

A quality cinema experience

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The Highlands of Scotland has survived many invasions in the past which have broadened its culture and changed the complexion of its population. The most influential of these has occurred in the latter half of the 20th century bringing about changes on an unprecedented scale and affecting every aspect of culture and social organisation. It began with an Act of Parliament in 1965 and the setting up of an agency whose remit was to re-populate and develop not only the highlands but the islands as well. The Highlands and Islands Development Board worked for twenty-five years only to be succeeded by another Act of Parliament and another bureaucracy: Highlands and Islands Enterprise. HIE is the flagship organisation for a network of ten local Enterprise Companies stretching from Shetland to the Mull of Kintyre. Its task, according to a statement within its 1996/97 Annual Report, is to "create a strong, diverse and sustainable economy where quality of life is matched by quality of opportunity." Within HIE's 'Strategy For Enterprise Development' the organisation's 'Vision' is outlined placing emphasis again on "a high quality of life", a phrase that is reiterated throughout HIE's glossy brochures. These try constantly to smash the romantic 19th century Highland myth replacing it with a 21st century equivalent based on "high-value services, knowledge-based activities and a diversified portfolio of manufacturing industries."

Despite HIE's somewhat propagandist 'Vision' the Highland region is still referred to as Europe's last wilderness by tourist organisations and the media. This exaggerated claim instills in the minds of an urban majority a landscape that is devoid of habitation, amenities and culture. A place, therefore, that might suit resettlement by dissatisfied city dwellers threatened by rising crime, traffic congestion, over-crowded conurbations and other urban ills. This resettlement and associated development is actively encouraged by HIE and until recently was financially supported by European Objective One funding along with substantial injections of cash from UK government agencies. This re-population and development programme has brought with it an increase in middle-class administrators and economically active incomers with money to invest in their own businesses. Statistics show that the number of self-employed people in the HIE area has increased by 33% from 1981 to '91 but this increase shows an expansion in the service sector rather than in traditional industries, many of which are in relentless decline. Incomers have brought their own perceptions of what the highlands were, what they are, and more importantly, what they should become.

Psychologically the empty highland wilderness is a place where this middle-class immigration can establish its own nirvana. An idealised highlands that will become the envy of other less fortunate urbanites. Aspirations are high and the general feeling is that

anything can happen. The romantic highland myth which remains a strong selling device for the area is under threat from entrepreneurial 'new' highlanders who require a new myth to stimulate development and economic growth. Into this landscape comes a project which satisfies both camps for not only does it help to perpetuate the old romantic wilderness myth but it also assists in the construction of the new, idealised myth of an area of new technologies where everyone has a quality lifestyle.

When told about HIE's decision to launch a £640,000 articulated lorry sized mobile cinema that will one day tour the Highlands and Islands, Doug Aubrey, independent film and video maker, said it typified a middle-class heroic vision of the Highlands. "A place", he went on to say, "that is still perceived as one to conquer. And what better way to conquer it than by transporting an accessible medium like film about in an impracticably cumbersome, non-efficient and extravagant vehicle. If they really wanted to distribute cinema to isolated communities", Doug concluded, "they could have set up their own local broadcasting channel for a lot less money. It seems to me they haven't taken advanced technology into consideration."

Aubrey's somewhat common sense criticism may indeed say much about the middle-class perception of the Highlands. And HIE's foremost reason for launching the vehicle, "To provide a quality cinema experience for isolated rural communities" says much about the Board's aspirations and 'Vision'.

By taking cinema out of its historical, Highland screening venue, the village hall, where a mobile unit consisting of projector and screen once entertained isolated communities, the more high-tech contemporary version may contribute towards the redundancy of village halls as community nuclei and consequently precipitate a dependency upon State run entertainments superseding community organised events. The Screen Machine, so unimaginatively named by Hi Arts (HIE's art development agency), is cribbed from the French, Cinemobile, the first of which was launched in La Region Centre in April 1983.

Cinemobile was made possible by la Maison de la Culture d'Orleans with the financial assistance of du Conseil Regional and other sponsors. The specially designed articulated lorry, fabricated by Toutenkamion, was named after the legendary French film director, Jean Renoir. Surprisingly, the nationalistic French, paranoid about Hollywood imports undermining the economy of their own film industry and their language, did not concentrate specifically upon promoting their home product. Their priority was to deliver mainstream cinema to rural communities.

Apparently any protective cultural policy was nudged aside in favour of commercial considerations. This more populist philosophy made *Le Jean Renoir* a huge success leading in turn to the inauguration of *le Jacques Tati* by Catherine Deneuve in 1992 and *le Jean Carmet* by Pierre Tchernia in March 1995. This third addition to the fleet cost 3.8mf and reaches an audience of 66,000 citizens, 11,000 of which are school-children. It delivers its "superbes salles de cinema" into the heart of fifty communities visiting each venue once a month. Different programmes are provided. During school hours specific films (in one instance *Lethal Weapon II* dubbed in French) are screened and pupils pay 17f per head. Early evening and late evening screenings cost 35f and 25f for concessions. Les Cinemobiles are administered by ADATEC in association with l'ARCC (Association Rurale de Culture Cinematographique) based in Orleans.

During 1993 *le Jacques Tati* was invited by the British Film Institute, the Welsh Film Council and the Scottish Film Council to visit Somerset, Aberystwyth, and Moffat where it gave local dignitaries a full screening of the Hollywood version of Martin Guerre. This mini-tour prompted a British Film Institute feasibility study into the probability of a similar vehicle operating

within a rural setting in the UK. The feasibility study was undertaken by Dick Penny a freelance consultant with experience in cinema and theatre management who had been the chief executive of Watershed Media Centre in Bristol during the early 90s. Penny's non-specific first study was followed by one examining the possibility of a mobile cinema based on the French model (which he had seen in France) operating in the Highlands and/or Dumfries & Galloway. Robert Livingstone of Hi Arts writes, "The cost of Penny's report in the Highlands had been met by Scottish Film Council, HIE, and a consortium of Highland local authorities. Following the positive report, this grouping asked Hi Arts to develop the project on their behalf." It was appropriate for Hi Arts to undertake this for not only was local government reorganisation pending but as the arts development arm of HIE it had an Act of Parliament and a powerful common development and social remit to back up its claim.

A second Cinemobile tour by *le Jean Carmet* took place in 1995. This time it visited Sanquhar, Castle Douglas and Newton Stewart in Dumfries & Galloway as well as Fort William for the occasion of the International Celtic Festival of Film and Television. This, writes Robert Livingstone, "offered an opportunity to show the French system off to those who would eventually support our applications for funding." The initial SAC Lottery application was made in 1995 based on the costs within Dick Penny's report of purchasing a French model and in November of that year it was announced that £330,000 of Lottery money would be forthcoming. HIE also committed £110,000 to the project. Hi Arts then entered into a lengthy process of commissioning a design before going out to tender. It had been shown that the French model was unsuitable for Highland roads and did not meet British Health and Safety standards. The tenders were placed Europe-wide but no specialist bids came from Scotland and those that were returned in May 1997 indicated costs far in excess of the original estimates. It was, therefore, necessary to make a second Lottery application to meet the costs of ordering a purpose-built vehicle from Lynton Commercial Units Ltd of Manchester. The second Lottery tranche amounted to £150,000 and was added to by a further £20,000 from HIE. The total cost of Screen Machine being £640,000 on the road meant that a short fall of £30,000 had to be met by Scottish Screen.

According to Dick Penny's report the estimated running costs would be in the region of £129,000 per annum and the estimated income would be £66,812 showing a deficit of £62,477—figures that no politically sensitive public agency could admit to. Revised figures for the expected ten year life-span of the vehicle released by Hi Arts, as hypothetical as Penny's, are based on a local survey carried out by Graham Campbell, at that time a student in Leisure Studies at Moray House College of Education. These reveal running costs amounting to £147,847 in the period 1998/99; £146,780 in the period 1999/00 with the figure rising to £173,813 in the period 2002/03. This perceived expenditure is balanced by an equally fictional income of £146,945 (1998/99); £147,151 (1999/00) and rising to £173,600 (2002/03). This indicates an imagined deficit of £902 in the first year of operation followed by a surplus of £370 in the second year and so on. These figures are based on an estimated audience of 20,000 per year with ticket prices set at £4 for adults and £2.50 for children with concessions set at £3. At the time of writing no price for block bookings has been set. Each ticket sold will be subsidised by £1.50 but Robert Livingstone writes, "a third of that subsidy is likely to be sponsorship, so public sector subsidy will be nearer to £1.00 per ticket." Contributions towards the running costs have come from the Post Office (£30,000), Scottish Arts Council (£50,000), and Scottish Screen (£60,000). Each of these substantial leg-ups cover three year peri-

OPPOSITE:
Le Jacques Tati
BELOW:
Le Jean Renoir





ods only and finally dry up altogether after 1999/00. Thereafter Hi Arts hopes to attract £10,000 per year from the private sector to add to the £20,000 per year which must come from the public purse to keep this reels on wheels on the road.

A new company, Hi Screen, has been formed to lease Screen Machine from Hi Arts, to operate it and employ the necessary staff. To minimise costs all programming, marketing and financial services will be contracted from Eden Court Theatre in Inverness which runs its own in-house cinema appropriately named 'Riverside Screen'. This too is subsidised by local authority money plus a grant of £16,400 per annum from Scottish Screen. Riverside Screen offers a fairly typical 'alternative' programme appealing to many movie-going tastes. Robert Livingstone insists that Screen Machine's programming will be specific to it although he qualifies this statement by saying that, in some cases the same film will be shown in both venues. But of course Screen Machine does not include Inverness in its touring circuit.

From the project's inception the steering group anticipated Screen Machine's benefit to the Scottish film industry as being its showing of work by contemporary Scottish film makers commissioned through Tartan Shorts and Prime Cuts. These mini-movies, as well as dusty, nostalgic reels from the Scottish Film Archive and the Post Office's own collection of commissioned classics, adding support to main-stream features. Alan Knowles of Scottish Screen was at pains to point out that the vehicle's prime function is to plug the gap in disadvantaged areas and to replicate, as near as possible, a cinema quality experience. It is this quality experience that will sell the Screen Machine to the public for if they feel that they are not getting their money's worth they may well stay at home and watch videos or travel the extra distance to Inverness where Warner Brothers has opened a multi-plex to serve that area which has mushroomed to a population of 70,000. There are other cinemas within the Highlands and Islands' larger towns that might also capture a dissatisfied Screen Machine audience. And here too it must be noted that the vast majority of people living in isolated communities are compelled by necessity to visit these larger towns in order to purchase their weekly shopping - so why not take in a movie at the same time and make a day of it? For the truly isolated and disadvantaged members of rural communities, eg. OAPs, unemployed single parents, who cannot drive or cannot afford to run a car, a much improved bus service to larger towns would have been of more benefit than a mobile cinema which still requires a car to attend.

For Alan Knowles the promotion of Scottish film is a secondary consideration. In this he appears to be adopting a similar attitude to the French who deliver a popular programme of American and home product to rural communities. The French model has been so successful that it has established a framework upon which to build an operating practice that can alter according to cultural necessities. It is necessary in Scotland to nurture our film industry and to instill a confidence in it at both ends of the spectrum - amateur and professional. The French may not feel this necessity as its film industry has a strong history and a vital contemporary practice. In Eire one may witness a similar confidence so it is not surprising, therefore, that the Film Institute of Ireland too "is interested in

pursuing and researching the possibility of introducing a cinemobile into Ireland." In a written statement Martha O'Neil, Chairperson of the Board, continues thus: "the cinemobile is not directly about promoting our own industry here in Ireland, though Irish material would be central to its programming, it is more about offering the opportunity of excellent exhibition across the land, along with a diversity of films that would ultimately, in our view, enhance the appreciation of filmmaking among audiences which would of course have a knock on effect in the production sector down the line." Both Alan Knowles and Robert Livingstone echo these aims taking the knock on effect one stage further.

As far as can be ascertained the French Cinemobile did not have at its heart a commitment to encourage film production. Robert Livingstone says that stimulating an interest in and developing the production of community film and video was always a key element in the thinking of the Screen Machine's steering group. He believes that there is sufficient grass-roots interest to partly justify the project's expense.

Although Graham Campbell's market research into a need for mobile cinema did not concern itself with trying to find out just how many people in Highland communities are interested in film and video production it is assumed that by stimulating an interest through regular film attendance this might lead to amateur productions. Cromarty-based and Highland-born filmmaker, Don Coutts, thinks the Screen Machine is "Brilliant!" and can't wait to work with local schoolchildren on community-based documentary video projects that may be screened in the mobile unit. He envisions the Screen Machine bringing communities together in a shared cinema experience in much the same way as the mobile film projector of his childhood once did in village halls. His enthusiasm is infectious. Robert Livingstone's enthusiasm on the other hand is more sober. He says that art development in the Highlands and Islands has to be taken one step at a time. In this he appears to be bureaucratically cunning as he advocates setting up levels of administration to support each stage of development. The Highlands and Islands Film Commission, which began in 1991 as a liaison only body financed by Highland Council, was launched in the Autumn of 1997. Its remit is to offer location support, to publish a directory of all services available to the professional and bottom end of the industry, and to encourage the development of indigenous filmmaking. But this HIE funded service has no money allocated for community productions. There is no Highland film fund so any would-be director must join the queue at the door of Scottish Screen and pray for a share of the film production fund or try the Lottery.

Don Coutts' notion of documentary video at a community level is shared by Robert Livingstone but one wonders what his own expectations as a bureaucrat might be. Will he hope that, like HIE's glossy brochures, such hypothetical community documentaries will reflect the quality of life, the area's unique environment and cultural heritage? Will he be shocked and embarrassed if communities reveal a few truths about the realities of living in the Highlands? Will documentaries that comment upon the increasing crime rate, drug abuse, and homelessness be given support? (moral rather than financial) Recently released statistics reveal that suicides and undetermined deaths in the Highlands have, between 1985 and 1996, fluctuated between 32 and 53 per year indicating that HIE's 'Vision' of an area offering a quality lifestyle is seriously flawed. Would such a necessary documentary examining this aspect of culture be shown in the prestigious Screen Machine or even qualify for grant aid? (if such aid was made available by HIE) Is it now too late to show how stone-built vernacular Highland architecture is being replaced by ill-designed kit houses that sit incongruously upon the land instead of occupying a rightful place within it, or how indigenous culture is being pushed aside by an incoming one that embraces its own 21st century vision, or how tourism inflates the prices of all essential commodities from cups of tea to rented accommodation and house prices?

In order to make the case for Screen Machine abundantly clear to all, including those sceptics who feel it is a gross extravagance, a high profile launch

was planned for 5th May. The island of Islay was chosen because, as Robert Livingstone explained, it typified a location that is as far away from a regular cinema as it is possible to be within the Highlands and Islands. His reasoning did not take into account the islands of Tiree, Coll, Eigg, or Jura which the cumbersome Screen Machine cannot reach. At the eleventh hour, amidst a clamour of public and media, the launch was cancelled. The white elephant had been lamed as it journeyed from Manchester to Islay. Press speculation as to how much money had been wasted on the launch and what had gone wrong technically was, according to Livingstone, wildly exaggerated. Gregor Fisher, Scotland's equivalent of Catherine Deneuve, it was claimed would not have moved for less than £10,000. Livingstone said that in reality Fisher would have appeared for nothing, his fee being paid instead to a charity of his choice. Of course this does not answer the question of what that fee was to be. In the event, however, Fisher's plane from Glasgow was halted and the amount of money lost was restricted to £5,000.

Robert Livingstone preferred not to think of the £5,000 as being lost because, although the launch had not gone according to plan, it had still worked as a publicity opportunity for the project and the Lynton Group who received a number of enquiries about similar vehicles. Of course we only have Livingstone's word for this. It is obvious that such a breakdown at the first objective caused a great deal of embarrassment not only within the Lynton Group but also within HIE whose notions of 'quality' were badly tainted.

At the time of writing it is known that the Screen Machine left Lynton's factory without the suspension being set properly. As a consequence the trailer was grounding on the corners. This caused the floor of part of the cinema to buckle resulting in a failure of the folding out procedure which transforms the articulated trailer into a 110-seat auditorium. As the vehicle had not formally been handed over to HIE the Lynton Group is being held responsible for making good the repair and the fault that caused the damage. Robert Livingstone was not at liberty to discuss any financial implications and was equally reluctant to expand on other details such as how long the delay will be before another launch (if any) is attempted.

This unfortunate incident does focus attention on Lynton's capabilities and raises the question of why they were awarded the contract. Livingstone is unequivocal in his support saying that the Lynton Group was the best to tender for the contract. But then to be fair Robert Livingstone is not an engineer nor for that matter was anyone else on Hi Arts' project team that supervised the mobile cinema development. Sandy Maxwell, the project leader, was the venue manager of the Cottier Theatre. Hardly a qualification to supervise a complicated engineering project worth £640,000. The rest of the project team comprised the board members of Hi Screen chaired by Jan Nicholson who runs a company in Portree delivering domestic gas and retailing camping equipment. His expertise as someone who has a couple of lorries on the road was all the project team had to rely on when it came to scrutinising the Screen Machine's detailed plans and suitability for highland roads. If Lynton's design did have any shortcomings none of these people would have been qualified to spot them. Sound Associates of London were contracted to select and install Screen Machine's state-of-the-art equipment providing 35mm film, video and slide projection with widescreen and digital surround sound. This aspect of the quality package is, one imagines, assured. It's just a pity that the money required to locate it in twenty or more community organised venues throughout the Highlands and Islands had not been found.

It is one thing to use the Q word as a rhetorical device within glossy publications and speech but it is quite another to deliver it. Although the Screen Machine will deliver a quality cinema experience to many highland communities as well as the outer isles of Lewis, Harris, the Uists and Barra, it must be noted that there are more communities that it will not reach. And there are many more people living in the region for whom the middle-class concept of 'quality lifestyle' in the Highlands and Islands is a dream as distant as it might be for similarly disadvantaged citizens wherever they live.