

No Cannes Do - An analysis of BBC Films' public PR disaster at the Cannes Film Festival, 1996, and its significance in the context of the challenges facing a public service broadcaster making films for cinema exhibition.

In May 1996, a delegation from the BBC attended the Cannes film festival with one film in competition and two others in official selection. However, for the BBC's Head of Film, Mark Shivas, the festival was about more than promoting recent productions, it was a platform to launch the idea of BBC Films as an autonomous film-making arm. After years of negotiations, dating back to the early 1980s and following on from the success of Channel 4's *Film on Four*, Shivas was ready to announce to the world's press that BBC Films Ltd – a company separate from BBC Drama – was about to become not only a reality but a future major player. It did not happen. This paper will consider how this highly significant non-event identifies key issues surrounding the challenges for a corporate broadcaster such as the BBC in intervening in the film market and, in particular, the factors which contributed to BBC Films' protracted formation as a separate unit.

'It was to have been the highlight of BBC1 controller Alan Yentob's trip to the Cannes Film Festival', reported one newspaper. 'He had left grey White City to attend the premiere of BBC Films' *The Van*, [the] latest movie adaptation of a Roddy Doyle book. After managing to sit through the thin plot and weak jokes of the Stephen Frears film, Alan wandered along to the *Van* party. 'I'm Alan Yentob of the BBC,' he told the commissionaire. 'Oh yes, pull the other one'.¹

Unlike Channel Four, the BBC's journey into film-making was far from straightforward and it has been an area that has received little study. Born² and Cooke³, amongst others, have provided detailed insights into the BBC as an institution and as a producer of television drama, yet – despite the fact that the BBC Drama department was making feature films long before Channel Four existed – there has to date there has been no specific study of BBC Films.

In fact, by 1996 this small but distinct unit had been instrumental in assuring an international cinema release for over thirty films with a range as diverse as Don Boyd's *War Requiem*, Derek Jarman's *Edward II*, and including *Enchanted April*,

Truly, Madly, Deeply, The Snapper, Persuasion and *Priest*. In effect, operating as a production company that developed films, financed either solely by them or by entering into co-production deals with a range of British and American film companies such as Palace Pictures, Greenpoint Films and Polygram Filmed Entertainment. Yet still without a clear brand or identity and functioning within the budgetary and competitive departmental constraints of BBC Drama.

Foremost amongst the reasons for this situation, was the institutional nature of the BBC itself which, as a public service broadcaster funded by the licence fee to make programmes for radio and television, saw BBC Films' primary purpose as to provide television product.

As Shivas was to discover when he returned to the BBC in 1988 as Head of Drama there was huge resistance to moving the Corporation into feature film production in a determined and regular way as Channel Four had done. This, fuelled by a reluctance on the part of the Channel Controllers to have films into which they had put money denied a television screening for anything up to three years if they had been given a cinema release. Whilst opponents focused on the argument that 'it wasn't the BBC's business... the Charter didn't allow it'⁴, despite the fact that television films made for series such as *Screen One* and *Screen Two* had in Shivas' opinion 'outclassed many British films that turned up in the cinema at the time'.⁵

Cannes, 1996, therefore represented the culmination of years of internal debate, planning, setbacks and frustration, which finally seemed to be coming to fruition.

In addition to Shivas, the BBC delegation included Head of Single Drama, George Faber, and Alan Yentob, Controller of BBC One, with three films in official selection - Stephen Frears' *The Van* in competition, Michael Winterbottom's *Jude* in the Director's Fortnight and Mary Harron's *I Shot Andy Warhol* (made for BBC Arena), opening Un Certain Regard.

The mood appeared to be one of confidence and optimism. Long-standing problems over union agreements, which had previously needed to be re-negotiated if a film made for television (with staff crew and television contracts) was given a cinema release, had largely been overcome. Whilst, the issues of delaying television

transmission were also becoming less acute as windows for the cinema had shrunk to six months and a year for video. Now, after months of speculation in the press, it seemed certain that BBC Films would use the festival as the platform from which to announce that the unit was to become an independent company – BBC Films Ltd. An entity operating outside the Corporation structure with its own budget of approx £5m, ring-fenced for its own projects and set up so that any profit would be ploughed back into production rather than into the general BBC Drama department pot as had previously been the case.

Contributing to the general media buzz of anticipation, Shivas had recently negotiated a co-production agreement with Hollywood's Lakeshore Entertainment, which marked 'the first multipicture co-production agreement ever signed between BBC Films and a U.S. producer'⁶, and included plans to develop and co-produce six low-to-medium budget films in Europe over a period of three years with Lakeshore guaranteeing US theatrical release and the BBC taking the UK television rights. This marked another major step forward for BBC Films in their quest to become a player in the movie industry as, although they already had long established relationships with distributors such as Miramax Films, the Sam Goldwyn Company and Fox Searchlight, most deals were negotiated on a project-by-project basis.

In the run up to the festival, both Shivas and Faber skilfully used the Press to boost public and industry interest in the planned launch of the new company by predicting that BBC Films would soon be funding up to ten feature films a year (double the number they had been financing to that point), announcing also the development of bigger-budgeted projects such as the \$13m thriller *In Search of the Assassin* to be directed by Antonia Bird, in the wake of the success of her 1994 film, *Priest*.

Such statements looked like a direct challenge to Channel Four, whose similar plans to make higher budget movies had been voiced by Head of Film, David Aukin, a year earlier. Whilst BBC Films' up to then cautious strategy of involvement in films at an early stage and at reasonable prices, had resulted in good returns on their investments and boosted confidence. For example, relatively low-budget films such as *Persuasion* and *Priest* (both of which had been made for television and only given a cinema release after attracting festival

attention) each grossed more than \$4m in the United States, with *Persuasion* featuring in the US critics' Top 10 lists for 1995. BBC Films may not have had the huge successes of such Channel Four hits as *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) but it was being taken seriously by the industry and to US distributors was acknowledged as producing high-quality entertainment that represented good value for money.

Of course, such waves of optimism had been seen before and for those familiar with the workings of the BBC, the portents were still there for things not to go well.

As late as April 1996, BBC Head of Drama, Charles Denton, (by that time on his way out and acting as a consultant for BBC Films) had been categorically denying that any decision over the future launch of BBC Films Ltd as a self-financing entity had been made or that the Board of Governors would be meeting anytime soon to approve the venture.

Hopes of success in the competition section of the festival also seemed slim with Frears' *The Van* (the third adaptation from Roddy Doyle's Barrytown trilogy which had included *The Commitments* and *The Snapper*) finding itself up against *Fargo*, *Breaking the Waves* and *Crash*, as well as Mike Leigh's *Secrets and Lies* which had been financed by Channel Four and would go on to win the Palme D'Or. Whilst *Jude*, an adaptation of Hardy's 'Jude the Obscure' directed by Michael Winterbottom, into which Shivas had invested £800,000 (the maximum he could put into any one project) had disappointingly failed to be selected for competition.

As a public relations exercise for BBC Films, Cannes 1996 would best be remembered as a debacle. *Jude* may, in the end, have been given a standing ovation when it received its gala screening in the Director's Fortnight, but the grand launch of BBC Films Ltd never happened.

Eager to save face and dispel the mood of pessimism which greeted this non-event, BBC Films rapidly issued a statement claiming that they were still confident the new company would be up and running within the year. Also, that they would be stepping up production in preparation for this with George Faber set to move from his position as Head of Single Drama to join Shivas at BBC Films. The

failure to launch they claimed was due to the fact that they were still sorting out issues such as whether to bring outside partners into the venture, whilst approval from the British government would also be required: a matter one would have expected to have been resolved before creating such a frenzy of anticipation.

Shivas informed the press that British Screen Finance had become a partner with BBC Films on *In Search of the Assassins*, now set to be their biggest production to date, adding that BBC Films' investment would be limited to no more than £1m with additional funds being sought from outside partners.

Confidence in BBC Films within the industry, however, had fallen greatly and no projects on the much heralded BBC Films/Lakeshore co-production slate could now be confirmed.

The resulting impression was of an institution at odds with itself, sending shock waves into a permanently fragile British film industry – whose greatest fear was that such a public pulling of the rug from under the feet of Shivas and Faber could only mean that the Corporation was no longer committed to maintaining a film-making arm.

Meanwhile, for BBC Films it was business as usual. Both Shivas and Faber had a large slate of films in development and there were still hopes for an annual budget increase from £5m to £10m.

As Faber assured the *Hollywood Reporter*, the partnership between BBC Films and the BBC's commercial arm, BBC Enterprises, was still being discussed by management. He also dismissed any possibility that BBC Films would become unprofitable or would be forced to borrow, in line with the institution's promise to the British government that it would have curbed borrowing by the end of the year. 'BBC Films Ltd., would have an output deal with BBC network television so there wouldn't be any question of us losing money. We would make money from our transmission fees, so we would have a cushion which few other feature film companies have'.⁷

Such bravura statements, however, one feels were made not only to inspire confidence in the industry but even more to reassure themselves.

The fallout from Cannes lasted for months as BBC Films once again found itself the victim of the very institution that supported it. Whilst the Corporation grappled with a major re-structuring implemented by Director General, John Birt, which saw a separation of the broadcasting and production units. Shivas remained publicly optimistic, insisting that the formation of BBC Films Ltd was just a matter of time, despite the fact that by his own admission 'the whole place is in such a state of confusion and uproar it's impossible to say with certainty when the new company will finally get going'.⁸

Other insiders were not so sure with one source stating: 'there are so many vested interests at the BBC. The broadcast and production divisions are at loggerheads, films and the corporate centre are at loggerheads. In the past, so many different parts of the BBC have wanted to make movies because it's seen as a glamorous activity'.⁹

Things were changing – especially for Shivas. Never fully supported by senior management, from the moment he was appointed Head of Film in 1993, he had been subjected to a moratorium on spending and was told 'he would have to fight for money from single drama – the area controlled by George Faber'.¹⁰

As Simon Perry of British Screen commented: '[BBC Films] has been trying to compete with C4, which put £16m into *Film on 4* last year alone, with its hands tied behind its back'.¹¹

Any move to launch BBC Films as a stand-alone division would need to be formally approved by the governors, despite the apparent support of senior executives such as Yentob and Michael Jackson. As *The Observer* commented: 'Whether the traumas of restructuring will delay or even jeopardise the project remains to be seen. Even before it has come into being, the BBC has shown its uncanny knack for fudge, compromise and political in-fighting by deciding that its joint creative heads will be Shivas and Faber, the very two who have often been at loggerheads over money under the old system'.¹²

With such lack of will or commitment to a coherent film strategy by the Corporation, it was inevitable that questions would still be asked about whether licence fee-payers money should be diverted from television into the business of making feature films.

As Faber saw it: 'A great part of our commitment to the licence payment is to get the best of British talent on to BBC TV and many of our best writers and directors have ambitions to get their work on the big screen. If we don't give them the opportunity by embracing a full-blown feature policy for part of our output, we're in danger of losing out'.¹³

Whilst for Shivas it was simply a fact that the television film was becoming obsolete. As he stated: 'It's impossible to raise money to make them any more. They are difficult to export and their cost is not hugely different from a modest budget feature. It's more profitable to put the money into a feature film, where you can show the film as often as you like and also get a position in the profits'.¹⁴

Ironically, Birt's reorganisation ought to have favoured the concept of a separate BBC Films Ltd as it fitted so well with the Corporation's new commercial profile. But it would be some time yet before BBC Films would become the autonomous unit Shivas and Faber had envisaged and neither would be there to see it. Shivas left the BBC in 1997 to resume his career as an independent producer, after further internal re-structuring saw the creation of a new post – Head of Films and Single Drama – filled by David Thompson with whom he had unsuccessfully competed. Whilst Faber resigned in December '96 to lead a bid for one of the new lottery franchises and went on to form his own production company, Company Pictures.

For an autonomous BBC Films and its supporters – alongside an attraction to the glamour and prestige which undoubtedly existed – there was clearly a future role for broadcasters in the film industry. A role which included the production of films that would no longer be seen as viable television projects, given the reluctance of the Channel Controllers to carry on producing single drama for television (*Screen One* and *Screen Two* ended in 1998), and a commitment to secure those films enhanced and deserved exposure by means of a cinema release both in the UK and internationally. This, in contrast to an earlier ad hoc releasing strategy which had been based mainly on the reception of individual films at festivals.

Allied to this was a desire to encourage new talent and to ensure that established talent - including writers, directors and cinematographers - stayed in Britain and was not lured away to Hollywood.

From the film-maker's point of view, broadcasters' intervention into their world had already been accepted, with Channel Four frequently cited as being the saviour of the British film industry, and there was no reason why BBC Films should not make an equally important contribution. Although there lingers even now a feeling that television killed off the cinematic imagination and it was not an easy relationship on either side.

For BBC Films itself a key factor was the need to respond quickly and flexibly to the market; to the availability of financing and of talent behind and in front of the camera. Balancing a desire to make bigger budget films (meaning more co-production partners), with a corporate expectation of maintaining a degree of control over the material that differs significantly from Channel Four's more neutral commissioning policy.

Where the worlds collided was in the inability of the BBC as a giant Corporation answerable to the government, funded by the licence fee, and with the managerial manoeuvrability of a leviathan, to adapt to change easily. As Shivas once put it – there were those at the BBC who saw the film industry as full of 'thieves, sharks and louts'¹⁵ and to them it seemed wise to proceed with caution.

So encumbered, BBC Films would never have the freedom or flexibility of Channel Four and as shown by the public fiasco at Cannes, the interests of the institution would always come first. A situation, it might be argued, which not only caused a temporary embarrassment but continued to hamper the long-term development of BBC Films, preventing them from formulating a coherent film policy or demonstrating a clear creative vision (as Channel Four had done from its inception) for years to come. Whilst the burden of being under constant public scrutiny – in a way an independent production company of similar size would never have to endure – may well have contributed to a perception in the industry that BBC Films was not the

place to go with riskier projects, leading to the production of films that never quite broke the mould or (with the rare exception of a *Billy Elliott*) captured the public imagination on a large scale.

And what happened to Yentob – out in the cold and unrecognised on that night at Cannes? Well, a guest finally recognised him and he was smuggled into the party. A metaphor for BBC Films itself and the tortuous path to its eventual formation; protesting it's the real thing, but constantly over-looked and in the shadow of its rival Channel Four. Oh, and always late for the party.

Notes

¹ *The Observer*, May 19, 1996, p. 4

² Born, G., *Uncertain Vision: Birt, Dyke and the Reinvention of the BBC*, (Secker & Warburg, 2004)

³ Cooke, L., *British Television Drama: A History*, (London: BFI Publishing, 2003)

⁴ Shivas, M., 'The BBC and Film', in Hill, J., & McLoone, M.,(ed), *Big Picture, Small Screen: The Relations Between Film and Television*, University of Luton Press, p. 184

⁵ Shivas, M., 'The BBC and Film' in Hill, J., & McLoone, M., (ed),*Big Picture, Small Screen: The Relations Between Film and Television*, University of Luton Press, p. 184

⁶ Adam Dawtrey, 'Lakeshore links with BBC in co-prod pact', *Variety*, Jan 29- Feb 4, 1996, p. 18

⁷ Louise Bateman, 'BBC Films a no-show in Cannes', *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 9, 1996

⁸ Sue Summers, 'Will Auntie Remain the Poor Relation?', *The Observer*, 23 June 1996

⁹Sue Summers, 'Will Auntie Remain the Poor Relation?', *The Observer*, 23 June 1996

¹⁰Sue Summers, Will Auntie Remain the Poor Relation?, *The Observer*, 23 June 1996

¹¹ Sue Summers, 'Will Auntie Remain the Poor Relation?', *The Observer*, 23 June 1996

¹² Sue Summers, 'Will Auntie Remain the Poor Relation?', *The Observer*, 23 June 1996

¹³ Sue Summers, 'Will Auntie Remain the Poor Relation?', *The Observer*, 23 June 1996

¹⁴ Sue Summers, 'Will Auntie Remain the Poor Relation?', *The Observer*, 23 June 1996

¹⁵ Kevin Jackson, 'The Transformer: Mark Shivas', *The Independent*, January 4, 1996,