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The changelings: once maligned, the keepers of the Golden Globes have worked to improve the event's image.

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Silvia Bizio is a big James Bond fan. But she had no time to fawn over Daniel Craig at the Hollywood Foreign Press Assn.'s recent news conference for "Quantum of Solace." As Craig fielded questions on the dais of the Four Seasons Hotel in Beverly Hills, Bizio already was pounding out a draft of the story on her laptop in Italian.

"I'm very fast, thank goodness," says Bizio, a 25-year HFPA veteran. "(Because) I have a very hungry monster there, waiting for a story every day."

The "monster" is Bizio's employer, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, publisher of La Repubblica, Italy's largest daily-circulation newspaper, and its sister publication, the weekly L'Espresso. Her contract calls for nearly 200 stories a year covering all aspects of film and television. She even works the night of the Golden Globe Awards, interviewing stars on the red carpet and in the press room while simultaneously helping facilitate the event.

Bizio isn't much different than other entertainment journalists slogging their way through awards season. But her work habits fly in the face of the image the HFPA once had--that it was made up of dilettantes, not legitimate journalists.

"It's a serious group, a professional group," says Bizio, who first came to Los Angeles in 1976 to study for her doctorate at UCLA. "Like every group, it has its own quirks, but if you only knew the amount of work we put in and the amount of passion. Nobody's forcing us to see 400 movies a year. But we do."

Indeed, whereas the Academy has trouble cajoling more than a quorum to watch the 60-plus foreign-language submissions each year, almost all the HFPA's members go to lengths to watch every single film.

Efforts like this have led the awards community to take the roughly 90-member HFPA with a level of seriousness that would have been unimaginable just a few years ago. But that is also in part because the HFPA has become strict about imposing ethical regulations.

In 1999, when it was revealed that Sharon Stone sent \$295 Coach watches to 84 HFPA members, then-president Helmut Voss ordered them returned at once. True, Voss let members keep the \$35 cell phones sent by Fine Line Pictures to promote its film "Simpatico," but he made them decline the free month of service that came with them.

Now, regulations are even stricter, and no gifts may be given to HFPA members other than regular promotional items distributed to other journalists, and their value must not exceed \$95.

[ILLUSTRATIONS OMITTED]

"They police their own people much more than they once did," says veteran film publicist Dale Olson.

The members being policed are more diverse than they once were. All are U.S.-based correspondents writing for various foreign newspapers and magazines. Today, the HFPA boasts contributors to a wealth of major publications, from England's Daily Telegraph and France's Le Figaro to the pan-Arabic magazine Kul Al Osra and the China Times.

Admittedly, not all of its members are active, professional journalists. Some are part-timers whose primary employment is outside journalism. Others, like 92-year-old Howard Lucraft, are elderly. A few are just plain curious, like Alexander Nevsky (real name: Sasha Kurtisyn), a Russian body-builder who has starred in such low-budget action movies as 2007's "Treasure Raiders" and 2004's "Moscow Heat" and is preparing to play the title role in a new version of "Hercules."

Perhaps aware of this, the HFPA is careful to manage who is interviewed by fellow journalists. Members are not allowed to speak to the media without the permission of the organization's publicist, Michael Russell.

It's no coincidence that the members approved to speak for this article were such busy professionals as Bizio; Rocio Ayuso, who writes for El Pais, the most widely circulated daily newspaper in Spain; Mike Goodridge, who writes for Screen International; and

Scott Orlin, a 19-year HFPA veteran who writes for the German film magazines Cinema and Spielfilm--not more "colorful" members like Nevsky.

The HFPA has been working to bring more professionals into its ranks and to strictly enforce its admission requirements.

Prospective members must first be certified by the MPAA. When applying, a candidate must provide, among other things, a letter from a foreign publication detailing its circulation and other vital stats and verifying that he or she is an active contributor (copies of clips of articles must be submitted). Also required: letters of recommendation from two current HFPA members. Once approved, members must pay a \$500 initiation fee.

"Every year we're getting new blood representing different countries," Ayuso says.

That new blood is drawn in by some of the perks of membership--like having screenings arranged at more convenient times.

"If I were just another foreign correspondent and I would say, 'Oh, do you know if there is another screening of this movie in this part of the town?' they won't even reply to that question," Ayuso says. "But they do reply to me, being a member of the Hollywood Foreign Press."

More to the point, Ayuso and her colleagues actually see the films--and not just the big ones, but also smaller pictures that are often neglected by others.

"I send out 1,300-1,600 screening invites for each film, for my domestic list," says Fredell Pogodin, a veteran publicist of upscale pictures. "I'm lucky over three screenings to get 30 to 40 people (to attend). That's a small ratio of domestic writers going to see extraordinary movies. But the foreigners turn out. (The members of the HFPA) are interested in foreign films. They were the ones, with due respect, who nominated '4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days: and the Academy didn't."

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Pogodin is referring to the Romanian film that won the top prize at Cannes last year but failed to be shortlisted for a foreign-language Oscar. While the Academy has endured criticism for its foreign-language nominees, the HFPA has been praised for choosing acclaimed movies.

"Even if they are not making a living off the smaller, foreign-language films--and they are making a living

off the big studio films--they have been really good (to them)," Pogodin adds. "And there are a lot of films to see: You could have 12 from Italy, 15 from France. For the most part, they are here to report on Hollywood films, and it is so jam-packed they go from one press conference to another; but they make an effort. Things have changed."

HPFA's clout also enables it to host 300-400 exclusive film and TV press conferences each year.

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