

Starting a film society



If you're thinking about setting up and running a film society, you're treading a well-defined path which many have followed successfully before you. You can be confident that every problem you encounter will have been solved many times, in many different ways. BFFS exists partly to make sure that this weight of experience is at your disposal, so your task becomes easier and the project becomes more secure.

BFFS has members throughout the UK: in cities, where films are readily available, in towns and in rural areas where film societies can be the only form of cinema provision. Both urban and rural societies continue to be popular because they select their own programme of films, provide a club atmosphere and develop the viewing experience with special seasons, discussions and social events. In towns or cities, societies may meet in their local cinema or multiplex or find their own venue in an arts centre, and in small rural communities they may operate in school or community halls, but there are no fixed rules.

1 What makes film societies so special?

- they are run by their members for their members, and they give communities the power to determine their own film culture
- they provide a warm friendly atmosphere, in which every audience member can feel welcomed and secure
- they take films seriously, selecting some of the best films around, and ensuring that viewing conditions are the best possible
- they arrange special screenings and social events, and can provide an opportunity to discuss the films they show
- they can provide varied and adventurous programming, including short films, independent film-makers' work and films of local interest
- they have advantages in respect of film certification, cinema licensing and cheaper film booking.

All these topics, and others, are covered in more detail below. Where additional information is available on the BFFS website (www.bffs.org.uk), a clear reference will be given.

Starting a film society – the road map

- get yourself organized - form a small working group
- find a venue - this will have a strong influence on what follows (section 3)
- decide what sort of film society you want to be (section 4)
- at this point you might decide to organize a test screening (BFFS may be able to assist you with this, with loan equipment, for example).
- at the test screening, gauge the interest for the venture and sign up some volunteers to form a committee.

Once you have a venue and a committee, you have to get down to detailed planning:

- take a skills audit, and decide who will fill each key role
- decide what projection technology you are going to use, and if you need to buy equipment, develop plans for obtaining funding
- work out how much you need to make, to at least break even over your first season, and let this determine your ticket prices
- book the venue dates for your first season
- choose your first programme, book the films, publicise it, and run it.

2 Forming a working group

You can't do it on your own (though film societies have been started by groups with as few as two members). A small group can have the advantages of spreading the workload, sustaining morale and bringing more than one point of view to bear when it comes to decision-making. Critically important is the process of discussion that working groups cause to happen: some of the decisions you will have to make – such as, for example, the type of commercial arrangement you will have with film distributors – need careful thought and detailed discussion. At the working group stage, you will have no established roles, but the way people engage with the working group gives a clear indication of their approach to committee work.

3 Finding a venue

The most useful first exercise a working group can undertake is to evaluate local venues, and choose the best to host your society. This choice can have a determining effect: there might be a venue with a 35mm projector and projectionist available, for example, which would lead you to run 'theatrical' shows and charge at the door. Otherwise, there might be a choice of local halls, of which the nicest might be the smallest: this could lead you to have a closed, membership-only society.

If a venue has 35mm projection, it will most likely be organized as a cinema already, in which case, you will need to evaluate the state of the equipment and seating, and the rental charge, and then decide whether a film society could be made to work there. Otherwise you will probably be evaluating venues for digital projection, which usually involves installing a projector, DVD player, sound system screen and seating for each film show and taking the installation apart afterwards. Many film societies – probably most – operate successfully in this way.

4 Mode of operation

No matter what kind of film society you run, if you are going to show a film to an audience, you *must* have a licence from the distributor, who owns the rights to show the film, to do so. In practice this means renting a copy of the film from the distributor or their agent - on 35mm film, DVD, or sometimes VHS tape - on terms which include payment for this licence.

Film societies tend to be constrained by the way the film rental market works into two main types – the 'closed', members-only type, or the 'open-to-all', more commercial type. In the former, audience members pay a subscription at the start of each season or year, and in the latter both members and the public pay for each film in advance or on the door. Specifically, a society can either operate

- as a closed society, which does not charge at the door, or advertise to the public, and therefore may be able to hire films at an advantageous flat rate on what is referred to as a 'non-theatrical' or 'non-commercial' licence, or
- on any other basis, in which case they must have a contract with each distributor similar to any commercial cinema, that requires them to pay either a minimum amount (the 'minimum guarantee' - around £80 for DVD rental) or a percentage of total ticket income, whichever is the greater (and depending on the size of the audience).

Checklist when considering a venue for digital projection

- how many will it hold (comfortably, remembering that there must be a gap between the screen and the front row, and that the seating layout will be fan-shaped, not rectangular)?
- does it have black-out (most important in late spring and early autumn, as digital projectors have a lower light output than 35mm projectors)?
- is the seating comfortable enough (much more important than you might think)?
- does it have a Public Entertainment Licence (permission from the local authority for shows to be put on)?
- is the heating effective?
- does it have disabled access, suitable toilets etc?
- is there space for the front-of-house desk?
- is there either a kitchen, with capacity to boil water and provide refreshments, or a bar?
- is there car-parking nearby?
- does it have third-party liability insurance?

Advantages of closed societies include greater financial security derived from receiving most of your income at the season's start, and the freedom to be more adventurous in your choice of films, as once people have paid their membership they are likely to come even to unfamiliar films. Disadvantages include the restriction that you cannot have a member under the age of 16. But remember, you can include 'commercial' filmshows open to everyone in a season, even if most screenings are closed.

Commercial societies can seem to be easier to start, as you do not have to assemble a group of members. Other advantages include greater freedom of operation, the ability to build an audience in the course of a season by advertising, and a much higher profile. Against this, there is the need to balance the books by including a number of sure-fire hits in your programme, and the fact that more work is involved in publicising the programme, and in running what is in effect a small not-for-profit business.

Deciding how you will operate is a complex process with far-reaching consequences. In the run-up to starting to operate, much of your preparation will be focused on getting this right. As your preparations get serious, you should read BFFS advice leaflet 003 **Modes of Film Society Operation** (available from BFFS or by download from bffs.org.uk), which gives the topic more detailed consideration.

5 Test screenings

If you are ready to think about a test screening, it's time to get in touch with BFFS. We can help with advice on the choice of film, and ways of getting hold of it, and we may be able to help by lending you the equipment for the screening. If you are in an area with other film societies close by, we can probably put you in touch with local support as well. The test screening is a good opportunity to ask people which mode of operation would suit them best – the fact that closed societies involve the payment of a membership charge big enough to cover the cost of hiring the films is often a decisive factor.

6 Forming a committee.

Film society committees work best when they are made up of people ready to undertake a well-defined set of roles. Most of these roles require a certain level of expertise, and benefit from being performed by someone of an appropriate professional background (e.g. a book-keeper as treasurer). Some of the roles can be combined, but the first three should be kept separate under all circumstances.

The chair runs the meetings, keeps members focused and makes sure key decisions are made.

The secretary organises meeting agendas, writes minutes, replies to correspondence, and is in general charge of the day-to-day administration of the society.

The treasurer monitors income and expenditure, keeps the books, prepares annual accounts, and is involved in obtaining grants and fundraising.

The booking officer ensures that once a programme is settled, all films are booked, and that they subsequently arrive and are available for projection.

The publicity officer produces the publicity materials, and may have a strategic role in planning publicity activities.

The front-of-house manager is responsible for all ticketing, for handling money at the door and banking it, and for making returns on the take and on the audience size. They may also have to develop a working relationship with venue staff.

The projectionist may also be the technical supremo, responsible for ensuring the quality of the viewing experience.

7 Putting a film on

Your society will have to work out the technical base for its operation. Around 75% of UK film societies project from DVD, and almost all of the rest use 35mm film. A very few societies still project from 16mm film, but few titles are now available, and this technology has had its day.

If you have access to 35mm projection, then it's likely that you will have access to a cinema-style venue and professional projection staff. In such circumstances, as long as the finances make sense, you should certainly use these facilities, as the quality of the film-watching experience will be better. You will have to acquire a distinct set of working practices, and the knowledge that goes with them, but nothing too demanding is involved, and the venue will be able to support the process.

Otherwise you will use digital equipment, which is now the norm. Digital equipment is relatively cheap, and easy to configure and operate, and the film distribution industry is now fairly well geared up to DVD rentals for exhibition, so this is a low-resistance route. Additional advantages include

- excellent equipment suppliers well-attuned to the needs of film societies (check bffs.org.uk/Content/contacts_otherwebsites.html)
- a direct route to lottery funding geared to the scale of bid that lets a film society obtain a full set of kit (Google up 'Awards for All' or use the link on the BFFS website)
- the prospect of higher-quality results from the same equipment when HD DVDs become available.

'Best buys' change all the time, but you should check with BFFS to find out what film societies have used and found satisfactory, especially in the realm of projectors. There are some clear front runners. You should also make good use of the suppliers with which the BFFS website is linked – they have a great track record in supplying film societies (see www.bffs.org.uk/Content/contacts_otherwebsites.html).

8 Fundraising

It is possible to start with borrowed equipment, and BFFS can help you to do this, but a far better solution is to make fundraising your first priority, to make sure you have enough money to cover purchasing equipment, pre-season costs such as publicity, and any shortfall in receipts, if you are operating theatrically.

Your fundraising strategy should have three main strands.

- 1) Check to see whether either the UK Film Council or your regional screen agency are operating any funding schemes such as the recent (and now sadly over) digital equipment grant scheme.
- 2) Make an application to Awards for All, after first reading the guidelines in the BFFS newsletter from Oct 2005 (download this from www.bffs.org.uk/content/pdfs/NewsReel%20Oct%2005.pdf).
- 3) Go and see your Mayor or Town Clerk to find whether there are any local funds to which you can apply. You may well be surprised and gratified at the possibilities – but it will help to have a clear statement of how the local community will benefit with you.

Ask around, in your committee and beyond, to find people with a track record of successful application to funding agencies. There's a definite knack to it, and you may well need help to develop your in-house capability.

9 Budgeting

Once you have worked out your expenditure and estimated the number of members and guests you will be able to calculate what you need to charge for membership and guest entrance. It is good practice to have a contingency fund for unexpected events.

Digital equipment - what you will need

- a DLP (or LCD) projector
- a DVD player
- an AV receiver (audio amplifier)
- a folding screen
- hard cases for each item (do not dispense with these).
- a suitable speaker system – most societies use Dolby 5.1 to get surround sound so you will need five speakers (plus a sub-woofer)
- cables to connect the equipment together

10 Publicity and marketing

For a theatrical film society, this is essential. If your films aren't publicised people won't come to see them. An effective publicity campaign will include:

- a well-produced leaflet, widely-distributed among your members, and placed in key places such as libraries, theatres, concert halls and at your venue
- attractive, informative and easy-to-read posters placed in libraries, community poster sites and at other venues (N.B. there are a number of possible designs which combine a brochure and poster)
- free advertising and editorial in local papers and on radio stations (well-timed press releases are the key to this)
- inclusion in mailshots by your local arts development officers – you need to cultivate these people
- your venue, or another, may include your publicity in their mailings, or give you access to their mailing list.

Experience has shown that some of the best publicity is by word-of-mouth. Be shameless, brag about your new film society, tell all your friends, make sure everyone at work knows about it, and most importantly, make sure all committee members always carry some brochures and membership forms.

Start-up costs checklist

- equipment (and insurance for it)
- print publicity (design, print and distribution)
- other publicity (news releases, parish magazines etc) – time and phone calls
- contingency (losses from low-attendance shows etc)
- tickets (if you have to produce them).

Ongoing costs checklist

- venue hire, projectionists etc.
- publicity
- film rental
- equipment insurance
- British Federation of Film Societies membership (50% discount for start-up societies)
- contingency fund for equipment replacement, projection bulbs etc.

Sources of income

- membership fees OR box-office take
- other ticket income
- grants
- donations
- possible advertising (brochure etc)
- sales of refreshments.

11 Hiring Films

Once you have decided your programme and confirmed your venue dates, the next stage is to book your films. If you are showing films on 35 mm you can book these yourself, as most film societies do. You may find it easier to enlist the help of a film booker, as some main distributors are reluctant to rent films to an organisation they don't deal with on a regular basis, but since that is exactly what you want to become, it's best to grasp the nettle and just get on with it. If you use a cinema they may book films for you, or put you in touch with a film booker.

If you are projecting from DVD your first port of call should be to consult Brian and Paul's List on the BFFS website (http://www.bffs.org.uk/Content/film_getting.html) or to ring the BFFS central office and request a print copy. This will tell you which distributor supplies each of the films you're interested in. You can then either contact each dis

tributor by email or phone them – a phone call is often the best first approach, but the BFFS website offers web links to all of them as well.

You are likely to find that most of your rentals are made through Filmbank, an organization which handles DVD rentals on behalf of many other companies. Since film societies have in the past found some difficulties in matching their ways of working with Filmbank's, you should make sure you're familiar with guidelines found in the Sept '06 edition of NewsReel, the BFFS newsletter (available in pdf form from the BFFS website).

Some BFFS regional groups operate block booking schemes that provide substantial discounts on a selection of new releases each season. These booking schemes will often allow societies from other areas to participate. Details can be obtained from BFFS central office.

Legal issues

Some of the things that you need to consider are:

- does your venue have all the relevant licences and are there any restrictions under the fire and building regulations? Your local authority will be able to provide advice and assistance.
- public liability insurance - your venue should certainly have it: even if it does you will probably need it anyway (a client may be harmed by their slippery steps, but just as easily by your trailing cable).
- membership of and attendance at a 'closed' society screening is limited to persons over 16 years of age.
- an 'open' society must abide by the age restrictions imposed by the BBFC or local authority film certificate.
- a film society must only screen films for which it has been given screening rights, i.e. films rented from a commercial distributor or an individual filmmaker who owns their own rights. In practical terms this means that you cannot screen a film rented from your local video rental store or a personal copy (unless explicitly permitted to do so by a distributor – this does sometimes happen).
- unless you are operating a members-only society which charges a subscription, but does not take money at the door or advertise, you must rent films 'theatrically' - that is, you must pay a minimum guaranteed fee and a percentage of your take at the door if the audience exceeds the minimum level.

Conclusion

We do of course wish you the best of luck in your endeavour, but in our experience, luck doesn't come into it. Sound common sense, teamwork, effective planning and making good use of the resources around you, such as BFFS, should see you through. We're there to support you, so don't hesitate to get in touch.