

MAKING LAWRENCE

Mark J T Griffin tells us the story of his film, and the challenge he's had getting it to cinemas...



About 15 years ago, I wrote a screenplay about the last years of T E Lawrence's life and his mysterious death. A crackin' story, it is called *Lawrence: After Arabia*. After polishing it and deciding it had a constitution as strong as Arnie, I sent it to roughly 60 production companies to back the project.

I gave it two years. If after two years I got only back what I called 'the sound of tumbleweed' then I would make the movie myself, despite having only directed in theatre.

Well, you can guess what happened! Tumbleweed ahoj. So I set a rough budget, saved what was called the film pot and, after two years of part-time production last Christmas, we finished post-production and the film, leaving a trail of blood, sweat and toil together with a highly depleted set of bank accounts and credit cards.

But it's completed! The final act in the Lawrence Of Arabia story is made. The film stars Brian Cox, Hugh Fraser, Michael Maloney, Nicole Ansari Cox and Bournemouth actor Tom Barber Duffy in the lead role. It includes soundtrack music by Clifford White, Rick

Wakeman, and has a stonking end title song by Bruce Woolley and Chris Thompson called 'After Arabia'. It is a low budget but highly watchable film, which we think audiences would enjoy.

Getting it seen

So what have I been doing since January this year and indeed well before it? Well, of course, it's ready to take to market so that folks can actually see it. I've been trying to get to talk to all those sales and distribution people.

I've now lost count of how many emails and follow-up phone calls I've made, but it is a continuing and titanic task. Even with what I call a strong cast and pedigree, I have about a 10% success rate in getting them just to take a streaming link to review the film followed by that sound of tumbleweed again.

However, after trying to get a backer at the start of the project, I realised very early in pre-production that the likelihood of a theatrical release of the film was very slim and I needed a strategy to get it out to an audience. You see, over many years on trawling through various film magazines, I was struck by a few facts. Only 8% of films that get into cinemas are independent and were not being made by the 'Big 6'. But of those 8%, all of them were distributed by the large, well-known distributors. The next fact which I've updated for 2020 is that, of the top 50 movies to be released in 2020, only eight of them are not prequels, sequels or remakes. Just eight are original stories.

This tells us that as an independent with an original story, you have a very, very small chance of getting your movie into a mainstream cinema. It also tells us that UK/US cinemas are not inclined to gamble on a risk, but stick to the tried and tested titles such as 'Fast, Extreme and Very Prejudice', 'Thor 7' or the new Pixar 'Wormz'. We independents are therefore on our own. It's up to us to get our film seen!





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The good news is that we do have options, the first of which is streaming. In that, I also include VOD, IVOD, rental, download and such like. This is still relatively simple – you can load to Amazon of course now – but there are many aggregators out there who will help for a fee. DVD is a simple option, the cost of authoring and pressing is relatively low, and something you can do yourself if you have a ready-made social media or website market.

You can also seek terrestrial broadcast: in the UK, the big options being Channel 4, ITV and the BBC, but they tend to stick to the blockbusters.

You can also seek airline/inflight deals, and there are a few dedicated sales/distribution companies you can talk to. For good documentaries, it's still a good market – less so for full-length features.

Cinemas

Finally we return to theatrical. Here, I think there are two options if a distributor won't pick up the film. Firstly, there are 'new' services like Demand.Film, Tugg and Gathr, who you request to show your film and will put it on and sell tickets if you can get an audience for it in key countries/cities in the world. If you have a ready-made audience, this is a good way to go. Certainly, this an exciting development for independents who have a strong movie following to get their film seen in a movie theatre.

The second option is the DIY option: agreeing options with venues, and something we're trying for *Lawrence: After Arabia*. However, there are obstacles. Using the big multiplex venues has been a no-go. They will hire a screen, but only for private viewings, and won't advertise the film, so it's down to you to get the audience and sell the tickets. With hire

charges of £1000 for 100 seats, that means you have to charge Mayfair prices for tickets just to break even. If you can get them to show the film as part of their programme, they will only do it after their programming team has seen and okay-ed the film, which can be a long, drawn-out affair.

The best solution here is small 'arts centre' type venues, where you can hire the venue and its equipment to show the film, and charge near enough normal ticket prices and perhaps make some money back to repay a few of those credit cards. Again, you need a load of publicity and social media to get that audience.

For *Lawrence: After Arabia*, we've booked 16 dates at various venues around the UK, including eight in Dorset, which are selling reasonably well.

Of course, in terms of future viewings, we'll utilise all the methods above – streaming, DVD, airline/inflight, terrestrial and such like. We are also chasing the international theatrical release option. With subtitles in English, French, German and Spanish, and a more flexible industry in, for example, France, Germany and the Netherlands, we stand a good chance of getting *Lawrence: After Arabia* seen there.

We're also proud the film has won Best Picture at the Florence, Los Angeles and Kosice Film Festivals, Best Director and Best Poster at Kosice and Official Selection at others, while trending at number one on IMDB for low-budget UK dramas for release in 2020. We have now been classified as 12A by the BBFC, so we will get the widest audience we can.

So if there is a distributor out there who can hear my howls of frustration, my email can be found on www.lawrenceafterarabia.co.uk. I look forward to your call... 📞