

# SPECIAL REPORT: UK Cinema Conference

## BOXOFFICE AT BAFTA

Piracy, Multiplex Meltdown and Silver Surfers Form the Focus of the UK's 6<sup>th</sup> National Cinemas in the Community Forum *by Chris Wiegand*

Photo by Chris Wiegand



With a mission statement of a tagline—"Sustaining Cinema: Preparing for the Future"—the National Cinemas in the Community Forum returned this year to the headquarters of the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) in London's West End. A dizzying spectrum of subjects was crammed into the one-day event, which offered something for all of the roughly 100 delegates, including cinema operators, consultants, marketing directors and journalists.

Attendees heard a range of guest speakers over a series of three sessions, chaired in turn by Frank Pierce (president of the Film Distributors Association), Michael Bach (principal of Urban Planning Policy, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) and Christine Costello (chief executive of Pearl and Dean).

### SESSION ONE: FILM SUPPLY AND ITS INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

The conference commenced with a short, optimistic introduction about the domestic scene from independent cinema consultant Anthony Williams. Announcing that UK admissions are the highest they've been for some three decades (last year's stand at an impressive 176 million), Williams declared, "We must be doing not just something but a lot that is right."

### The British Boom

Keynote speaker Dr. Kim Howells MP, minister for Tourism, Film & Broadcasting, Department for Culture, Media & Sport, also opened on a positive note. He declared that the UK has a love and passion for film "both as a cultural and a leisure activity." Howells highlight-

ed the Brits' impressive tally of Oscar nominations (11) at this year's Academy Awards and applauded a productive period for the sector, declaring that the UK has "a great talent base to build on."

The immediate future for UK film looks particularly bright. Several modest British features have been well-received international-

ly, not least "Bend It Like Beckham," "28 Days Later" (a cult favorite at Sundance) and "The Warrior," which was, incidentally, named Best British Feature at this year's BAFTA awards. Weeks before the conference, Michael Winterbottom's "In This World" also unexpectedly bagged the Golden Bear in Berlin. High-profile movies in post-production in the UK sector include Stephen Fry's "Bright Young Things," the Sylvia Plath biopic "Ted and Sylvia" and Winterbottom's next feature "Code 46."

### The Price of Piracy

Howells went on to examine piracy and counterfeiting—hot topics that he's familiar with from his years at the Department of Trade and Industry. During this time, the MP strove to alter the perception that piracy is a "victimless crime." Although the British government recently raised the maximum penalty for many copyright offenses, the latest figures remain daunting. At least one in five DVDs purchased in the UK is believed to be a counterfeit (often of a film not yet theatrically released), causing an approximated loss for the industry of £400 million in revenues. Howells commended the work of those trading standards officers in the audience, whom he said are using "very limited resources" to combat this problem.

In his comprehensive overview of global counterfeiting, Dara MacGreevy, head of European Anti-Piracy, Motion Picture Association, elaborated on Howells' comments and explained that piracy is closely linked to money laundering, terrorism and the arms trade. In London, much of the piracy business is believed to be controlled by Chinese crime gangs.

With the steady prevalence of broadband technology in UK homes effectively reducing the length of downloads, the threat of movie piracy on the web rises at a worrying rate, echoing the recent crisis seen in the music industry. However, protective measures have also increased. Investigations, raids, legal actions and seizure numbers were all up last year. The Federation Against Copyright Theft (FACT), which now boasts a dedicated senior investigator for the cinema industry, carried out over 12,000 Internet take-downs in 2002.

### Debating Day & Date

Daniel Battsek, senior vice president of Buena Vista International (UK), explained that over half the people who download films in the UK do so before that film's release. He used this problem and other web-related factors—including the easy availability of Region 1 DVDs for UK consumers and the "global information flow" caused by the Internet—as prime supporting cases for day & date releasing.

In a balanced and rather humorous speech, Battsek went on to examine the downside of day & date, highlighting the importance of market research to see what can be understood from a film's American reception to help its performance in the UK. Emphasizing the impact of spreading buzz, he suggested that Fox may have received better results had they held back "Daredevil" from its day & date and let some of the film's runaway success in the States filter through to UK audiences. Other day & date disadvantages cited by Battsek included discrepancies between the U.S. and UK calendars. (As he pointed out, Brits just don't hold Memorial Day.)

### The Criteria of Classification

Also speaking in the conference's first session was Robin Duval, director of the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), who offered a condensed overview of the BBFC's structure and hefty workload, which has recently increased due to the meteoric rise of DVD. In 2002, the BBFC was responsible for classifying over 10,000 videos, 600 cinema films and 900 cinema adverts and trailers. The bulk of this viewing is done by some 20