Phoenix

Discussion on Film Festivals in Leicester


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Introduction

The Chair of the Heritage, Culture, Leisure and Sports Scrutiny Commission has asked for a discussion at its meeting in January on film festivals in Leicester.

Phoenix is invited to the meeting to support the discussion. One or more members of the Phoenix management team will attend the meeting with a presentation to inform the Commission’s discussions. This paper provides some context, information and thoughts in advance of the meeting.

Film Festivals Overview

The term ‘film festival’ encapsulates a wide range of events spanning international festivals such as Cannes to locally-rooted community events. Film festivals can be based at one venue or many and some tour from place to place. Some festivals happen regularly (e.g. every year), others occasionally, and some are one-off events.

A common dimension is that they aim to bring people together to celebrate and explore particular themes through curated programmes of films and related activities over short periods of time.

A good understanding of the purpose of a festival and its intended audience is essential for success. Festivals are aimed at particular audiences, for example:

**Festival De Cannes** is the foremost international annual film showcase targeted primarily at people working in the film industry. It attracts celebrities, industry leaders and hopefuls from across the world to a glitzy location every year.

**Borderlines** is an annual month-long festival showing the best contemporary cinema at 32 venues throughout Herefordshire and Shropshire mainly in rural locations. The festival programme is broad in appeal with an audience drawn mainly from the local region.

**British Silent Film Festival** is a highly regarded occasional touring festival. It attracts an international and national audience for those interested in the silent film genre. In recent years it has based itself at Phoenix, Cambridge and the Barbican in London.

**Hammer has Risen Again** was a one-off event organised by Phoenix and De Montfort University to celebrate the allocation of the Hammer ‘horror’ script archive to the university. Held over 3 days, it attracted academics, celebrities including actor and scriptwriter Mark Gatiss, and a national audience interested in this genre.

**The Short Cinema** is an annual event that started as a celebration of short films by local film-makers. It has grown to attract regional and some international interest. The event is hosted and supported by Phoenix and comprises a submissions process and evening showcasing the best local short films. The audience is mostly the local film-making community of Leicester and the region.

**The UK Green Film Festival** started at Phoenix in partnership with the regeneration company Blueprint with the aim of helping people understand their impact on the environment, and what they can do to reduce it. Sponsored by Greenpeace, last year it simultaneously involved 17 cinema across the UK over a single weekend. Clearly audiences are drawn to the theme and are mainly local to the participating venues.
These examples illustrate the diversity of film festivals and importance of being clear about the purpose and intended audience.

Other factors in the success of film festivals include:

- The passion, commitment and organisational capability of the organisers.
- The market potential and competition from other festivals.
- The available ‘screening’ capacity of the host city or location.
- The attractiveness of the host location.
- Adequate finance and lead-time to invest in planning, organisation and marketing.

**The Situation in Leicester**

Phoenix, working with a number of partners, has developed a portfolio of regular film festivals aimed primarily at local community and regional audiences. Phoenix has also hosted a few one-off and touring festivals that attracted national and international audiences.

These festivals are listed in Appendix 1 for information. We believe they represent a valuable contribution to Leicester by:

- Providing learning opportunities for local people.
- Providing opportunities for artists and practitioners to show and develop their work.
- Bringing people together around important themes.
- Attracting people and income to the city and Cultural Quarter
- Projecting a positive reputation of Leicester and our stakeholders and partners.

Phoenix is planning a number of new festivals that will be mentioned in the presentation to the Commission.

This established festival portfolio and new opportunities are kept under review by the Phoenix management team. Phoenix successfully plays to its strengths and must work within its venue’s capacity limitations when balancing its festivals portfolio as part of its cultural programme.

Public funding and partnerships are crucial to the continuance of this established level of film festival activity in Leicester.

The current festival portfolio and capability would not exist without an independent civic cinema such as Phoenix, which has the mission, freedom and capability to programme thematically and for particular audiences.

**Development of New Film Festivals**

Festivals are infrequent events that require significant resources and funding. The development of a significant new film festival in Leicester would require a preliminary investment in research and development guided by the question: what are we trying to achieve?

The ultimate level of investment would depend on the festival’s intended aim and target audience, as well as the established competition, especially if thinking about a national or international event.
Lead times are also a major consideration. For example, the lead time to organise a community level festival at Phoenix is typically at least one year. If we are to attract an established touring event, we might need 2-3 years. Establishing an international event from scratch might take over 5 years.

**Appendix 1: Table of Film Festivals Organised and Hosted by Phoenix**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Target Audience</th>
<th>Partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The UK Green Film Festival</strong></td>
<td>An annual film festival that explores environmental issues through cinema - entertaining, educating and promoting debate. The festival started at Phoenix and last year involved 17 cinema across the UK over a single weekend.</td>
<td>A national audience interested in green issues drawn mainly from the local area of each cinema.</td>
<td>Friends of the Earth, Blueprint Regeneration, Igloo, Washington Environmental Film Festival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>An Indian Summer</strong></td>
<td>An annual festival delivered with Inspirate in Leicester’s Cultural Quarter that explores Indian culture and heritage, past, present and future.</td>
<td>Intended to appeal to both an Asian and non-Asian audience, it is a celebratory festival that is open to all.</td>
<td>Inspirate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hammer Has Risen From the Grave</strong></td>
<td>Two-day festival in 2012 that celebrated the history of the Hammer Studio.</td>
<td>Hammer aficionados and academics. Horror and cult film fans drawn from across the UK.</td>
<td>De Montfort University Hammer Films</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DocFilm Festival</strong></td>
<td>Leicester based annual festival that explores the documentary medium and highlights the work of local people.</td>
<td>Local audience with an interest in documentary films, filmmakers and film educators.</td>
<td>Citizen’s Eye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Short Cinema</strong></td>
<td>Phoenix-based an annual short film festival showcasing established and emerging film-makers from across the East Midlands.</td>
<td>Leicester’s filmmaking community and locals interested in new talent and short films.</td>
<td>The Short Cinema</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sci-Fi Fest</strong></td>
<td>Annual day-long repertory festival of sci-fi cinema.</td>
<td>Local groups with an interest in the science-fiction genre and gaming.</td>
<td>Star Base Leicester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The UK Festival of Zombie Culture</strong></td>
<td>Annual festival of Zombie culture, Leicester's longest running film festival.</td>
<td>Local and national audience with interest in Zombie culture, film and literature.</td>
<td>Terror4Fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RetroActive</strong></td>
<td>The UK’s only film and video-game festival, a celebration of culture from the 1980s.</td>
<td>National audiences with interest in cult film and retro-gaming.</td>
<td>RetroActive UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>South East Asian Festival</strong></td>
<td>A 3-month pilot of independently produced South East Asian cinema that was yet to receive distribution in the UK.</td>
<td>South-East Asian audience of Leicester.</td>
<td>Local partner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Human Rights Film Festival</strong></td>
<td>Taking place on International Human Rights Day to raise awareness of the work of Amnesty International.</td>
<td>Local audience with interest in human rights and Amnesty International.</td>
<td>Amnesty Leicester</td>
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Appendix 2: About Phoenix

Phoenix is Leicester’s centre for independent cinema, art and digital culture. As a local charity, all our earnings are used to develop our creative programmes, enabling us to reach out to more people.

In our two modern cinema screens we show everything from micro-budget independent films to the best of the more popular new releases. Our programme is deeply rooted in Leicester – creating opportunities for local filmmakers, artists and educators. We organise festivals, events and film seasons often working with community groups and drawing upon influences from across the world.

Our regularly changing art programme presents work by local and international artists, and our education work helps people of all ages to learn about, and create their own, film and art.

At Phoenix, we believe film and art have the power to improve our lives. Watching a movie or visiting a gallery can entertain and inspire us, offering new perspectives on our lives and those of others. They deserve to be experienced somewhere special – which is why we work hard to ensure Phoenix is a place everyone can feel welcome and inspired.

Phoenix’s founding stakeholders are Leicester City Council and De Montfort University. Regular public funders include Arts Council England and the British Film Institute.

Our busy Café Bar is open all day serving freshly-cooked food and many community groups and organisations use Phoenix Square for conferencing, training, networking and social events.

We’re proud of the difference we make with the help of our stakeholders, members, sponsors and volunteers. Recently, with their help, we have:

- Worked with 42 local schools to provide educational film events for over 4,500 children.
- Launched the Access Cinema initiative to provide better cinema watching experiences for 1,400 people with hearing and sight loss, and learning disabilities.
- Supported 60 county volunteers who organise community film events attended by 12,500 people a year. These shared experiences promote volunteering, social cohesion and benefit rural economies.
- Launched a programme to help local people be creative with digital technology by providing grants, personal development and access to facilities.
- Organised events that showcase and celebrate the work of over 1,000 local young people.

Growing numbers of people are enjoying the Phoenix experience - 187,000 connected with our cultural programme last year and many more come along to enjoy the cafe. High levels of customer satisfaction are confirmed in our surveys with 95% saying they would recommend Phoenix.

Phoenix is a registered charity (Leicester Arts Centre) founded in the 1987. In November 2014, we celebrated our 5th anniversary in the purpose-built Phoenix Square, which is an anchor development in Leicester’s Cultural Quarter.