

Cinema: the infinite live event venue

A cyber success story, as well as a box office success

A recent experience of attending a live presentation of “Tosca” at an independent cinema, gave **Mark Tompeteler** cause to reflect on the success of Event Cinema — and not just in commercial terms.

WOULD ANYONE IN their right mind pay £3,000 for a seat for a single film screening? I think not. But that is what was being asked on the black market in London for a single seat at the Royal Opera House to see the March 2020 production of Beethoven’s only opera “Fidelio”, according to Antonio Pappano, the music director at the UK’s blue riband opera venue, when he was interviewed by the BBC after the event. This recent, new, and eagerly anticipated production of the opera was only performed six times in the first half of March and tickets at the opera house had been sold out for months in advance. As many of us have now come to expect of our leading cultural events, the last performance on 17th March was broadcast to over 400 cinemas worldwide. I was able to see the production at my local cinema for a ticket price of just under £20.

Event expectations

More people saw that production of “Fidelio”, in that one cinema broadcast than would have seen it in its limited run

of just six performances at the opera house. To my mind, this democratisation of the arts is just one example of the way in which Event Cinema has changed the cultural landscape. It now regularly provides access to cultural, musical and other events to rural, town and city populations across the world.

David Pope, CEO of MusicScreen Ltd., recently invited my wife and I to join him for a live transmission of the equally anticipated opera “Tosca” from the famed La Scala, Milan. David had secured the distribution rights for the broadcast of this production to UK cinemas from the Italian state broadcaster RAI. Even with my limited knowledge and experience of opera, in my mind La Scala and its productions represent a level of excellence that guaranteed this would herald a very special event. Apart from featuring one the world’s great sopranos, Anna Netrebko, this was also the first night, the premiere of this new production.

Networking auditoria and audiences

Just like so many of the other event cinema transmissions that I have attended, the moment we sat down in the 82-seat Screen 2 auditorium, of the independent >



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NT Live's theatrical productions - now an established part of the programme

£10 to patrons: event cinema is an affordable proposition

Serving its community, the Art House in Crouch End

Arthouse Cinema in London's Crouch End, I immediately felt I was going to be a part of a far bigger worldwide cultural event. The surround sound of the audience at the venue from which the event is being broadcast, together with glimpses of the networked audience in other locations, makes you appreciate that you are part of a combined single audience. Being able to experience the amazing auditorium of La Scala live, further reinforces the feeling of being a definite part of a networked cultural experience.

With the greatest of respect to the exhibition community, when you consider the contrast between the cinema auditorium and the actual event venue, you realise that one of the most notable successes of Event Cinema is to give audiences in remote auditoria a true sense of inclusion. The production was impressive, at times lavish, and it certainly lived up to expectations.

“Can you turn it down a bit...?”

In musical events, sound is clearly one of the most important factors. In our auditorium during Act 1 of “Tosca” sound was superb. With opera, the singing and music affect the emotions of audience members profoundly. Set in our auditorium at Dolby level 6.5, the sound was rich, deep and without distortion. It was definitely hitting that operatic psyche, stirring the emotions and immersing the audience. However, during the first interval one audience member complained to the cinema staff that the sound was too loud so we subsequently heard Act 2 at level 5. Whilst the beauty of Puccini's music still shone through and the singing moved the emotions, the effect was noticeably diminished and significantly less immersive. During Act 3 the sound was turned

“During the first interval, one audience member complained to staff that the sound was to loud...”

back up to level 6, after further representations were made, and the full audio glory of a live musical event was rescued. This experience demonstrates just how critical sound is to any cinema experience – and live events offer considerably fewer opportunities to remedy problems on the night.


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Mixing film, fine art, live music, discussion, dance, theatre, and workshops, the Art House is a unique hub in North London for artists to feel at home in and lovers of art to be entertained in.



Power to the people! The social relevance of event cinema

I'm certain that if anyone did purchase a black market ticket for around £3,000 for the Royal Opera House's 17th March performance of "Fidelio" at Covent Garden, then they would have had a wonderful experience that was well worth the outlay. For those in cinemas around the world paying a little under £20 to participate in the cinematic experience of the exact same event, they were not only taking part in a recent box office trend or phenomenon, but they were also participating in something much wider. The widening of access to culture and community and social perspectives event cinema enables is something of which contemporary cinema has every good reason to be proud. Event Cinema has also genuinely helped to underpin the egalitarian, social and cultural relevance of cinemas in today's ever-changing cultural and media landscape.

Changing Cultural & Cinema Landscapes

The business model of Event Cinema has established itself and has been remarkably successful. The percentage splits of the box office receipts serve the exhibitor, distributor and content providers and creators well. Event cinema has been so successful that it has become an integral part of the cinematic programme now offered to the public. When I visited the independently owned Picture House in Uckfield last year, I was struck by the fact that approximately 25% of the programming now consists of Event Cinema broadcasts.

The small independently owned Crouch End cinema is a classic example of a boutique cinema serving its local audience. With a second auditorium of just 82 seats, the

One of the world's greatest operatic sopranos, Anna Netrebko, now performing in your local cinema.

World-class performances, such as ROH's "Tosca", now reach screens globally as a matter of course.

cinema operates as a going concern even though there is a small Picturehouse multiplex only one hundred yards away. Co-owners Jenny Hansford and Sam Neophytou talk fondly of their site — a former Salvation Army Citadel and snooker club conversion which is very much supported by the local community. Sam particularly spoke of his roots in the area and how he felt Event Cinema had contributed to the enrichment of the cultural landscape of communities world wide. Access to opera is a good case in point: as an art form it is incredibly expensive to stage and often commands very expensive ticket prices at the opera house. Cinema and online streaming have made it available at more affordable prices. In conversation with me Sam praised this egalitarian and enriching aspect of Event Cinema. It was interesting to note that their February Event Cinema blackboard offered their patrons tickets at £10 for the screenings.

David Pope, who won an international Event Cinema award for MusicScreen following the transmission of The Rolling Stones' "Havana Moon" concert across Europe, chatted to me about how he feels the music industry is being affected by Event Cinema. An increasing number of performers are re-aligning live concert tours and musical events to take in Event Cinema and streaming on other media. Both the overheads of staging a stadium concert, and the potential economic, logistical and physical impact on performers of extended tours across multiple continents must all be high. No wonder the logistic and economic advantages, as well as the extended audience reach, make Event Cinema increasingly appealing to performers. **CT**

