

Film in the Community: Back To The Future

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There was a time when cinema going was a mass popular occupation. The rise of multiplexes, DVDs and individual hi-definition television has changed all that. This may be fine if you are an urban dweller, but it puts rural communities with few cultural facilities at hand, at a disadvantage.

Derbyshire Film is a project developed by the Derbyshire Arts Officers' Group that brings cinema to local communities that may not otherwise have access to the big screen. It has been an outstanding success in its first year having sold over 3,000 tickets and screened nearly 100 films.

The project provides a fieldworker, three sets of digital film projection equipment, training and technical back-up to make everything run smoothly. Workshops with a 'film' theme are also available for the groups to book to help promote their season of films.

The fieldworker works closely with each group providing support and advice to

help them through their first film season and subsequent seasons. She organises technical training in the use of the projection equipment, audits each venue and provides advice on improvements. The Fieldworker helps with the set-up of the groups, provides advice in the form of a regular newsletter as well as being on hand for one-to-one discussions. She manages the storage and booking out of the shared equipment and also organises artist-led workshops, training sessions and network support meetings.

More than just a cinema

Derbyshire Film uses local venues, mostly village halls in rural areas, to create a mini cinema for the night. Everything to do with the evening, including selecting films, liaising with film distributors, using the projection equipment, publicising the films and providing a bar and refreshments - is done by volunteers. Local people turn their chosen venue into a temporary cinema - be it for an afternoon matinee

with popcorn for children, or a big night out in the village hall for adults. The villages show an eclectic mix of films (anything from "Brief Encounter" to "The Motorcycle Diaries") to an equally eclectic mix of audiences the length and breadth of Derbyshire. When local people discover that "Pride and Prejudice" or "The Constant Gardener" is showing in their local village hall, (usually just a walk away) - they turn up in droves. This is the real strength of the project - the fact that it is only just a walk away. No public transport needed. This also makes it a very inexpensive outing for most people, especially families. Refreshments add to the evening and are always much cheaper than at a pub or multiplex and usually home-made. Some villages theme their refreshments to the film so for "Sideways", Calver village organised a wine tasting. For "Chocolat", Holymoorside raffled a box of chocolates and provided chocolate biscuits with tea. Other villages have provided Sangria and



tapas with Spanish films and German beer with the award winning film "Downfall".

Attracting loyal audiences

The films prove to be not only visually exciting but also an opportunity to meet up with friends and chat, a feature which is noticeably absent from any run-of-the-multiplex screening. A large proportion of the audiences are made up of older people who haven't visited a cinema for over 30 years. Having a chance to walk to their local village hall to see a film has made a great deal of difference to the quality of their lives, especially during the long winter months.

The people screening the films have not only developed technical skills in film exhibition, research, marketing and publicity, they are also attracting loyal audiences. All of the comments from local people have been very positive and very complimentary. Cinema has been brought back to some villages for the first time in 50 years.

The project uses portable state-of-the-art cinema equipment including a digital projector, a 12ft by 10ft big screen, a drape kit, sound mixer, two speakers and stands, and a DVD and VHS player. Everything is housed in a flight case and hard-wired so that operating the equipment is very simple. All of the equipment fits into the back of an estate car.

Animated film is popular

Derbyshire is served by only 2 cinemas. This project has proved that there is an appetite for film screened at local venues chosen by local people. Some of the villages have gone on to successfully apply for grant aid to buy their own digital projection equipment. The attraction of the mini-cinemas is that local people have control over what they choose to watch and are not forced to put-up with what the nearest multiplex offers. Quite often films are shown a year after being shown at the nearest multiplex, merely because

the distance and expense and the multiplex venue is not to everyone's taste. When given a choice of walking to the local village hall, having a glass of wine and nibbles and watching a film on the big screen, rather than the blander more expensive option of the multiplex, many people choose the latter.

A number of artist-led workshops have run alongside the screening of films. This has helped develop the audiences. The Film Animation workshop whereby children get to make their very own animated film was the most popular. This also meant that their short films could be screened before the main feature and also encourage a different audience to attend the film night or afternoon. ●

If you would like to find out more about this project check out the Derbyshire film website on www.derbyshirefilm.org.uk or contact Kay Ogilvie Derbyshire Film fieldworker on 01629 823495 or kay@derbyshirefilm.org.uk for more details. Kay Ogilvie, Film Fieldworker