

A virtual cinema model to share with independent exhibitors: An interview with Leslie Montgomery Sheldon, director of *YourScreen*

Daniela Treveri Gennari,
Oxford Brookes University, UK

The genesis of *YourScreen* can be traced to the Cheltenham International Film Festival, launched in 2019. The Festival was on course to welcome filmgoers, filmmakers and celebrities to Cheltenham. The dates had been set for 25th May to 30th May 2020. All changed on 23rd March when the British government announced the country would go into lockdown. On 24 March, the Festival organisers decided to stream the Festival online. The Festival screened 35 films and organised 10 Q&As with filmmakers from around the world. Audience reaction was swift and fulsome. Many welcomed the opportunity to attend a film festival and to watch films normally out of their reach, including members of the community who had previously been isolated due to their age, location, health, disability or social circumstance – e.g. shielding or self-isolating.

One of the Festival's biggest successes was forming Virtual Screening Partnerships (VSPs) with independent cinemas around the country, in order to support venues that had no audiences through virtual screenings. These partnerships boosted ticket sales and inspired Festival organisers to consider taking VSPs to the next level by forming long-term partnerships, year-round, based on a business model that split profits with independent exhibitors.

With venues temporarily closed or capacity restricted, there could not have been a better time for film exhibitors to take *YourScreen* to their local audiences, to complement live, in-venue screenings with an online programme to broaden audience appeal, sell more tickets and generate revenue from new income streams.

DTG: When everything closed down at the beginning of the lockdown, I felt for my local cinema, the Ultimate Picture Palace, and realised that I could support it by watching films online. So, in many ways, it was not the film that I was attracted to, but the possibility to do something for my local cinema. And when I discovered YourScreen, I realised I wanted to

find out more about it. So, how did you come up with this idea?

LMS: It really came out of the Festival, that we decided to put online and stream from the 8th of June 2020 for 2 weeks. And the reaction we had from audiences was very positive. Obviously the Q&A made it more like a festival, but we also programmed our films to be available at set times and days, which again made it more than just an online streaming platform. So audiences had to be watching at a specific time to view our films. They would buy a ticket to the film, and they couldn't watch it before the day and the time that the film was available but thereafter. They could watch it within a certain period. In this way we could give people access to films, but also support independent cinemas. These cinemas had to close during the pandemic and they had no way of generating any revenue. So, we partnered with some of them. And the idea is that when cinemas get audiences back into their venues, we can still work with them and offer a second screen to them, where audiences can watch a second film. Our novelty is that we negotiate with international sales agents for films that are not available on UK platforms. We select seven or eight films and make them available on our virtual cinema. And then the independent cinema has the choice to partner with us for any of those films and screen it for their audiences.

DTG: How many cinemas are you currently partnering with?

LMS: I couldn't give you the figure off the top of my head. Maybe around 35 between cinemas and film clubs.

DTG: So it is not just independent cinemas, you also mention film clubs? How do you reach all these venues? And how do you promote the work you do with YourScreen?

LMS: Well, we have three groups of partners who promote *YourScreen*. One is the ICO, the Independent Cinema Office. The other is Cinema for All, and the third one is the British Film Institute Regional Hubs. And they all send out information about us to their members. That is how we promote our activity.

DTG: How can you describe your activity?

LMS: Well, it's a virtual cinema as opposed to a streaming service because obviously if you look at Netflix, they're streaming all sorts of content. They have a huge library and they also produce their own content. And any day, any week, any month, you go and they have all those titles up there available for you. We are a different kind of offering, more like a cinema. We don't have thousands of products. We curate about eight titles, which we programme during a two-month period. And once that two month period is finished, we then programme another eight films. So we are really a cinema. So, we are not a

streaming service, but a virtual cinema, giving exhibitors the possibility to turn into a multiscreen.

DTG: And you envisage that this partnership with exhibitors can last beyond the period of the pandemic?

LMS: We would like to carry on because, if you're a cinema, you obviously want people to come back to your cinema. But we are giving exhibitors and cinema owners the opportunity to programme a second film at the same time.

DTG: And how do you choose your films?

LMS: We have a very good relationship with international sales agents. So, they tell us what films they have, or we look to see what films they have available that haven't yet had distribution in the UK. It is hard to balance what we think would be appropriate for an independent cinema, which would be more of an arthouse type of film, and those that would be appropriate for a film society where the audiences are older, and maybe prefer something less challenging. So we have to balance that.

DTG: What are the other challenges of your format?

LMS: One is securing the films. The process of searching for the films involves a lot of negotiation with the sales agents. And sometimes when you think you have secured a deal, at the last minute sales agents may pull out. We have had that a couple of times where they've given us a film, and we're ready to put that into our programme, and then they say we cannot have it, because they have a UK distribution deal now. So, programming films is a challenge.

DTG: Are there challenges for the exhibitors as well?

LMS: Actually for the exhibitors it is easy. If an independent cinema wants to join, they do not need to pay anything upfront. It does not cost them anything. They just participate in the box office receipts. And take advantage of the marketing of the platform. You know, there have been independent cinema owners who have tried to do it themselves by uploading a film on YouTube but it hasn't really worked, and it takes a lot of time and effort. When they come on board with us, they do not have to think about all of that, because we are responsible for it.

DTG: Let me ask you about the audience. Do you have a sense of what the audience is like, and how they respond to your offer? Have you done any audience survey, or are you planning to?

LMS: Well, a couple of things. As you know, Netflix, albeit it's a big powerhouse and it's got 1000s of titles. People who really like cinema find it very difficult to find good films on Netflix, certainly interesting international foreign language films are very difficult to find on Netflix. So we're trying to be unique at what we're doing. We haven't yet surveyed our audience, but we certainly plan to. We have had audience surveys for the online Film Festival and that was interesting. But we are certainly planning to do that soon!

DTG: Thanks, Leslie and good luck with this!