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It's like film school for children

Educational Swiss movie club to open a branch here

Anna Seaman

An international film club dedicated to helping youngsters deal with the daily barrage of multimedia images is preparing to open a UAE branch for children.

The Magic Lantern, founded in Switzerland 18 years ago, will once a month show children a diverse range of films followed by discussions to boost their comprehension of what they have seen.

Kurt Blum, the general manager of Swiss Art Gate UAE, an independent organisation that hosts cultural exchange projects, corporate and public events, has been working to bring the franchise from his native Switzerland to the UAE for two years.

"There is a lack of information about film for children here," he said.

"They watch TV all the time, in the back seat of the car, on mobile phones, laptops and even while they are in the mall, but no

one really cares about the content or gives them the chance to talk about what they see."

A team of specialists chooses films that are age-appropriate. A few days before each show, the children receive an e-mail to introduce the film. When they arrive at a screening a comic stage show performed by local actors will introduce the film and informs them about the history, genres and techniques of cinema.

"The presenters explain to them why they get scared sometimes during films, why music and lights are important and the basic principles behind filmmaking and screening," Mr Blum said.

The UAE schedule begins in November and will offer one 75- to 90-minute film each month for six months, including comedies, dramas and inspirational selections. The presenters will be speaking in Arabic and the films will have been translated into Arabic.

"There is an increasing film industry in this country and this is one part of the process to get the new generation involved," Mr Blum said.

The programme, which will begin at cinemas in Sharjah, Abu Dhabi and Al Ain in November,

is open to children aged six to 12. It is supported by the Emirates Foundation.

While Magic Lantern keeps its playlist under wraps until showtime, movies selected by other branches include the coming-of-age story *Persepolis*, the health-care documentary *Sicko* and Buster Keaton comedies from the silent era.

"Magic Lantern offers such an opportunity to transform the passive spectators to active participants, encouraging critical thinking and promoting self confidence," said Salwa Mikdadi, the head of the Emirates Foundation's arts and culture programme.

The Magic Lantern was founded in 1992 in Neuchâtel, Switzerland. Within four years there were 37 clubs. By 1999 versions had opened in Europe and by 2005 in North Africa.

In the Middle East there are Magic Lantern clubs in Beirut and the Moroccan cities of Tangier and Marrakech.

Mr Blum said he will be working with those three clubs to ensure children get the best from their experience.

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Children watch TV all the time ... but no one gives them the chance to talk about what they see

Kurt Blum Swiss Art Gate UAE

Lantern shines far and wide

Set up in 1992 by Vincent Adatte, Frédéric Maire, Yves Nussbaum and Francine Pickel in Switzerland, The Magic Lantern was turned into a non-profit organisation the following year. It has more than 40,000 members in total in Argentina, France, Germany, Italy, Morocco, Senegal, Spain and England.

Clubs are usually sponsored by public bodies, private companies and volunteer partners. Nestlé and the Emirates Foundation are sponsoring the UAE club.

For more information, go to www.magiclantern.ae

* Eugene Harnan

www.magiclantern.ae