

Celebrating 'LAWRENCE OF ARABIA' AND THE ROADSHOW



Enthused by the latest classic to be re-released on 70mm, Mark Trompeteler reflects on how the big “tent-pole” movies used to be promoted and exhibited.

As we know, in the past century, cinema rose from being a fairground novelty and local hall attraction to a global mass entertainment industry. It also became a modern art form. If cinema is an art form, then David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) is that very rare film that is both a true masterwork of the art form, a brilliant piece of entertainment and a great commercial success.

A MASTERWORK OF CINEMA

Between its understated beginning and conclusion; an overhead shot of a parked motorcycle and a man getting on it, to T.E. Lawrence at the end of his tour of duty, being driven by an army sergeant into the dusty distance of the desert, Lean unleashes a beautifully told epic.

What happens between these two cinematic understatements is, as Steven Spielberg famously described it, “a miracle of a film”. The film is a stunning and vivid exploration of the psyche of a complex legend told in a way that almost any audience can understand. It contains some of the signature moments in the history of the cinema: the very long shot introduction of the late Omar Sharif propelled him to international stardom; one of the great jump cuts in movie history, from the flame of a

match to the rising of the morning sun; the sweeping visual poem to the desert sequence underlined by a superb movie soundtrack. The film won seven Oscars including Best Picture, Best Director and Best Cinematography. It is a film that transcends the decades. Painted on the stunning canvas of Super Panavision, it is a true masterpiece of cinema and — purists will argue — the only way to see it is on the big screen, from a 70mm print.

THE ROADSHOW EXPERIENCE

In their heyday of the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, the big blockbuster “tent-pole” movies of their day were released and promoted in a totally different way from today's marketing and distribution. Now the latest big movies are released at exactly the same time across all cinemas in a particular territory, or across a whole continent, or across the world. Films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* were initially exhibited and promoted in a small number of premium large capacity, big screen, showcase cinemas in the centre of the few major cities of a given territory.

These exclusive roadshow presentations ran in these city centres for months, and sometime years, before the title went on general release to local suburban cinemas. Anyone wanting to see the film had to pay a

premium advance ticket price and had to travel into the centre of town to see the film. The roadshow experience was designed to make seeing the film an event. It borrowed traditions from the opera and the theatre. The manager and deputy managers would often wear black tie to greet customers arriving for the performance. A souvenir programme was available for sale. Both the capacity of the human bladder and the length of the film's performance necessitated an intermission.

Before the film started, the house lights would be dimmed and, while the screen curtains were still closed, the overture to the film was played (the film running through the projector with its soundtracks being used and with black leader in the projector gate.) Before the second half of the film, the same ritual would be repeated and a piece of music, the interlude or entr'acte would fanfare the second half. At the end when the house lights came on, the film would still be run with black leader in the projector gate and the soundtracks would play walk out music as customers left the auditorium. The soundtrack music, overture, entr'acte and walk out music were often superbly composed to announce, underline and remind the audience of the themes, mood, locations, nature and genre of the film.



This form of “slow burn” exhibition and promotion led to many people returning to the suburbs and promoting the film to their social circles and neighbourhoods by word of mouth. Anticipation and eagerness slowly grew in local populations for the film to go on general release and arrive at their local cinema, thus maximising attendances and box office when the film finally arrived.

A GOLD MINE IN THE BOX OFFICE

Another advantage was that because roadshow engagements were often based on, and encouraged, advance booked tickets, the exhibitor, distributor and film company could accurately forecast income streams from such periods and venues. In its opening week at The Criterion Cinema in New York *Lawrence of Arabia* took an amazing \$46,000 — the equivalent of half a million dollars in today’s money. In its fifth week, it had settled down to taking \$43,000 per week, playing to full houses. Once the reputation of a film had been established as a must see, the roadshow could play to such large and full houses, earning huge sums for month after month.

A MODERN-DAY ROADSHOW RECREATION

Park Circus released the new DTS 70mm print of *Lawrence of Arabia* in autumn 2017 and it had an extended run at BFI Southbank in London starting in September, before moving on to screenings at Bradford’s Widescreen Weekend, The Irish Film Institute in Dublin, The

▲ Clockwise from top left: a magnificent print; the original marketing material for David Lean’s epic; Park Circus have brought back the roadshow

Filmhouse in Edinburgh and also in Glasgow. During December it was shown at American Cinematheque, at The Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood, and at The Aero Theatre in Santa Monica. This year, the film is going on to Varnsdorf in the Czech Republic and Karlsruhe and Hamburg in Germany. You can check on the progress of scheduled screenings by going to the “Now Showing” page of the excellent enthusiasts’ website www.in70mm.com. If you get a chance to see this “miracle of a film” — on its new magnificent DTS 70mm print — do please take the opportunity! **CT**

ED: For a somewhat different view of 70mm’s return, don’t miss Graham Spurling’s opinion piece on page 74.

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OLD AND NEW FILMS IN 70MM

2017 saw no fewer than four new films released in 70mm versions exhibited at selected cinemas; *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, *Kong: Skull Island*, *Wonder Woman*, and *Dunkirk*. Rather ironically the first two were shot digitally. *Wonder Woman* was shot in a combination of digital and 35mm film and only *Dunkirk* was shot in 65mm and IMAX analogue film. It is gratifying to many cinema enthusiasts that 70mm exhibition has recently been utilised both for a small number recent releases as well being used to exploit the back catalogue of glorious masterworks like *Lawrence of Arabia*. Currently also available is a brand new 70 mm restoration print of the Sixties classic *2001: A Space Odyssey*.



▶ A previous extensive reconstruction and restoration of *Lawrence of Arabia* by Robert Harris was completed in 1988 using the analogue techniques available at the time. This latest restoration appears to have been the by-product from an analogue backup archival 70mm print, that was made at the same time of Sony’s 50th anniversary 2012 4K restoration of *Lawrence of Arabia*. Sony’s 50th anniversary restoration, overseen by Grover Crisp, Sony’s Vice President of Asset Management, resulted in the release of a magnificent 4K DCP.

▶ I watched the current extraordinary new DTS 70mm print several months ago, some three days after having seen *Dunkirk* also on 70mm. I have thought highly of *Dunkirk* as a film, and still do, but was overwhelmed by how much I thought *Lawrence of Arabia* was a superior experience of cinema. As the front cover of the December issue of *Cinema Technology* magazine heralded — the future of cinema lies with the art of storytelling. The rich goldmine of cinema’s back catalogue is full of fabulous examples of storytelling and *Lawrence of Arabia* is surely one of the artform’s finest examples.