

**Scottish Films on Scottish Screens: Local Voices and Stories. An Interview with
Alice Black, Head of Cinema at Dundee Contemporary Arts.**

Alice Black, Dundee Contemporary Arts (DCA)

and

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In January 2014 Creative Scotland published a document entitled *A Review of the Film Sector in Scotland*. This was an independent review, undertaken by BOP Consulting, covering the state of film production, film education, employment within film and film exhibition. The review covers these equally but it is noticeable that the front cover features an image not of a film, or a production crew, but of an audience, seated in a cinema watching, or at least pretending to watch, a film.

Indeed the view of exhibition that emerges from the report is largely very positive, certainly more so than the view of production. The authors acknowledge that the majority of people in Scotland now see films at home on television via either broadcast, streaming platforms or DVD, but also report that in 2013 54% of Scots went to the cinema (p.1) and that cinema attendance per head in Scotland is second only in Europe to France (p. 8). In addition, the review draws upon a BFI Report from 2011, entitled *Opening our Eyes*, which states that ‘people in Scotland are keen to see more films from their home nation, with just over 50% of respondents feeling that there were too few films set in Scotland’ (p.12). It goes on to say that ‘a comparison of Scottish Screen-funded features made between 1997 and 2008 at the Scottish and UK-wide box office shows that Scotland generated an average of 23.7% of the UK audience for those films, three times the proportion that would be expected on a pro rata population basis’, concluding that ‘17% of all UK audiences who saw *Brave* [...] in 2012 lived in Scotland’ (p.12).

In short, what the review concludes is that although there are certain areas of Scotland where the population has less regular access to films, particularly to a range of programming, nevertheless the exhibition sector in Scotland is healthy and that there is a demand for Scottish films from Scottish audiences. Those audiences also embrace the kind of mainstream films which fill the multiplexes that make up three-

quarters of the cinemas in Scotland, so in principle the exhibition sector would be just as comfortable without Scottish films, but, as the review notes, ‘A healthy Scottish cinema sector doesn’t depend on a healthy Scottish film industry – but it would welcome one’ (2014, p.15).

While academic debates around Scottish cinema tend to focus either upon the nature of production in Scotland or upon readings of film texts, recently through the lens of nationalism or transnationalism, the relative health of the exhibition sector and the popularity of Scottish films with Scottish audiences seem to me to hold interesting and potentially valuable insights into notions of a Scottish National Cinema from a perspective outside of funding models, production personnel and thematic traits. What do Scottish audiences consider to be a Scottish film, and what does a film have to have in order for audiences to so define it? Furthermore, given that Scottish audiences do appear to support Scottish films and want to see them, what then can and does the exhibition sector do to facilitate the promotion of Scottish films to Scottish audiences? To begin to think about these issues I wanted to get a programmer’s perspective so I approached and interviewed Alice Black, Head of Cinema at the Dundee Contemporary Arts (DCA).

A Canadian by birth, Alice graduated with a BFA in Film Studies from Concordia University in Montreal before going on to do an MPhil at Glasgow University and an MA at NYU. After graduating, she stayed in New York working for the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) and the Cultural Services of the French Embassy, before moving to Dublin in 1999 where she was Regional Development Officer and Director of the French Film Festival for the Irish Film Institute, working under the IFI’s legendary programmer Peter Walsh. She moved to Dundee to take up the post of Head of Cinema for the DCA in 2009. She was interviewed via Skype on Monday 31 March 2014.

SB: Tell me a little bit about the DCA

AB: The DCA is a multi-disciplinary arts centre established in 1999, so we’ve just had our fifteenth anniversary. The building houses two contemporary art galleries, a print studio, a café bar and restaurant as well as the cinemas. We have two screens; one that is 200 seats and one that is 70. Both screens are fully digital and can show

3D, although we've retained our twin-locked 35mm projectors. We show around 350 individual titles in approximately 3000 screenings, welcoming on average 90,000 admissions a year, which is very good for a city of 149,000 people, which is what Dundee is now. Our programme is a mixture of cultural cinema, foreign language films and what we would consider quality mainstream films. These are crossover films, so films which one would consider are in the mainstream like *The King's Speech* (2010) or *12 Years a Slave* (2013) or indeed *Les Misérables* (2012), which has a huge mainstream budget behind it but is still considered to be at the quality end of the spectrum. The only time we would show a blockbuster film is because it was shot in Scotland. For example we showed *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) because part of it was shot in Culross in Fife, Scotland, so there was a local relevance. Also Dundee is the home of D. C. Thompson who produce *The Beano* and *The Dandy* amongst others so we have a strong comic book heritage. We tend to gravitate towards any of the blockbusters that deal with comic books but we stay away from the real mainstream.

SB: How does the DCA fit into the current picture of exhibition in Scotland? What other types of venues are available to audiences?

AB: The exhibition sector in Scotland is very strong. While we have the familiar big national circuits such as Cineworld, Odeon and Vue, especially in the big urban populations, there is also a group of independents, which are commercial cinemas owned by local business people. Some of these groups have multiple sites, for instance in Perth and in Glasgow. And then you have the publicly funded cultural cinemas such as GFT in Glasgow, Filmhouse in Edinburgh, ourselves, Macrobert in Stirling, Eden Court in Inverness, the Hippodrome in Falkirk, so there is quite a strong cultural cinema sector. The fact that there are independents which aren't chains but aren't art house is quite unique to Scotland, as is the fact that our cultural cinemas are very well supported by the public. Also the cultural cinemas are all programmed locally, which is also unusual. In England a lot of the cultural cinemas are now programmed by various central booking agencies.

SB: What do you think the impact of that is?

AB: Although there's a similarity to what we do, because all publicly funded Scottish cinemas get their films from the same pool, every single one of our programmes is quite different. The differences tend to be often quite subtle, like how long you show a film for, or how soon you get it after the release date or what you might do with it locally but they add up. So my programme for example is quite different from Eden Court's. Most importantly I think that's the reason why we survive and are successful, because there's someone on the ground who knows the local audience who is absolutely fine-tuning the programme for them. Also we're not only on the ground in terms of what we're programming, but in terms of being someone actually present in the foyer and to our audiences we have a personality. I met someone the other day who knows the Eden Court in Inverness and the first thing she said to me was 'Paul Taylor, he's a lovely fellow, I know him well. He does Q & As and we all love Paul'. I think the same is true in Dundee. Everybody knows me, I'm a familiar face. They feel they can come up to me and tell me 'I liked this' or 'I didn't like that' or 'why aren't you showing this?' There's a local connection. They are very forthcoming with their opinions, and they demand an answer. That's about building ownership and feeling they have a direct line about what's going on, not just to me in person in the foyer but also via social media. I have a strong presence on social media and people know it is me talking to them whether on Facebook or Twitter.¹

SB: Is there a distinction between the major chains and the public cinemas in terms of their attitude to Scottish films?

AB: I think there will always be more interest in, and more support for, Scottish films among the independents. Always. Largely because we're more connected to our audiences. The best example I can give is *Sunshine on Leith* (2013). It originated as a stage play produced by the Dundee Rep Company in 2007 so I knew the film was going to have a resonance locally. I therefore contacted the distributor and we made a big deal of having a local press show, involving the local press and getting people involved in the stage production to come along, which is not something the chains offered to do. Because I am on the ground and have access to the distributors this was something that I could approach them and ask them about and also I could tell them

that I thought it would have an impact, and it did. *Sunshine on Leith* beat *Les Misérables* in terms of box office at the DCA, and *Les Mis* was up until then the biggest film the DCA had had in its 15-year history. *Sunshine on Leith* beat it hands down. A lot of that had to do with the fact that we laid that groundwork with the press and local people. The multiplexes showed it as well, and I think they did well with it, but not as well as we did.

SB: What do you think are the benefits of the independent sector, and the publicly funded cinemas like the DCA in terms of supporting and promoting both cinema-going in general in Scotland and also the availability of and support for a specifically national cinema?

AB: We often talk in the industry about the divide between exhibition and production and that the links between them are quite slim, but when it comes to Scottish film making, because the independent exhibition sector is so strong and because we're quite small, there's a will to support any Scottish production making it to the screen, and we also follow the course of productions. We know when something's being shot in our area or when a certain filmmaker is working nearby, and we would share that information with each other. There's more will in the independent sector because we're here on the ground.

SB: Do you have a desire to show Scottish films or do you feel an obligation to do so?

AB: Both. Absolutely both. First, it's cultural but even if a film has very tenuous links to Scottish culture, like *World War Z* (2013), it's important to show it, and I knew there would be an audience for it because people want to see anything that has a local connection. There is, without a doubt, an appetite for Scottish films with Scottish audiences. When you go back to things like the Bill Forsyth films like *Gregory's Girl* (1981) *Local Hero* (1983) and *Comfort and Joy* (1984), they did very well in Scottish cinemas, but also films like *Rob Roy* (1995) and even *Braveheart* (1995) have been embraced by Scottish audiences. Also *Trainspotting* (1996) and more challenging films like *Ratcatcher* (1999) or *Red Road* (2006), and more recently Ken Loach's collaborations with Paul Laverty, *Sweet Sixteen* (2002) and *The Angels' Share* (2012).

Even films like Disney's *Brave* (2012), which is a Scottish story - although you can argue if it's really Scottish - was embraced by Scottish audiences who felt very proud of it.

SB: In academic discussions there is a distinction between films that are considered to be, for want of a better word, 'authentic' Scottish productions such as *Filth* (2013), *Sunshine on Leith*, and faux Scottish films like *Rob Roy*, *Braveheart*, *Whisky Galore!* (1949) or *Brigadoon* (1954). Is there a distinction for audiences? Is there something that Scottish audiences would reject?

AB: They are happy to see anything but they are discerning, so *Rob Roy* would trump *Braveheart*, and *Whisky Galore!* would trump *Brigadoon*. Authenticity is important and they are willing to accept, especially on a local level, things that are quite difficult and challenging, such as *Fire in the Night* (2013) a documentary about the Piper Alpha disaster. That was made for television but had a very small theatrical release and that did very well for us. *You've Been Trumped* (2011) also did very well because it was very localised. Even *Kiss the Water* (2013) which is a documentary made by an American about a Scottish woman, Megan Boyd who tied fly fishing ties, drew a good audience. There isn't necessarily a distinction between films made in Scotland and films made about Scotland, but if you get the zeitgeist and have a film made in Scotland by Scottish filmmakers, or a film made with a bit more integrity like *Filth* or *Sunshine on Leith*, then you are onto a winner.

SB: In terms of popularity is there a distinction between more mainstream narrative films and art films, so between say *Sunshine on Leith* and *Under the Skin* (2013), and also films that are mainstream in terms of being backed by a major distributor, and films which are independently distributed?

AB: Any film that has a national promotional campaign behind it is going to have an easier run. They are already on the public radar. But you take a film like *You've Been Trumped* that had no distribution and was being promoted by the filmmaker and the production company. It worked very well, relatively, because the production company and director were willing to do Q & As, and to bring out the residents that were part

of the story to attend the screenings. A film like this is never going to be as successful as *Sunshine on Leith*, that has a huge promotional campaign, but in terms of how it stacks up against something of the same calibre, a small Scottish film is going to do better because of the local relevance.

SB: So what have been the most popular recent Scottish films?

AB: We've had a bumper year. The renaissance started with *The Angels' Share* and then *Sunshine on Leith* and *Filth*, which came out pretty much at the same time in 2013. We had *For Those in Peril* which is quite a tough art house film and then the smaller films like *Fire in the Night*, *You've Been Trumped*, *The Great Hip-Hop Hoax* (2013) and *Kiss the Water*, they've all done really well. *Under the Skin* has also been successful for such a limited art house release. These films attract different audiences. *Filth* or *Trainspotting* attract a different demographic to *The Angels' Share*, but what you do get occasionally is crossover. *Sunshine on Leith* brought out all ages while *For Those in Peril*, because it is so challenging, is going to limit the audience to some degree. We don't have a core audience who will see anything Scottish but because cinema-going is so ingrained in Scotland – statistically we're one of the top European nations for cinema admissions – you're already ahead of yourself and for something like *Under the Skin*, what you'll get is people willing to take a chance because it has a Scottish connection. You'll get audiences who wouldn't normally see a Jonathan Glazer film coming because it was shot down the road. Ditto you might get young people who aren't necessarily interested in the story of *The Railway Man* (2013) coming to see it because it was shot close to where they live.

There are really two things that are essential to being a Scottish film for audiences. The first is language, that they are hearing Scottish voices, and the second is location. *The Railway Man* was shot in North Berwick and Tay Screen, the local screen agency, produced this wonderful map that we gave out to people of *The Railway Man* locations. Plus the Eric Lomax story is something that is burned into the consciousness of people in Scotland because his book was very popular in Scotland when it was published in 1995. *The Railway Man* was one of our biggest hits this year and though you might not define it as a Scottish film, people were coming out to see it because they knew it and because they wanted to see where it was shot. There's no

real clear definition from a programming perspective other than that. *NEDS* (2010) is as much a Scottish film as *Sunshine on Leith* and they are polar opposites in terms of style, approach and subject matter.

SB: Let's consider the state of Scottish films in general. How healthy is the exhibition sector in Scotland overall?

AB: The exhibition sector in Scotland is very healthy. Attendance at cinemas has risen steadily over recent decades, and Scots have become some of the keenest cinema-goers in Europe – as a nation, attendance per head is second only to France. Cinema is now the most popular cultural activity in Scotland outside the home. At the start of 2014 Creative Scotland published a Review of the Scottish Film Sector where they noted that the 2013 Scottish Household Survey showed that seeing films at the cinema was the most popular form of cultural attendance and the percentage of households going to the cinema rose from 51% in 2010 to 54% in 2013. There are more art house cinemas per million in Scotland than anywhere else in the UK outside London (p. 11). In Scotland we also have two internationally recognised film festivals, Edinburgh and Glasgow, and there are also regional initiatives happening all over such as the Silent Film Festival at the Falkirk Hippodrome, the touring festival Scotland Loves Anime, there's Take One Action which is issues based, and in Dundee we have Discovery, Scotland's International film festival and Young Audiences. Scottish people do go to the cinema regularly.

But the production sector continues to struggle and there's a frustration certainly in the exhibition sector that the recent success seems like a fluke and there's no explanation as to why we've suddenly had all these really strong Scottish films. They don't seem to come out of any joined up thinking in terms of funding or strategy. Part of that is because Scottish Screen, which was for a long time the national body for film in Scotland was merged with the [Scottish] Arts Council and became Creative Scotland in 2010, and in that merger there's a feeling in the sector that film got side-lined and lost its lobbying voice. Creative Scotland have responded to that and issued an independent review of the sector earlier this year, but they took a very long time in appointing someone to be the head of film and have only just announced a woman called Natalie Usher. She comes from a legal background at the

Film Council where she was the legal advisor to the New Cinema Fund. She's just been appointed in the last week but one of the main issues in the production sector is the fact that we still don't have a studio so that's lacking in terms of infrastructure and we don't have an obvious talent route. It feels sometimes as if we are losing the talent coming out of the third-level film programmes to the South or abroad as there are fewer opportunities here. For instance, support for young filmmakers in terms of short film funds, has been sporadic. Creative Scotland carried out an independent sector review earlier this year so they are certainly aware of the challenges the production industry faces and hopefully changes will be afoot.

SB: I was reading an interview with Richard Brown the producer of the HBO series *True Detective* and who is Scottish, born in Edinburgh and said that there's too much focus on building a studio and that Scotland would be better off providing better tax breaks for productions, because at the moment it's behind, for example, Ireland. (Brown, 2014).

AB: We probably need a combination of the two, because the tax breaks bring in the big productions, which then develop the talent, and Ireland is a perfect example of that. Ireland has a *bona fide* film industry; they have a star system, they have a very strong support for shorts which means filmmakers are able to produce very strong calling cards. We don't have any of that yet in Scotland, and there's no reason why we shouldn't. What we need is joined up thinking so we need funding to create a technical infrastructure that, for me, includes building a studio because we probably need that to provide what big productions need when they come here. But it's also supporting and fostering talent, which is not something we do at the moment in a really obvious way. Plus the tax incentives to get people coming in. In terms of the exhibition sector we're there, we're strong, we're ready to accept anything that's coming along and what's missing is that joined up thinking in the production sector. It's amazing that these recent films have got made in the last year without that. We've proven there's an audience for all kinds of Scottish films, and there's a lot of talent here and we have incredible locations and stories to tell and raw talent in terms of acting waiting to be tapped, so there's a frustration there.

SB: You've mentioned Q & As and showing films without distribution to audiences. In what other ways could and do cinemas support Scottish filmmakers?

AB: We could probably be a platform for new talent, so if there was a short film initiative certainly all the cultural cinemas would get behind it. We could show a short film before every feature and if they made that a legislative issue so we all had to do it – we talked about that recently – then more films would get made because we'd need the content. We could run focus groups or show rushes for local filmmakers, which is something I've been trying to do with the director of *You've Been Trumped*, Anthony Baxter. I've offered my venue outside of programmed times to him to do this, so we can help in that way. I'd say most of us do that anyways, which goes back to us being local programmers because we know what's being shot locally and are willing to get involved.

SB: When you say locally do you mean locally divided up, so you talk to the filmmakers in one area and another public cinema somewhere else talks to another in their area?

AB: Yes. We're divided in terms of the central belt and the North for example in terms of what's being made in your local area.

SB: Does it matter to audiences how 'local' local means?

AB: No. It's a real mix. It can be very urban like *Filth*, or *For Those in Peril*, which is quite rural. Or you could have something shot in the islands. Scottish audiences will embrace it all. They might not have anything to do with Shetland, but they are going to go and see a film like *Shell* (2012), that's based in that area because it's Scottish, even though they may be living in Dundee. They are less likely to automatically go and see something made and set in Wales, even though the subject matter might have more direct relevance to their lives. They are more likely to see something about Glasgow. I think that has something to do with the language and issues of national identity. That's so important. Their attitude is that we are interested in all of it. It

doesn't matter if it's not on their doorstep, provided they recognise the language and the location. The stories will come out of that.

SB: It's interesting then that it doesn't matter what it's about, whether for example it's social realist or a musical. That affects perhaps who and how many will see it but it's still Scottish. In the long term, then, do you think there is a demand for specifically Scottish stories or should filmmakers be looking more towards transnational stories, stories with a Scottish element but telling more fundamentally international stories?

AB: That comes down to your definition of how transnationalism does or doesn't work but I think there is a fundamental authenticity in terms of local stories that is universal. So when something is authentically local, then it has meaning universally. I don't know if the public is that discerning. It goes back to the idea that they want to hear local voices and see locations that they recognize, and they respond to that. If *Shell* had been from Hungary for example, it would have got a far smaller audience but they came to see it because they wanted to see the place. In Scotland people will definitely give the time of day to something that is Scottish.

Endnotes.

¹ Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/DCA.Dundee?fref=ts ; @DCADundee>

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