**PODCAST 5: Inclusive working class programming**

Welcome to this podcast on programming measures. It’s quite clear that a key feature, which distinguishes independent cinema from the local multiplex, is the programming and the focus on indie and ‘cultural’ cinema, as well as films in languages other than English over Hollywood blockbusters, for example. While it’s very important to maintain spaces for such work, there is also a way to expand and make independent cinemas interesting for and welcoming to a larger range of audiences, which not only improves equality, diversity and inclusion, but also helps the venue to better weather financial and other storms.

This podcast will cover: how to move beyond working class stereotypes onscreen; programming strategy and teams; and how to support the work of working class filmmakers.

It’s certainly not my place to tell programmers, with their significant expertise, what they should or shouldn’t programme, but it is important to stress that programming should be inclusive: not just for ethical reasons, but also because it makes good financial sense to attract wider audiences to cinemas, especially considering the effects of the Covid pandemic and the perfect storm, which led to an increase in fuel prices and so many more financial issues.

First of all, it’s important to include a spectrum of working-class representation onscreen at a venue, rather than simply tired stereotypes and tokens. The latter happens far too often, especially as filmmaking as a career is so dominated by privileged wealthy white men.

In my academic work, as well as my EDI consultancy, I research the representation of working class people and we are too often presented as tired stereotypes onscreen. While statistics vary, depending on questions posed and data used, almost half of the UK population consider themselves to be working class and around 30 - 40% of the population would officially be considered as such. That’s a huge amount of variety among millions of people, and the ways we are represented should be as varied as we are.

One way to ensure a range of authentic working class representation and to support working class people in the screen industries is by locating and promoting work by working class filmmakers and filmmaking teams. More on this shortly.

It’s also important to show work that will get a greater range of people through your doors. While I understand some cinemas like to focus on maintaining an exclusivity in their programming and want to set the tone on what is good and worthwhile cinema, ultimately film is about entertainment and/or about learning and/or about being transported elsewhere. Why should any of these things be exclusive or a question of good taste?

Some independent cinemas have been successfully screening more popular Hollywood films for years, cleverly understanding that it’s a way to attract a wider audience and that getting people through the doors using more popular films can create a familiarity with the screening space. This comfort within the space is key to getting audiences to watch films outside of their comfort zone. For more on this listen to the podcast on Welcoming Working Class Audiences. Loosening the reins on what should and shouldn’t be screened at an indie cinema can ultimately lead more people to enjoy indie cinema and to increased profits.

If the distribution terms can be agreed, can a family-friendly Hollywood blockbuster be priced cheaper at your venue than it is at the local multiplex to act, for example, like loss leaders in supermarkets. Supermarkets advertise and sell some key food items cheaply to get shoppers through the doors. These customers buy other things when in store and may even do their entire shopping there. Get someone through your doors for the first time and that could translate to them coming back, perhaps many times, while telling their friends - free advertising - and bringing their friends - increased revenue.

Key here is that people feel comfortable entering and being in your screening space. They can then be introduced to different types of film, if they wish.

When showing Hollywood blockbusters, do remember that people only used to a multiplex might be dismayed by the smaller screens in some of the exhibition spaces in your cinema. You could aim to show these films on your largest screen, but also manage expectations by making clear in advance that the screen is half the size of that at cinema X. Cheaper tickets really will make it worthwhile for many.

In order to have a great programme, it’s imperative to have a diverse programming team, all of whom should be dedicated to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion. Don’t just programme what a small homogenous group think are good films, because that’s so subjective, but rather show a breadth of cinema. What’s good to one person is rubbish to another. We shouldn’t dictate or judge anyone’s taste.

And don’t just rely on your own programming team or the festivals you always work with, invite others in to programme. Fling the doors open. Think less about being tastemakers and setting some totally subjective cultural bar, and more about being as inclusive and accessible as possible. Can you offer two-way, paid programming mentorships to those raised working class, so they learn about the logistics of programming and gain industry knowledge, while sharing their knowledge and experience of working class representation and audiences with middle class programmers.

Ensure you screen a broad range of work by working-class filmmaking teams, who often have less film education, equipment, and fewer industry networks than more privileged middle class people.

It’s important that working-class voices and filmmakers can tell working-class stories and that you screen films by working class people that don’t only foreground working class lives. It’s problematic when minorities or less privileged people are only allowed to focus on one characteristic or aspect of their lived experience, while the most privileged people are supported to tell a whole range of stories, including identities which they don’t have firsthand, or indeed, any experience of.

To do this, support working class filmmakers including emerging and local ones. How about scheduling screenings of local working class shorts? Team up with relevant local groups to line up speakers and to advertise the events at a reduced rate. Personal experience of working for a number of years on a film festival has shown this identity-themed shorts format can attract a full house, especially when well-timed.

Please listen to the podcast on Welcoming Working Class Audiences for a consideration of how to organise events, such as Q&As, inclusively as well as a consideration of online, in person, and hybrid events and the impact of these across audience members.

Make sure to programme a broad range of child and young person-friendly events, with plenty of activities and screenings for the very young, through to teenagers and beyond and make sure that these are fully inclusive. In the Broader Measures podcast, I expand on being child- and family-friendly, programming inclusively for working class people, and I offer information about inclusive family ticketing, onsite childcare and suchlike, so please do head to that resource if you haven’t already.

The key takeaway from this podcast is to get a wide range of people involved in programming, show a broad range of films, including supporting the work of local working class filmmakers.

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