

Alexa Raisbeck, photographed exclusively for *Empire* at the BFI in London on 14 December 2020, following current social-distancing and public health guidelines.



## ALEXA RAISBECK PROJECTIONIST

WORDS ELIZABETH AUBREY PORTRAIT BERTIE WATSON

ALEXA RAISBECK WAS studying film and media at college in London when her career took a surprise turn. Curious about how things operated behind the scenes in her local cinema, she started working as an usher and, after being asked to help track down some film, trained as a projectionist. So began a life-long love of projecting films and now, 17 years later, Raisbeck works as the BFI Southbank's Technical Supervisor. Here, she gives *Empire*

an insight into the high points of the job, and reveals how it can be both thrilling and pretty nerve-racking, too.

### What does your day-to-day job involve?

I'm not sure a typical day exists! It's so varied, but it will typically involve some maintenance such as changing lamps, putting oil in the projectors, going over the digital projectors, updating software, things like that. The most important thing is making sure everything is all working and in good order for the screenings that day. I'll be in my booth making sure that everything is ready for our projections — and that can really span a lot of things. It can be for 35mm, 70mm, video, DCP [a digital version of a 35mm print], a satellite streaming or a world premiere. Every day really is very different.

### How do you cope with the responsibility?

There is a lot of weight on [the projectionist's] shoulders because so much work has gone into these films all the way up to the point we get them. There's this huge pressure to deliver that to the audience and we are the last part in the chain. You have to have a certain level of anxiety because that helps you check things. You also have to have confidence in your ability and just go with it!

### What types of films do you enjoy playing the most?

I think because of my profession, I love technical films that reference the medium or ones that are really beautifully crafted such as Robert Eggers' *The Lighthouse*. The black-and-white images, the fact it was shot on a vintage lens... Morgan Fisher

has a film called *Projection Instructions* on 16mm and I love projecting that. It's where the projectionist has to do the opposite to what they'd normally do. There's instructions they must follow on screen and it's like having a live communication between the projectionist and the audience.

### What would you say have been your most memorable moments?

Martin Scorsese's editor Thelma Schoonmaker has attended a number of events at BFI Southbank. There was one set-up where I spent time sat with her in the auditorium fine-tuning the set-up from a laptop. It is very important that how we are projecting films is in line with the director's vision, so we often collaborate with her to make sure what we are screening is adjusted perfectly to how Scorsese himself would like it. Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan came in to watch a film and my manager, who knew I was a fan and was learning Hindi, practically dragged me out of the projection room to introduce me. I immediately clammed up as my words failed me. But going back into the projection room — fully manually, without automation — I ran the most perfectly timed show. For me, it was like communicating with him through my work. My pride in that show is the best part of the memory.

### What do you enjoy most about cinemas?

I love hearing the audience applaud after a screening. As a projectionist, you're sort of enabling that to happen, and that's what I really love about my job. Cinema is an event: there's definitely something that's lost in not having that combined, shared experience. But cinema has always adapted. It adapted for sound, it adapted for television and will adapt for the future, whatever that should look like.

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## THE TRUCK'S DEMISE

### GUILLERMO DEL TORO on *DUEL*



One huge moment, and a peculiar one, was when I first saw a movie I revere and watch in awe every year: Steven Spielberg's *Duel*. I was about eight years old and my parents took my brother Federico and me — in our pyjamas — to a drive-in, Autocinema Real. We were in a station wagon and both my brother and I were poking out of the rear window — the deluxe balcony position in the car (not great for audio, but...) — and had no idea what would be playing that night. It mattered little back then — you would go to the theatre to "see what was playing", plus the drive-in had the very best milkshakes. So, milkshake in hand, watching over the station-wagon roof, we were astonished by the edge-of-your-station-wagon-seat stuff!

We all held our collective breaths... And then, as Dennis Weaver triumphs over the truck/monster and it falls over the edge, honking/howling like a dying brontosaur: elation! Every single car in the drive-in "applauded" with their horns — all at once — and you could hear the vocals inside the cars. Loud, beautiful. A great memory.

The work of a filmmaker is, many a time, sort of very communal and, ironically, sort of lonely, too: you transit through many, many creative partnerships but they all either come or go at intervals. You, and you alone, turn on the lights and sweep the pub, so to speak, and you and you alone stand at the end of the journey to turn off the lights. There are exceptions to this rule but inevitably you toil for a long time before you see the "brushstroke" in your painting come alive in front of people. So those responses, when they happen, are as close as we get to experiencing the "live concert" emotion. You get your corny but intensely moving Paul Potts moment. And on occasion, it can save your sanity or even your life. I have experienced both.



## INVISIBLE TERROR

### DAISY RIDLEY on *THE INVISIBLE MAN*



My most vivid recent cinema-going memory is *The Invisible Man*. I was in Sheffield and it was just before lockdown. I was

terrified and I was sat half-watching, half-hiding my eyes, physically with my hands, like I was a child. I remember the moment there's a quick cut into an egg being cracked into a pan. The entire (ful!) cinema jumped out of their skin and then everyone laughed. I remember looking around and thinking, "I don't know a single other person in here, but we are all part of a collective, and we've all experienced this, in our own ways, but all together." I remember it more vividly because of the feeling of really being part of a group of people.

