

## EXCERPT FROM THE GUERRILLA FILM MAKERS MOVIE BLUEPRINT

### Chapter 26 - Domestic Theatrical Blueprint



### CASE STUDY - Urban Ghost Story

*Our third movie, Urban Ghost Story, had what we feel was a successful yet considered release. We played only in very friendly theatres where we knew we would get good figures, often being held over for second weeks. We released only on two screens, but always managed to make it appear that we were doing something bigger.*

*Primarily we released in London (Odeon Panton St.) where the majority of cast and crew lived, along with thousands of film fans and low budget film makers. We also opened in Glasgow where the film was set and lead actress was from. In both instances we were held over. We played a number of other venues including my home town of Wigan in the North West where the film did exceptionally well, being moved to the premiere screen for week two, and even beating movies like The Fast and The Furious. The reviews and press were pretty much all good, fuelling DVD / VHS interest.*

*The release also platformed our company, Living Spirit Pictures, and in meetings whenever people ask about our films, we can say that we release theatrically and have the figures and reviews to prove it.*

As an example, our second film *White Angel* went out on 16 prints and was a disaster. By contrast our following film, *Urban Ghost Story* went out on 2 prints, broke even and gained just as much press and industry attention. Plus we were not as stretched so we could focus more on the most important aspects of the release.

### You must be Nuts!

The golden area to aim for with a theatrical release is to hit the house nut. What the hell is the house nut? This a figure, set by each and every cinema (and every one is different) where the revenue split inverts, from their favour to your favour. It's designed to reward the makers of extremely successful films.

As a rough guide... A cinema has 138 seats and the average figure for the house nut is set at £18.50 per seat. So the house nut is  $138 \times £18.50 = £2,553$ . That's what you have to take in a week to hit the house nut. For that first £2,553 there is a 75 / 25 split in the cinema's favour. After hitting the house nut, the figures begin to invert on a sliding scale and can end up at 90/10 in favour of the filmmakers (distributor). This goes some way to explain why on the opening weekends of blockbuster films, drinks and popcorn sales are so vital to cinemas - it's where they make the *real* money.

Showing in the smallest screens in cinemas is also a good idea because the house nut is lower for that screen. Your ego may love screening in a 400 seat theatre but you will never hit the house nut, but hitting the house nut in a screen that has say 75 seats is more possible.

In reality it's unlikely you will hit the house nut, unless you mount an extraordinary campaign to get every person you know, and every person they know, to come along on the opening weekend. This was echoed by a distributor friend who confided that in the 20 years he has been in the business he has never hit the house nut.

If you are going to have a cast and crew gathering at one of these screenings, do it in the opening weekend but in the afternoon. You don't want to pack out your screenings in the evening showings where 'real' customers who don't know you and just want to see the movie may turn up and get refused as the screen is sold out.

## Act BIG but be small

Keeping the number of prints down has clear cost advantages, but if you are considering releasing your film in more than one screen in any major city, there are some things to consider. Let's assume there is a finite amount of people that will see your film, people that are interested in seeing independent, low-budget films. There aren't many of those people. So let's assume you're going to open in a city such as Glasgow, and let's assume there is a maximum of 1000 people who will brave a wet and cold February evening to see your micro-budget movie. If you are playing on two screens at either end of the city, they'll just go for the closest and they'll have cost you two prints to service that audience.

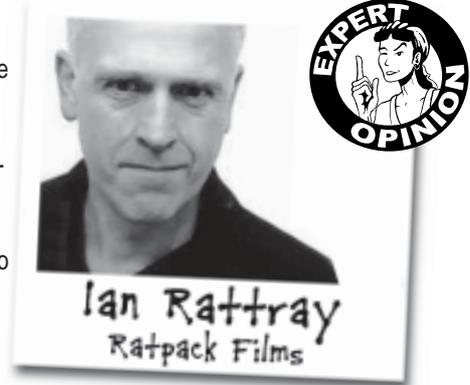
If you screened on only one print, they would all be forced to attend just the one cinema. These people are probably not casual moviegoers but hardcore, and will go the extra distance to see that non-Hollywoodised, low-budget, quirky, weird, off-the-wall, whatever your movie is. You may lose a few to the extra distance, but it will save you considerably more than the cost of the extra print and its servicing. When Monday morning comes and the cinema owners look at the weekend figures in order to decide which films stay for another week and which get axed, your figures could be £750 in each of two screens "nah ditch it..." or £1500 in one screen "that's ok, let's keep it for another week..." It's extraordinarily unlikely that your film will go over two weeks, unless it has hit a niche or is of exceptional quality. That second week is important because it doesn't cost you anything to be there, whereas moving to a new venue for another 'first week' will have cost you money to get there. So the second week is financial icing on the cake.

The decision as to whether you stay the second week in any one theatre will be made on a Monday morning by the exhibitors, (cinemas) and it's based wholly on the weekend's takings. If you hit the house nut, you'll stay. If you did well, you'll still probably stay. When you do eventually get bumped, the booker should have arranged a new venue for you to move to, and the print should be shipped to the new cinema probably in a new city and the whole process will begin again.

## In conclusion...

There are two sets of figures in this section. Study them well as they will give you a feel of just how little commercial value the release represents. You can draw your own conclusions from these figures.

Secondly, whilst it may be financial suicide in the short term, with a longer view, a theatrical release can pay back dividends. It should enhance video / DVD / TV deals domestically. But most important is the impact on international sales. A film has a one year shelf life for a sales agent before it becomes 'old news' and essentially part of their back catalogue. If a film is not released domestically within that one year window, it sends out a



*"The theatrical booker is the link in the chain between the 'creative' and the 'exhibition' sides of the industry. I organise everything required to get the film onto the screens in a cinema which usually starts with getting the film entered into the booker's bible, the EDI and SFD release schedules. These schedules inform anyone who is interested, just what will be released and when.*

*This information is often accessed by other distributors and of course, the press and media.*

*The process usually starts with a meeting, then a viewing of the film, ideally on a big screen but more often than not on a VHS tape! I would then advise on the viability of the film in the cinema - not every film is suited, a fact many new filmmakers don't want to hear. If we decided to proceed I would cut a deal with the filmmakers and advise them on PR agencies and draw up a release budget. I do not pay for a release, they do, be they the distributors or the film makers directly.*

*I then organise an exhibitor (cinema owners) screening after which I produce a booker's reaction sheet. Be warned these reports can be painful reading! From here we can work out the final release date, which is typically many months away, and then go through the physical steps of the release - moving prints, collecting royalties etc.*

*Distribution isn't rocket science, but it is an art, perhaps even a dark art. It requires an instinct for what is right for a film."*