room to watch the feature presentation introduced by Dr. Stewart and Kimberly Peirce, while capturing photos or quick videos of the screen and posting live to ACP's Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter feeds. I nearly jumped out of my seat when I listened to Peirce compare some of the aesthetic choices made by Keko in this film to those of director Gillo Pontecorvo in *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), particularly in the street scenes leading up to the film's climax.⁵ I think it's likely that Keko had watched *The Battle of Algiers* for inspiration. When I first set foot in the Albanian National Film Archives in the summer of 2011, I was immediately struck by their collection of foreign films, some 600 or so well-worn 35 mm projection prints with Albanian subtitles. The archives' facilities, constructed in the early 2000s, occupy the same parcel of land where the original Kinostudio still stands. It was established with financial support from the Soviets between 1960 and 1961, before Albania broke with the Soviet Union. The 1960s structures now house the Albanian Film Commission and the Albanian Ministry of Culture.

On that first visit to the archives, I spoke to one of its film inspectors, a woman in her sixties, who had been an editor during the Kinostudio years and a projectionist. She recounted that *The Battle of Algiers* was one of the Kinostudio filmmakers' most watched films. I imagined what it must have been like to sit with Hoxha and his cronies and screen films such as *The Battle of Algiers* on their initial release to determine whether any or all parts

of the foreign films would be censored. I immediately imagined a scenario like what is portrayed in Mila Turajlic's *Cinema Komunisto* (2010). I had seen Turajlic's debut documentary less than a year before; it was impossible not to draw comparisons as I found myself in a neighboring Western Balkan enclave whose Cold War history had also been dominated by a larger-than-life ruler who maintained a strong stance of nonalignment while employing the cinematic apparatus to construct an imaginary Albania on screen. Here I was, in an archives that held secrets and secret [cultural] weapons of the state that was itself crumbling around these very objects. What stories might yet be revealed here? The current prime minister of Albania, Edi Rama, a painter, has connections to the old regime on both sides of his family. His father, Kristaq Rama, was a sculptor who created many of the statues of Hoxha and Stalin that were placed throughout Albania. His mother Aneta Rama's family members were part of Albania's communist politburo. During the fall of communism Rama returned to Albania from France to get involved in the newly formed Albanian democratic party. Due to differences of opinion with the conservative Sali Berisha who helmed the party and went on to serve as president of Albania from 1992 to 1997 and prime minister from 2005 to 2013, Rama and Berisha became political foes, though at times it seemed they had an unspoken agreement to set each other up as strawmen.

On my first visit to Albania, I began to make sense of the ways in which the vestiges of the old regime still emerged in visual information campaigns orchestrated by Albania's public and private television entities. These have been bolstered by the film industry that remains state sponsored with the bonus of EU funding provided to developing countries in Europe despite their EU member status. Berisha was still in power, but Rama was in his eleventh year of serving as the mayor of Tirana, and since 2005 head of the opposition socialist party. He had made great strides to give Tirana a new facade, cleaning up public spaces, painting drab communist-era buildings in bright colors, engaging the people in open meetings to air their grievances and encourage participatory governance. By the time I returned in 2013, Rama had won a landslide victory in a parliamentary election. He campaigned for prime minister on a platform of European integration, economic revitalization, restoration of the public order, and democratization of state institutions. However, his critics inside and outside the government remain many. Albania still suffers from one of the lowest standards of living in Europe; drug trafficking and related crimes remain rampant; and youth continue to leave the country to pursue advanced degrees and professional lives abroad.

I reached out to Rama via email on several occasions regarding the work of ACP. Despite his own artistic training and direct connections to the socialist realist art of the Hoxha era—and his short stint from 1998 to 2000 as the Albanian Minister of Culture, Youth, and Sport who oversaw all the cultural archives in the country—he has been reluctant to celebrate efforts publicly to restore Hoxha-era films. The past is still not distant enough, especially for a politician who must maintain alliances at home and on the international stage. He has supported funding for contemporary Albanian art and artists but has received strong criticism for these gestures as well, with his opposition believing he is out to promote his own artistic output and capitalize on his status as the PM who doodles on napkins at state dinners and on his agendas during government meetings that then end up on exhibit or auction at galleries in New York and London.⁶

Pivoting back to TCM's 2020 broadcast and the scene unfolding in my living room: I had that impossible desire to jump through the small screen and into the conversation with Peirce, who went on to note that she had invited several friends to an open-air screening of *Tomka Dhe Shoket e Tij* in her backyard to prepare for her appearance on TCM with Dr. Stewart. At this backyard screening, a Bulgarian artist friend of Peirce's remarked that this film felt too propagandistic for her. I was equally pleased to hear this comment spoken on TCM. At last, the conversations that had only taken place in smaller theatrical venues might now enter American living rooms. And, thanks to the afterlife of TCM's series introductions on social media, this seven-minute conversation between a renowned American film scholar and filmmaker can continue to circulate. I, for one, have shared it many times since. This event marked the culmination of my eight-year odyssey to bring the films of Albania's first female film director, Xhanfise Keko (1928–2007) into global distribution.

Keko directed her first feature film, *Mimosa Llastica* (Spoiled Mimosa) in 1973 just as the fleeting era of cultural freedom was ending. As with all her films, she spent countless hours with her young actors, talking and listening to them. By gaining their trust, she was able to elicit authentic performances once the camera started rolling. Zhaklina Dhimojani was only seven years old when she starred in the title role, playing a spoiled child who doesn't want to share her toys with her friends in the apartment block, and is left to play all by herself. In one of the most touching scenes, Mimosa feels so lonely that she starts talking to her dolls. Only in the end, she realizes her mistake and makes up with the other kids. Mimosa is spoiled no longer. The regime approved

the film's ending, as it strongly emphasized the power of the collective over the individual. But most Albanians who have seen the film recall the young actors' authentic performances rather than the didactic ending. This is how Albanian audiences recall *Tomka and His Friends*, while most contemporary critics focus primarily on the communist themes.

Prior to its appearance on TCM, *Tomka Dhe Shoket e Tij* was presented primarily in a framework of films about childhood. As the 2014 Filmhouse UK "Cinema of Childhood" series curated by ACP board member and filmmaker Mark Cousins noted, such films could take us on fantastic voyages. In fact, the tagline used to promote this series was "Around the world in 17 Films."⁷ Promotion for the series mentioned Keko's unique status as the first female film director working in Albania's state-funded film industry, and it portrayed her as a kind and loving maternal figure who could elicit virtuoso performances from the child actors because of her innate way with children. ACP's marketing played right into this approach with a feature on ACP's website titled "Keko's Kids: Where are they now?"⁸ ACP worked with Xhanfise Keko's son, Ilir Keko, to translate and republish the stories of the stars of *Tomka Dhe Shoket e Tij* that are part of a larger memorial publication that he produced to honor his mother and her career. *Teta Xhano* was printed in a limited run in the Albanian language, and not for commercial sale.

When the film premiered at the BFI Southbank in 2014, ACP sent Albanian actor Herion Mustafaraj, one of the most beloved child actors of the Kinostudio era, and admittedly Keko's personal pet, to appear at the post screening Q&A with Ben Gibson. During this Q&A Mustafaraj echoed loving and tender memories of working with Keko, almost to the point of sanctifying the director.⁹ By painting broad and nostalgic strokes, ACP and their partners ensured that global audiences found a gentle way into the narratives of socialist-realist Albanian cinema. The poignant stories shared by Keko's troupe of child actors, now fully matured to adulthood, and representing the Albanian diaspora—as several had left Albania after the collapse of the regime—were highlighted again in 2017 when FilmStruck streamed *Tomka Dhe Shoket e Tij* in the United States and Canada.

When Xhanfise Keko died in 2007, she left behind a legacy of nearly a dozen features virtually unknown to critics and audiences outside of Albania. Seven years later, ACP's English-subtitled restoration was the first chance for international audiences to experience one of Keko's most loved films. In

2016, I wrote at length about the larger projects of ACP in a special issue of *KinoKultura* devoted to Albanian cinema in my article “The Albanian Cinema Project: Saving and Projecting Albanian Film Heritage for Global Audiences.”¹⁰ I lay out with candor the goals and some of the struggles among ACP’s own ranks and with ACP’s publics. These struggles were ideological and mired by transnational bureaucratic and infrastructural constraints. There remained a strong concern that ACP’s choices would contribute to the perpetuation of impunity for artists who had knowingly colluded with the oppressive regime and had received special treatment. ACP’s receipt of financial and programmatic support from the US State Department also dictated some of the limits of what we could or could not present in programs directly funded by the US government.

When I made the choice to shutter ACP in 2018 (with the consensus of all ACP board members and supporters), it was with the understanding that Albanian cineastes and perhaps most importantly, the Albanian Ministry of Culture, had reached a point of reckoning with its own cinematic past(s). They were now intent on continuing the work of opening up their archives. It took time and care to demonstrate that restoring films from Albania’s “golden” cinematic era was neither a rallying cry in support of the regime nor a takedown of anyone who chose to align, and yes, at times collude, with Hoxha. As a curator/outsider, my hope was to open a space for greater theorization of the colonial context of communist Albania as depicted and imagined through its cinema. Over the past twelve years this has indeed occurred, with several peer-reviewed articles published in the English language for an international readership. Some of these articles also grapple with issues of Albanian national identity(ies).¹¹

There is still so much more to discover, and I believe that diplomacy is also a curatorial practice. In my capacity as the founding director of ACP, and because of the strong ties and relationships built on mutual trust that I was able to cultivate within and beyond Albania, I continued to work with the Albanian National Film Archives as a pro bono consultant, helping the Archives forge more international partnerships with preservation specialists and independent media distributors in order to restore more of Keko’s films for international distribution. Under Archives director Iris Elezi (2019–22), the Albanian National Film Archives was soon embarking on collaborative restoration efforts with other Eastern and Western European archives, post-production facilities and distributors, as well as with preservation partners in Israel and Asia.

With each new film restored and with new audiences being introduced to Albanian cinema, the people who have filled theaters since 2018 have been incredibly diverse, and genuinely interested in exploring an underseen cinema. In July 2021, I Zoomed into the festival *Albania Si Gira!* (Albania, [and] Action!), the third edition of the four-day festival of Albanian cinema organized by Nensi Bego in Rome, Italy. The theme of the festival was *tradizione, transizione e trasgressione nell'immaginario cinematografico contemporaneo* (tradition, transition, and transgression in the contemporary cinematic imagination). Bego programmed both archival and contemporary films from Albania and Italy, including coproductions between the two. Bego encouraged me to promote the work of ACP and address the larger themes of changing gender roles in Albanian society in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. During the other nights of the festival, fellow Albanian and Croatian founding board members of ACP Iris Elezi and Ana Grgić Zoomed in to discuss other films on the program.¹²

Even more recently, in April 2023, the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid, Spain, hosted a four-day film series devoted to Keko: “Xhanfise Keko: The World for Childhood (1973–1984),” curated by Chema González. ACP’s restoration of *Tomka Dhe Shoket e Tij* opened the series, introduced by Keko’s granddaughter Denise Keko Andoni, who attended the series in person. She now works alongside her father Ilir Keko to continue to establish the legacy of her grandmother. The third evening’s film *Beni ecën vetë* (Beni Walks on His Own, 1975), starring Herion Mustafaraj, was introduced via pre-recorded video presentation by ACP cofounder Thomas Logoreci. And finally, on the fourth night, via pre-recorded video, I introduced one of the last films Keko made under the regime, *Taulanti kërkon një motër* (Taulant wants a sister, 1984.) While the theme of this series was once again childhood, *Taulanti kërkon një motër* is anything but a child’s film. I was delighted to read the program copy for this screening. Finally, twelve years after ACP had set out to demonstrate that Albanian films were more than just state-sponsored propaganda, an audience in Spain would be introduced to Keko’s work and see for themselves that an Albanian film produced in 1984, directed by a woman, could be so completely of our contemporary moment—a moment in which women’s bodies are still sites of state-sanctioned violence and contested spaces of governance in the lands of the free and the lands of the oppressed. The late Cold War constructs in which Keko’s films were produced are long gone. And yet, and still, the long arm of many governments continues to dictate

a woman's right to choose. Here is the description from the museum's program:

Along with *Kur po xhirohej një film* (While Shooting a Film, 1981), which deals with divorce, *Taulanti kërkon një motër* (Taulant wants a sister) is another film in which Keko addresses controversial and taboo issues in Albanian society. In this instance, she shines a light on the large number of one-child families, particularly among the upper class. Taulant tries to convince his parents, two intellectuals, of his solitude. But with both unaware and unresponsive to his fixation, the boy decides to take charge of the situation, saving up and going to a maternity ward to buy a little sister. After producing this sensitive and satirical work, Keko was forced to stop making films due to health issues, leaving behind a film corpus aptly summed up in her own words: "The deeper you go into the world of children, the more you learn, regardless of previous experience. In their world, I always believe we are all apprentices."¹³

To echo Keko's words, I believe that all curators and archivists, and especially those preserving, restoring, and programming films outside of their own native languages and cinema cultures, are always apprentices. We are always watching, listening, seeking, absorbing. At best we seek to understand. At a minimum we seek to appreciate filmmakers for the variety of formal and aesthetic choices they make that grant us entry into their stories. Putting aside dialectical approaches to identity formation and state-building and putting aside the obvious and oftentimes obtrusive tropes of social realism that persisted in Keko's cinema through the 1980s, she managed something that none of her male counterparts could. While the term "child spy film" is often used by Xhanfise Keko's detractors to disparage her artistic agenda and ideology, film historian Bruce Williams has recognized the term as an integral subgenre of the notion of vigilance in service of the state and has demonstrated how Keko works within the confines of official doctrine to create innovative works that reveal true individuality on the part of her films' protagonists. He states that:

While reading the films from virtually thirty years in hindsight, we note a strong separation between the child heroes and the government. They think outside the box and solve problems unconventionally. They become rugged individualists who, although meeting the needs of society, explore their own capacities to the fullest degree.

Williams suggests that it is possible to recoup the term to foreground the creativity Keko employed “to bring a most impressive level of innovativeness to orthodox and hackneyed themes.”¹⁴

While Williams has identified what he terms a series of three child spy films that Keko made between 1977 and 1980, it would be a gross generalization to include all her work under this rubric. *Taulanti kërkon një motër* premiered in 1984, when Albania was in a new period of transition and when the status of women throughout the Balkans and Eastern Europe was undergoing dramatic shifts. Abortion and a woman’s right to decide her own professional and personal destinies are central issues in this political melodrama. After an accomplished concert pianist discovers she is pregnant with her second child, she is dismayed and realizes that she will not be able to continue in her career and take care of a new baby as well. So, she asks a committee of doctors for permission to have an abortion and is taken to task for being a pampered intellectual.

Taulanti kërkon një motër can be compared to Hungarian filmmaker Marta Mezaros’s 1975 award-winning, groundbreaking film *Adoption*. Firstly because of the themes, and secondly because of the focus on a southeastern European socialist milieu during a transitional period of the Cold War. There are indeed similarities between the two films, but the female protagonists inhabit distinctly different economic classes. Mezaros’s lead is a factory worker, and Keko’s lead is a classically trained concert pianist. While it has never been mentioned, I believe it is quite possible that Keko had seen *Adoption*. Though it doesn’t appear in the list of foreign films from Hungary that are still housed at the Albanian National Film Archives, Keko was a member of an elite Albanian cultural caste that was able to engage in limited travel outside of Albania. Still, it is certain that Keko was aware of the film as it became a touchstone in discussions of Eastern European political and arthouse cinema, as Mezaros’s work was widely admired by her contemporaries and gave female filmmakers in other parts of the world more confidence to share similarly potent stories. It would take Keko ten more years to be able to produce such a film in Albania, and she did so in a very different political moment for Albania on the global stage. *Taulanti kërkon një motër* confronts the age-old dilemma that women face globally: to be both at home and in the world. It is about the choices one makes to navigate child-rearing spaces while maintaining intellectual and creative autonomy as well as a degree of economic independence. I like to think that Keko herself may have found this balance, though not without moments of serious compromise.

While I remain uneasy with some of the language of adoration that surrounds Xhanfise Keko, I also recognize just how difficult it was to play two sides against the middle in Hoxha's Albania, and the importance of highlighting the work of a female director in an Albanian film industry that is still male-dominated today.

Keko plays a central role in another project that ACP helped support, the Modern Endangered Archives UCLA Library Project for the Albanian National Film Archives paper and photo collections.¹⁵ This project is now hosted online by UCLA, making these photos available for the first time to researchers and fans alike. While the collections that were identified and digitized represent nearly every filmmaker who worked in Albania's Kinostudio, across their social media platforms the Albanian National Film Archives premiered the collaboration by sharing photos of Xhanfise Keko along with recollections from child actor Herion Mustafaraj (see Figure 3).



FIGURE 3. Xhanfise Keko prepares to shoot a scene with one of her child actors on the set of *Beni ecën vetë* (*Beni Walks on His Own*, 1975). Photo courtesy of AQSHF.

One of the main shooting locations for the movie was the village of Vithkuq in Korça. In the memories of the protagonist Herion Mustafaraj on the film and director Jeanfise Keko (1928–2007) he recalls:

I remember when we went to Vithkuq, we slept in a room and she would read me fairytale books until I fell asleep. While on the set . . . I've never learned the reason, but today when I think about it, I have the impression that Aunt Xhano was a little superstitious. Otherwise, she wouldn't have to keep me so close even when she wasn't shooting with me, and she didn't need to gently caress my head whenever she got bored on the set or yell at someone who didn't respond to her requests. Maybe she thought I brought her luck, prosperity. I don't know. That's why even today, after so many years, my love for Aunt Xhano has remained the same as the love for my mother and grandmother.¹⁶

I now have the benefit of hindsight, and the opportunity to enter spaces of endearing recollections, while also centering more critical discussions of Albanian cinemas: past and present. The work of restoring and exhibiting a series of films directed by Albania's first, but certainly not their last, female filmmaker, Xhanfise Keko, has helped me to appreciate that the project of re-programming (double entendre intended) Albanian socialist-realist cinema for contemporary audiences will continue to evolve. Until 2017 my curatorial work had been focused primarily on the films restored specifically through ACP's efforts. Since making the decision to close ACP, I have happily witnessed many curators, critics, scholars, and preservationists find their way to the Albanian film archives to make their own unique, critical interventions. While I still assist in making connections and keeping this network growing, it has been refreshing to relinquish the control on branding and messaging that ACP maintained, and to trust that the points of entry into these narratives will continue to shift. Perhaps all the time I spent learning about Xhanfise Keko's calculated approach to achieving her cinematic visions has had more of an effect on me than I initially recognized. ■

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NOTES

1. www.facebook.com/plugins/post.php?href=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2FFilmarkiva%2Fposts%2FpfbidoDDyyipu4stxxGrTHWJA3DMsjcWz568ekcUBvHSF48zubSPYnRQGYXgMstN3PtTYL.

2. www.tcm.com/articles/Programming%20Article/020720/women-make-film-tuesdays-in-september.

3. FilmStruck was the passion project of Turner Classic Movies and the Criterion Collection that ran from 2016 to 2018. In 2019 it was replaced by the Criterion Channel. See some of FilmStruck's PR for *Tomka*: www.facebook.com/filmstruck/photos/weve-added-albanian-director-xhanfise-kekos-tomka-and-his-friends-77-read-more-a/1988745884681374/.

4. Nielsen numbers as reported in the *LA Times*: www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2021-06-22/tcm-fights-to-keep-classic-film-alive-on-tv-in-a-streaming-world.

5. www.tcm.com/video/066666983/women-make-film-tomka-and-his-friends-jacqueline-stewart-kimberly-peirce/.

6. www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/nov/15/meet-edi-rama-albanias-artist-prime-minister-exhibition.

7. www.bfi.org.uk/features/around-world-17-films-cinema-childhood.

8. www.thealbaniancinemaproject.org/kekos-kids-where-are-they-now.html.

9. www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aihLiPOkTc&list=PL6t5huZH8ePj_w4rHaa-sG-GwZXcBJ6MS.

10. Regina Longo, "The Albanian Cinema Project: Saving and Projecting Albanian Film Heritage for Global Audiences," *KinoKultura* 16, www.kinokultura.com/specials/16/longo.shtml.

11. Ana Grgić, "Building a New Socialist Art: A Short History of Albanian Cinema," *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 12, no. 3 (2021): 276–92; Xiaoning Lu, "The Captive Audience and Albanian Films in Mao's China," *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 12, no. 3 (2021): 216–36; Fabio Bego, "The Sound of the Other: Albanian-Italian Relations and Kinostudio Films," *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 13, no. 1 (2022): 3–20; Lydia Papadimitriou and Ana Grgić, *Contemporary Balkan Cinema: Transnational Exchanges and Global Circuits* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020); Philip E. Phillis, *Greek Cinema and Migration, 1991–2016* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

12. <https://zero.eu/en/eventi/222234-albania-si-gira-2021,roma/>.

13. www.museoreinasofia.es/en/activities/xhanfise-keko.

14. Bruce Williams, "Two Degrees of Separation: Xhanfise Keko and the Albanian Children's Film," *Framework* 54, no. 1 (Spring): 49–58.

15. <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/catalog/ark:/21198/z1s19vm6?fbclid=IwAR1-B54y75poMXsohkm9WczBRmjjRUpGLcSA8bD3cOUyS5TFVvudyw4w23Fg>.

16. www.facebook.com/plugins/post.php?href=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2FFilmarkiva%2Fposts%2FpfbidoS3DADuYnhTzjEPujx9TGACgWbsDaWhzLt6L5h4ck6Up3LupPmkKEJuEdzCQZMgqbl&show.