



Left: The Lexi Cinema and Programme Director Carina Volkes (left) and founder Sally Wilton. Below: The cinema's imposing chandelier by Eden Project sculptor Bruce Munro.



No. 1 Indie cinemas fight back

It's been a long, brutal year, especially for independent picturehouses. Here's how these local heroes have made it

THE REX, BERKHAMSTED

When James Hannaway, owner of The Rex cinema, walks around town, there's only one question people have for him: when will the cinema reopen again? "I get stopped a lot," he says. "People [tell] me how much they're looking forward to coming back. We can't wait to open our doors again." On 17 May, it'll finally be back.

It's no wonder cinemagoers want to return. Walking through The Rex's impressive lobby doors, you're transported back to the Golden Age of Hollywood with its sweeping balcony, cabaret-style, Art Deco proscenium and grandiloquent red-and-gold colour scheme. "It takes you right back to the splendour of the cinema when it first opened [in 1938]" Hannaway says.

The cinema had just enough savings to get through the first lockdown, but sought help from the BFI's Culture Recovery Fund in order to survive when the following lockdown arrived in

November, ultimately awarded a £350,332 grant. "We had a little cushion to start with," Hannaway explains, "but that really evaporated quickly. We built back up a little after we were able to open for a short time, but it was really getting the furloughs and BFI grant which saved us."

The Rex has survived tough times before. When the cinema was forced to close after a 50-year-run in 1988, it became derelict. Hannaway led an extensive fundraising campaign, restoring the building to its former glory. In 2004, it reopened with one screen and 300 seats plus a raft of support from actors like Judi Dench, Martin Freeman and Charles Dance.

Pre-lockdown, the cinema had some of the highest audience numbers in its history. "Screenings nearly always [sold] out," Hannaway says, speaking of the queues that would lead around the corner from the box office. Hannaway hopes such scenes will return soon, pointing to a programme of "the best of the new releases to

tiny, obscure titles from around the world" and the "warm welcome" waiting for the audience on their return. therexberkhamsted.com

THE LEXI CINEMA, NORTH LONDON

Last year, The Lexi decided to put lockdown to good use and get on with a series of planned refurbishments. After years of fundraising and grant applications (they received £50,000, the biggest amount ever awarded by the London Mayor's Fund), renovations were well under way until everything came to an abrupt halt last autumn: the building was gutted by a fire.

When The Lexi's founder, Sally Wilton, saw the smoke-ravaged building she "immediately burst into tears. It was absolutely devastating." The rebuilding process, she says, was "an absolutely colossal project, but our builders, architects, our staff, our volunteers and the community — they've been the real heroes in all of this," noting that they've worked around the

clock to get the cinema ready.

Their work paid off: on 17 May, The Lexi will be reopening its doors and welcoming people back, including to its new second screen, a first for the cinema. "We've had some bubbles to celebrate," Wilton says.

It's not unusual for The Lexi's community to come together in a crisis. When Wilton bought the cinema back in 2006, a freak tornado hit Kensal Rise, causing masses of damage to the area. Seeing the community come together to rebuild and recover inspired Wilton to run The Lexi as the UK's first not-for-profit cinema and a hub for the entire community.

Central to The Lexi's manifesto is outreach work to parts of the community unable to access cinema. For example, they partnered with local refugee charity Salusbury World to offer subsidised cinema screenings for refugee women, many of whom were nervous about attending, having never been to a cinema before.

"We worked closely with the women to choose films they wanted to see and ones that would help develop their language skills," Carina Volkes, The Lexi Cinema's Programme Director, explains. "As the women's confidence grew, more and more women joined the screenings realising this was a safe and welcoming space for them."

As this outreach work was successful, they're planning more, especially after a year that has seen many in their community experience isolation. For example, they plan to work with local GPs to prescribe cinema tickets to those suffering with depression or loneliness. "You can't beat that experience of sitting in a cinema and sharing an experience with other people — hearing that collective intake of breath or sharing laughter or tears," Wilton says. "Cinema is about human contact and goodness — we need it now more than ever." thelexicinema.co.uk



Art Deco gem: The Rex has been restored to its former 1930s glory.



BROADWAY, NOTTINGHAM

All cinemas are desperate to reopen, but Broadway in Nottingham has an extra special reason: their recently-completed lockdown renovation. “We just want people to see it now,” says Stewart Terry, Broadway’s Director of Marketing and Communications. As well as being more sustainable (a new system uses heat from the projection room to heat the building) and accessible, it’s upgraded its four screens and has a new café and bar area too. It even has some seats designed by fashion designer and frequent Broadway regular, Sir Paul Smith. “You can watch a film in these luxury seats made by one of the best designers in the world — and all for the cost of a standard cinema ticket,” Terry says.

The cinema has kept afloat during lockdown thanks to donations from its cinemagoers, a grant from Arts Council England and the development of a “virtual cinema” so people could support the cinema with streaming tickets. “I think we raised around £12,000 just from one-off donations from our audience. People have been renewing their memberships even though they can’t come to the cinema which has been so humbling,” Terry says. “We’ve kept curating online content, but we can’t wait to welcome our audience back through the doors.”

Despite it being a tough year, Terry says it’s allowed them to reflect proudly on their long history, which has spanned world premieres, critically acclaimed crime and horror festivals and the development of up-and-coming filmmakers through its education programme. “One positive to come out of this year of negatives is that we’ve been able to take a step back and look at all we’ve achieved so far,” Terry reflects. “We have some great memories and those have kept us going.”

One such special memory came in 1994. The site of a former church, the building heard a very different kind of sermon when Samuel L. Jackson’s famous Ezekiel 25:17 speech from *Pulp Fiction* echoed throughout the building. Quentin Tarantino unofficially — and secretly — premiered *Pulp Fiction* for the first time in the UK at the cinema. A year earlier, he’d attending a special screening of *Reservoir Dogs* at Broadway as part of the cinema’s renowned crime and thriller festival, Shots In The Dark. He was so impressed, he decided to return.

“Quentin got off the plane from Cannes and came straight to us,” Terry explains, saying Tarantino was delighted to return. He arrived



with nothing more than a 35mm reel and a couple of requests. “All he asked for was a decent meal and the run of the bar for the night and he was quite happy,” Terry says. The event ran into the early hours after Tarantino did a Q&A with fans afterwards. “He chatted and had drinks with people, signing autographs — everyone loved it.”

The cinema has a long history of showing what Terry describes as “challenging films that reflect all the different and difficult slices of life”, much like *Pulp Fiction*, and its May programme aims to continue in that vein. It’s also planning to show films from up-and-coming filmmakers — including some home-grown talent.

“We have a long history of filmmakers starting out here,” Terry says, explaining that about the same time as Tarantino visited, a young Shane Meadows was working in the cinema’s basement, editing his early shorts. Throughout lockdown, it was important for the cinema to keep developing filmmakers of the future and it carried on delivering its BFI-supported Film Academy online throughout the pandemic. Now in its ninth year, alumni have gone on to work on *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter* and James Bond — to name a mere few. “It was a challenge online but the films the students made are incredible. We’re planning to premiere the films in the coming months. We can’t wait to welcome cinemagoers back now to see them — or indeed, to welcome the next Quentin Tarantino or Shane Meadows through the door.” broadway.org.uk

Clockwise from above: Suits you, sir; Broadway’s Stewart Terry checks out the seating designed by Sir Paul Smith; The cinema’s lounge; The Broadway is looking forward to seeing a lot of reservations; Enjoying a drink at the bar’s outside area; The screen at the Stafford.



STAFFORD CINEMA, STAFFORD

Sam Lavington has worked in cinemas for over 50 years. “My ambition was to save an old Odeon cinema; I’ve done that now,” he says, optimistic that despite a tough year, his cinema will once again thrive. “People sit in those seats and dream; I can’t wait to see them full again.”

A keen film historian, Lavington has a centenary’s worth of memorabilia on display at Stafford Cinema, which he owns. “People who come here are greeted by an array of film posters and projectors from every era of cinema,” Lavington says. “We even have a 1910 hand-turned projector in our foyer, something our visitors love.”

One of his favourite moments when lockdown was temporarily lifted last summer was during a screening of *Frozen 2*, when a group of children spontaneously started singing, so happy were they to be watching a film with other kids. “They loved being back,” Lavington says. “They’ll remember that for years to come, as will I.” Now, he can’t wait to reopen so his cinemagoers can enjoy more moments like these.

Lavington says Stafford cinema survived thanks to a rent reduction from the landlord and some support from the government. Despite a tricky year, he’s optimistic for 2021. “I think it could be the best year ever for cinema,” Lavington says hopefully, pointing to the glut of blockbusters still to come. “All the films that have been held back could mean a packed schedule for 2021. We’re very optimistic for the future: cinema will survive.” staffordcinema.co.uk

ELIZABETH AUBREY



No. 2 Where do cinemas go next?

Phil Clapp, Chief Executive of the UK Cinema Association, on what the future holds

Will cinemas now show a different mix of films?
The industry had survived on a diet of major studio content: no-one ever expected that supply of films to be turned off. What we will see going forward is a desire on the part of cinemas to show a broader range of content because they will need to sustain an audience which last year [flocked] to films like *Saint Maud*. Some of those smaller titles, which would’ve struggled to get onto screens, will get space in the cinema.

How is the release calendar looking?
From July onwards, we have almost an embarrassment of riches when it comes to potential film content, and it may be that some of the smaller venues are waiting for when they have a broader choice of film content. My sense is that with larger operators, their plan is to open as many of their sites as soon as they can.

Will the simultaneous streaming/cinema release model continue?
We’ve seen a number of

experiments by studios in releasing films, and I think those will continue to a degree for a period of time. But nothing we’ve seen suggests those revenue streams can replace what you get from a film being shown in cinemas.

Are there any measures you’re concerned about?
We publicly and robustly oppose Covid passports. That’s on the basis of a whole series of familiar concerns around equalities, and the ethical consideration about asking someone to prove they’ve had a medical procedure to enter what’s supposed to be a place of entertainment.

Could we see a return of cinemagoers to the level of 2019 this year?
A nationwide survey [from the Film Distributors’ Association] found that the UK public is more eager than ever to return to cinema. I think getting to 2019 levels by the end of this year is probably a challenge, but there’s a great deal of confidence that within a year or 18 months, we absolutely can. ELIZABETH AUBREY

THE BIG QUESTIONS, ANSWERED
Getting to grips with what your first post-lockdown trip to the cinema will look like

WILL I HAVE TO WEAR A MASK?
Yes. You’ll be required to wear a face covering at all times while at an indoor cinema, including while watching the film, unless you are exempt for health reasons. You will be able to take it off temporarily to eat or drink. The mask mandate is due to be lifted, pending a review, on 21 June.

WILL THERE BE SOCIAL DISTANCING?
Yes. In order to be Covid-secure, cinemas are having to run at reduced capacity to maintain social distancing, and will only allow you to book seats in the screen in small clusters, by household or bubble. Again — all going to plan — there will be no restrictions in England from 21 June.

WHAT ABOUT DRINKS AND SNACKS?
Specific government guidance for cinemas on food and drink is yet to be published, but the expectation is that it will be similar to the set-up from last year: limited snacks and drinks will be available. That includes cinema staples like popcorn, bagged sweets and bottled drinks.

Joe Coates, Zute Lightfoot, Getty Images, Shutterstock

CAN I HAVE A GLASS OF WINE?
Unclear. Last year, booze in a cinema was complicated by the “substantial meal” rule, which has since been dropped. The guidance for ‘Step 3’ in England is that “customers will have to order, eat and drink while seated”, so only cinemas with at-seat service will be able to serve, until 21 June.



WHAT ABOUT PICK ‘N’ MIX?
Sadly, the beloved self-service sweets are unlikely to be deemed Covid-secure, given the risk of many grubby, unwashed hands coming into contact with fizzy cola bottles; some cinemas are offering pre-packaged bags as a lucky-dip alternative. (This is expected to change from 21 June.)

CAN I MEET UP WITH FRIENDS TO SEE A FILM?
Yes, but don’t plan a big group outing just yet. ‘Step 3’ of the government’s lockdown-easing roadmap in England, starting from 17 May, states that the ‘rule of six’ applies indoors, or a maximum of two households or bubbles. Similar rules apply for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

WILL I NEED TO TRACK AND TRACE?
You will initially have to participate in track-and-trace, either at the booking stage, via the NHS phone app, or at the box office. You won’t need to provide proof of a negative test or Covid vaccine for most screenings; the concept of a ‘Covid passport’ has only been suggested by the government.