

**INSIGHT REPORT**

# Borrowed Time



# INTRODUCTION

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The following is a report on the innovative release of *Borrowed Time*, which employed a number of new distribution and financing models, including crowdfunding, ‘Direct Distribution’ and Cinema On Demand. (See 1.2)

The film was the directorial feature debut of London Film School graduate Jules Bishop and the first feature film from production company, Parkville Pictures.

The £120,000-budget feature was part of Film London’s innovative Microwave scheme, which is also supported by BBC Films.

Shot in 18 days in East London in June 2012, *Borrowed Time* tells the story of an unlikely friendship between a teenager, who has fallen into crime, and the curmudge only pensioner he had tried to rob.

The cast is led by Theo Barklem-Briggs, one of the stars of hit comedy *The Inbetweeners Movie*; and established character actor Phil Davis (*Quadrophenia*, *Vera Drake*, *High Hopes*), perhaps best known to the targeted younger audiences for television work, including appearances on *Doctor Who* and *Sherlock*. The film also includes rising stars Juliet Oldfield, Warren Brown and Perry Benson.

## 1.1 KEY ELEMENTS OF THE RELEASE

### Crowdfunding

For the first time in the UK, *Borrowed Time* used crowdfunding service Kickstarter solely to finance the P&A of a film. Parkville exceeded its target of £20,000 in just a month on the site, helped by a series of incentives. (See 4.1)

### Direct Distribution

Direct Distribution is a broad term used in a number of different ways but it is essentially a releasing strategy in which producers, in the words of a leading advocate Ted Hope, “take control of their own destiny.”

That means retaining as many rights as possible for as many platforms and territories as possible, and using tools and third-party expertise to directly reach and engage an audience.

It contrasts with the traditional licensing model, where distributors, and/or platforms, acquire the rights for the film for a considerable period of time, usually for an advance against future income.





### Cinema On Demand

Cinema On Demand is an emerging trend, by which audiences are directly involved in setting up screenings of films in their local cinema. *Borrowed Time* was the first UK film to use USA Cinema On Demand service, Tugg.

### 1.2 DISTRIBUTION FINANCE AND BFI SUPPORT

| Distribution          |         |
|-----------------------|---------|
| Kickstarter           | £20,000 |
| BBC Films             | £5,000  |
| BFI Distribution Fund | £25,000 |
| Total                 | £50,000 |

*Borrowed Time* raised an initial £25,000, with £20,000 from Kickstarter supplemented by a £5,000 award from BBC Films. It was then awarded £25,000 match funding from the New Models strand of the BFI's Distribution Fund.

The film qualified for BFI support on the basis of the innovative elements, described in section 1.1, and its plan for a multi-platform near-day-and-date release.

The involvement of experienced executives with a wide range of skills and experience (See section 3.6) was also considered to have added to the credibility of the project.

### 1.3 INSIGHT REPORT

At the core of the approach taken by *Borrowed Time* is the extension of producer responsibility across the value film chain, covering sales, distribution and exhibition. Importantly, it also involves direct and active engagement with audiences.

In Direct Distribution, the producer's role is to build a coalition of expertise for a specific film, paid for through fees. In some ways, it mirrors the approach to raising film finance, which for most independent producers involves piecing together funds from a variety of sources.

This report, therefore, is strongly centred on the producer experience, sharing the challenges that will be faced by any producer following the same path.

Olivier Kaempfer, of Parkville Pictures, offers a candid view of the challenges faced, of the opportunities both seized and



missed, and the pitfalls that, in retrospect, might be avoided by others.

It is important to stress that Kaempfer, while acknowledging the difficulties of a steep learning curve, remains committed to the idea of Direct Distribution and believes it offers great long-term promise.

#### 1.4 METHODOLOGY

While the core of the report is based on the producer experience, this study is also informed by other factors.

- Box-office reports
- DVD, Sky and VOD sales figures (where available)
- Interviews with key members of the team of executives involved in the distribution of the film
- Other knowledge and data from SampoMedia on new models around the world

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- The £120,000 budget film was made through the Microwave scheme, supported by Film London and BBC Films and completed in June 2012
- It was the debut feature of London Film School graduate Jules Bishop and starred Theo Barklem-Briggs and Philip Davis
- The film did not initially find a distributor willing to guarantee theatrical release, despite winning the Best of the Fest award at Edinburgh
- An innovative release strategy was devised after studying successful Direct Distribution releases in the US, via participation in the Artists2Entrepreneurs programme, run by Ted Hope
- The release strategy was supported by a campaign on the Kickstarter crowdfunding site, raising £21,712 in a month
- The release received £25,000 in support from the BFI Distribution Fund's New Models strand, and £5,000 from BBC Films
- The producer gathered a team of experts with specific distribution and marketing skills to support the release
- The film used a 'Cinema On Demand' tool, Tugg, for the first time in the UK, but managed to complete only one audience-driven screening
- The film employed a new website and audience development tool, Assemble
- The distribution team opted for a 10-day exclusive theatrical window before release on DVD, Sky and VOD
- The film was rejected by many cinemas, and all multiplexes, because it had broken the standard 17-week gap between theatrical and other exploitation windows, making it heavily reliant on arthouse cinemas
- Theatrical revenues were £7,245, DVD gross sales were £3,998 and VOD generated post-split net revenues of £5,858 (£5,108 from iTunes)
- International sales were taken by High Point Media Group, in exchange for ancillary rights in the UK
- *Borrowed Time* was marketed as a feel-good take on the tradition of urban youth films and aimed for a young audience
- The concentration of the theatrical release in arthouse venues may have undermined the potential to engage younger audiences
- The experience of the production team suggests that a bold strategy, devised at the early stages of development of a film, could offer the best results
- Careful strategic planning ought to come before picking a team, or conceding any rights, according to the producer
- Momentum and timing are critical factors in Direct Distribution
- Parkville Pictures remains committed to the ideals of Direct Distribution and believes it has considerable potential.



# THE PRODUCER'S VIEW

This section recounts the producer's experience of the development, planning and implementation of the *Borrowed Time* strategy. It is based on interviews with Oliver Kaempfer, of Parkville Pictures, immediately after the release and some months later, when there had been time for reflection.

## 3.1 TIMETABLE

| Key Dates    |   |
|--------------|---|
| June 2012    | Completion of shoot   |
| October      | Initial Kickstarter planning                                |
| January 2013 | Kickstarter launched  |
| February     | Kickstarter target hit                                      |
| May          | Invitation to Artist2Entrepreneurs, first meeting with TUGG |
| August 16    | Initial planned cinema release date                         |
| September 3  | Initial planned cinema release date                         |
| September 13 | Promotional Sky preview screenings at 25 cinemas            |
| September 20 | First traditional theatrical screening                      |
| September 23 | DVD, VOD and Sky launch                                     |

## 3.2 EVOLUTION OF THE STRATEGY

The producer's initial focus was solely on the challenge of developing and producing a micro-budget film with a tight shooting schedule, and the release model was not high on the agenda.

The film's prospects looked promising: it won the Best of the Fest award at the Edinburgh International Film Festival in June 2012, and attracted the interest of distributors at Film London's LUFF screenings.

Interest, however, did not immediately translate into firm deals that met the

ambitions of the producers. In particular, Parkville Pictures struggled to find UK distributors willing to guarantee a run in cinemas, which the producers believed it both needed and deserved.

*"People had worked out how to make micro-budget films, and make them well, but people hadn't figured out how to distribute them."*

Kaempfer says there were doubts about the positioning of the film ("it may have been caught between two worlds, being comic and dramatic") but the real problem, he believes, was the state of the market for low-budget original independent film.

Film London's Microwave scheme had an impressive track record in helping micro-budget films, such as *Shifty*, *Mum & Dad* and *Ill Manors*, secure strong distribution deals but Kaempfer believes the market had become more challenging with a surfeit of content.

Some distributors had experimented with low-budget film and been disappointed with the results.

But despite the more risk-averse distribution environment, the confidence in the theatrical potential of the film remained firm.

*Borrowed Time* had been shot in Super 16mm and was praised by reviewers for its cinematic quality, while success in Edinburgh reinforced the view that the film would play well with audiences.

*“You put in so much passion and ambition that it felt spiritually draining to see it just on VOD or TV. The big screen correlates to your sense of ambition.”*

But he was also sure that even a small theatrical run was important to success on other platforms. (See Section 4)

### 3.3 NEW MODELS

The decision to think seriously about pursuing new forms of distribution and marketing came three months after the film’s completion in June 2012.

The frustrating limitation of the conventional options on offer coincided with exposure to fresh ideas from the US. Promising case studies were emerging where producers had enjoyed some success with innovative release models.

Parkville Pictures’ participation in the IFP Filmmakers’ Conference in New York in 2012 led to a meeting between Kaempfer and Elizabeth Holm, Film Programme Director at Kickstarter, which was just launching in the UK at the time.

Kickstarter had made a strong impact on film in the US and, importantly, was no longer being used simply as part of the production budget but had been employed to support marketing and distribution.

The producer also became aware of the work of Ted Hope’s groundbreaking Artist2Entrepreneurs (A2E) scheme, which was driving interest in Direct Distribution.

A plan began to take shape for a new kind of release. The expected younger audience for the film (See 3.8) reinforced belief in the potential for a fresh approach.

During the Kickstarter campaign, another confidence boost came, which Kaempfer says was important to the campaign. *Borrowed Time* was selected in May 2013 for Artists2Entrepreneurs, alongside like-minded, but more experienced producers from the US.

*“Suddenly these people, who were five years ahead in their thinking, started talking about the big picture, and how theatrical and VOD strategies should be integrated.”*

### 3.4 SALES AGENT

By October 2012, the Kickstarter plan had really “fired up the team,” to the point that a new offer from a small distributor was turned down. The idea of “taking control of our own destiny” became increasingly important.

There was one compromise, however. Parkville agreed a deal with sales company High Point Media Group. High Point would take international sales in return for ancillary sales in the UK.

Kaempfer took up the option, feeling it would free Parkville to focus on UK theatrical rights, which had become its paramount concern.

*“We did feel that if we took control of theatrical, the rest would take care of itself.”*

High Point already had experience with micro-budget films, handling a number of Film London’s Microwave projects, and it was happy with the Kickstarter approach.

High Point’s involvement was also seen by the film-makers and executives as a monetising safety net should the Direct Distribution approach to theatrical exploitation not prove successful.

The sales company did a deal with distributor Matchbox Films and, on the plus side, the film found its way onto platforms, including iTunes, Blinkbox, FilmFlex and, crucially, Sky TV.

Ceding control of non-theatrical release to a third party, however, became a complicating factor. (See Section 4)

### 3.5 P&A

The success of the Kickstarter campaign was a major boost for the prospects of the film. The BBC contributed £5,000 having been impressed by the approach of the producers.

The release might have been scheduled for the spring but another opportunity came in May with the launch of a new strand to the BFI's Distribution Fund, devoted to testing innovative distribution models. A successful bid saw the P&A budget increase to £50,000.

Ironically, the bigger budget, and the credibility and momentum behind the film finally attracted two approaches from established independent distributors.

But by that time, the production team had a strong sense of mission and growing confidence in the potential for Direct Distribution and in the Tugg screenings.

*"I also thought that I wouldn't be able to look the Kickstarter backers in the face if we hadn't followed the plan we promised,"* said Kaempfer.

### 3.6 THE BORROWED TIME TEAM

*Borrowed Time* began with a core team of committed supporters, who were instrumental in supporting the film through production, crowdfunding and the marketing and distribution push.

All the institutional partners, and particularly Film London and BBC Films were generous in their support and advice during each stage of the film.

The cast and crew were also strongly involved in promoting Parkville's Kickstarter campaign, and in helping

create online awareness for the film, in particular:

- Writer-Director Jules Bishop

Bishop was present at all the special 'event' screenings (see 4.3) and promotional events to engage with audiences and represent the voice of the film.

- Theo Barklem-Biggs and Phil Davis

The lead actors were especially generous with their time and commitment to promoting the film, as were Juliet Oldfield and Warren Brown.

- Jumayn Hunter, Andrew Ellis, Hammed Animashaun, and Katie Stephen

The younger cast members were all very influential in the social media campaign

For the Direct Distribution campaign, Parkville Pictures set about creating a team to meet the specific needs of the release.

The backing of Film London's Microwave scheme gave the film clear advantages, opening up partnerships with senior professionals that would not ordinarily have been possible.

There were some constraints on the choice of team because Parkville was not in control of UK ancillary rights, where choices of partners were made by High Point.

But the film clearly had advantages, which were further boosted when the groundbreaking nature of the release won significant support from the BFI's Distribution Fund (See 1.3).

The potential of a new approach to distribution and marketing also excited interest from experienced partners, who were willing to work for fees that were much lower than might have been expected from a conventional film.



This too came with downsides, as the high-quality experts had other commitments, which made it difficult to coordinate the team and to bring them all together at the same time.

Nonetheless, Parkville managed to bring together an impressive range of expertise within a total P&A budget of £50,000. (NB It should be noted that a large percentage of that budget came from support that would not be available to all films in future).

- **Parkville Pictures:** Olivier Kaempfer  
Producer and team leader.
- **Film London and BBC Films:** Mia Bays  
As part of the Microwave scheme, *Borrowed Time* was able to work with Oscar-winning producer Mia Bays. The founder of Missing In Action Films was able to bring huge experience in distribution and marketing to the project. Kaempfer says she embraced the Direct Distribution approach and was a key ally in “fighting our corner.”
- **Shear Entertainment:** Dave Shear  
Shear Entertainment is a consultancy, founded by the former Head of Distribution at Revolver Entertainment, Dave Shear. The company worked with the team on the theatrical distribution campaign.
- **Organic Marketing**  
Organic became involved through the interest of Rob Wilkerson, CEO of the agency’s parent company Target Media Group, who was on the board of Film London. Organic has a strong reputation as a forward-thinking PR and Marketing company in film and other media. Organic liked the project and agreed to support it for a reduced fee.
- **High Point Media Group**  
Handled UK ancillary and international sales. (See 3.4)

- **Assemble**

As the first UK film to employ US web, social media and audience development tool, Assemble, *Borrowed Time* was able to use the service for free. Assemble was used to build a website, create social media interaction, host trailers (with an ‘embed’ option) and to coordinate Tugg screenings.

- **Tugg**

*Borrowed Time* was the first to trial the US Cinema On Demand service. (See 3.7)

- **ShowFilmFirst**

ShowFilmFirst managed test screenings.

- **PPC**

Created trailers.

- **Alex Murray, of Murray Studios**

Designed the film’s posters

### 3.7 CINEMA ON DEMAND

Cinema On Demand is a concept that had been growing in strength in the US at the time of the release, and which is now rapidly entering the mainstream.

The simple concept is that consumers, who wish to see a film, are able to create a screening in their local cinema by using a simple social media-centred booking platform.

*Borrowed Time* used a service called Tugg, which it met at Artist2Entrepreneur in May 2013. Tugg had been growing fast in the US, since launching at the South By South West (SXSW) festival in 2012. It had managed to mobilise an active community of cinemagoers, and to win the support of cinema owners and industry, offering more than 1,000 titles.

“Like Kickstarter, it (Tugg) wasn’t just the event itself but all the conversation around it, social media and all that stuff. People got excited about what is possible and that was good positive energy.”



Successes include 2013's *Angel's Perch*, a crowdfunded film, which managed to play in 75 cities with 50% of screenings powered by Tugg.

The relationship with Parkville began following the initial meeting at Artist2Entrepreneur, at which time Tugg was planning a UK launch. They agreed to allow *Borrowed Time* to be the exclusive first user of the platform in the UK ahead of the launch.

The first UK Tugg screening was on October 29th 2013, when *Borrowed Time* played at the Prince Charles cinema, which was keen to test out the platform. The agreed minimum threshold made with the venue, which would trigger a screening, was 100 tickets, which is higher than the 60-90 sales standard in the US. The threshold is set at a level that would cover both costs and the minimum screen revenue required by the venue.

Under the deal, any profits on sales above the threshold would be shared between producer and theatre, with 5% going to the audience member 'promoter', who initiated the screening.

In the one successful Tugg screening ticket sales (160) were far above the minimum, and the promoter, a Kickstarter backer did earn a percentage.

Despite the clear initial promise, the producer did have concerns, namely Tugg's lack of relationships with UK cinemas, needed for the infrastructure to work, as well as the lack of audience awareness. Another complicating factor came later, when it became clear that Picturehouse Cinemas were partners in a rival Cinema On Demand service, called Ourscreen.

There were, however, potential opportunities that convinced Kaempfer. Tugg suggested it was willing to put its weight behind *Borrowed Time*, which would act as a proof of concept beside a wider launch of the product and brand.

Parkville Pictures was also planning to work with Dave Shear, of newly-created consultancy Shear Entertainment, who was offering to use his own relationships with cinemas to help build the Cinema On Demand strategy.

### 3.8 MARKET POSITIONING

Part of the rationale for exploring fresh approaches was the projected younger market for the film, expected to be more knowledgeable and open to digital and interactive elements.

The primary audience was identified as urban, ABC1, 15-34-years-old, with no gender bias. There was an expectation



that the audience would be dominated by regular cinemagoers but also by frequent users of digital and social media, with knowledge of multiplatform content. The secondary target audience was 35+ audiences with the same interests in cinema and digital content.

The marketing plan played on the idea that *Borrowed Time* was a fresh take on the British arthouse urban film tradition, represented by directors such as Mike Leigh, Ken Loach and Shane Meadows.

The film was positioned as “an antidote to the bleak, depressing and hopeless urban youth movies.” The Kickstarter campaign talked about a “fresh and life-affirming comedy.”

*Borrowed Time* was very active on social media, with considerable activity on Kickstarter, Facebook and Twitter (See Section Four). The website, built using the Assemble tool, attracted more than 6,000 visitors and allowed users to embed a player to show the trailer, though it was little used.

The crowdfunding campaign did drive social media traffic and a Kickstarter backer did initiate a successful Tugg screening (though Cinema On Demand activity among backers was generally less than had been hoped),

The talent used their own networks to support the film. Principal cast member Phil Davis, in particular, was able to engage his large Twitter following of 15,400 people. Theo Barklem-Briggs has 1,660 followers and strongly promoted the film.

All these factors reinforced the belief of the producer in the Direct Distribution approach.

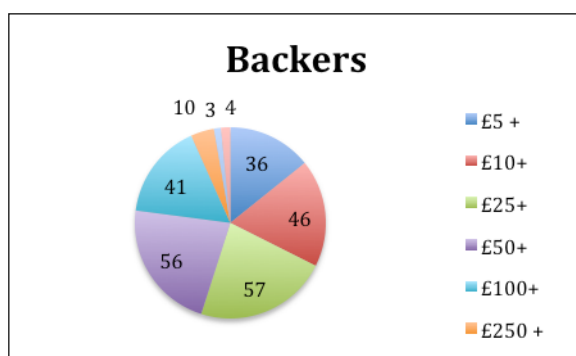


# RESULTS AND LESSONS

All results cover the first four months of release.

The following section presents the results of the various parts of the campaign and the lessons learned by the producer. The overall revenue performance was as follows:

| Platform   | Revenues     |
|------------|--------------|
| Box Office | £7,245       |
| DVD        | £3,998       |
| iTunes     | £5,103 (Net) |
| FilmFlex   | £755 (Net)   |
| Sky        | License fee  |



## 4.1 KICKSTARTER

The Kickstarter campaign led by Parkville started in January 2013, six months after the release of the film. Despite the unusual focus on distribution, rather than production, its target was reached in a month.

*Borrowed Time* earned 109% of its Kickstarter target of £20,000, reaching £21,721 in February 2013. The total was raised through 360 backers, including four offers of £1,000 or more.

The money raising part of the campaign was a major success and was built on careful study of best practice. A range of

incentives, from cinema tickets to a framed painting by the director, encouraged backers to invest. The top 4.7% of backers (17 giving from £250-£1,000) made up around 40% of the total raised. (See graphic above)

The more disappointing part of the Kickstarter campaign was that backers did not become the active supporters during the film's release that had been envisaged. In particular, the crowdfunders initiated only one Cinema On Demand screening, although it was a big success. (See 4.2)

Lack of knowledge of Cinema On Demand, (see 3.7) and of Tugg in particular, may have been a key factor.

But Kaempfer believes there was a significant and serious loss of momentum between the end of the crowdfunding campaign in February 2013 and the actual theatrical release in September. Timing is critical to keeping crowdfunders interested, he suggests. (See 4.7)

## 4.2 TUGG RELEASE

The plan to extensively use Tugg, to create a broad cinema audience, particularly outside London, did not deliver on its initial promise.

To be fair, one of the biggest cinema screenings of the film was organised through Tugg, with 160 people attending the Prince Charles Cinema in the West End of London. But it turned out to be the only Tugg event.

There were a number of issues that undermined the ambitious plans for Tugg:

- **Cinema relationships:** UK cinemas did not know of, or have a relationship with, Tugg and were reluctant to offer the slots, times and profile required. A second major factor was that a major cinema chain in Picturehouse, which might have been a partner, had already developed a rival platform, Ourscreen.

- **Audience awareness:** UK audiences were simply unaware of the service and there was no marketing campaign from the service itself that might have aroused interest. Tugg decided not to launch alongside *Borrowed Time*, as planned.
- **Timing:** Like crowdfunding, Cinema On Demand is essentially reliant on momentum. Problems in the timing of the release, coupled with the lack of awareness, meant, as Kaempfer admits, that the plans “ran out of steam.”

### 4.3 THEATRICAL RELEASE

The theatrical life of the film started with a very successful Sky preview tour to 25 venues, which generated a positive reaction, with a high 75% recommendation rate from audiences.

It was followed by a campaign, based on a limited cinema release, with the expectation that box-office performance would drive ancillary sales (only six screenings are needed to qualify for some platforms, including Sky).

The theatrical strategy was centred on special event screenings.

These events proved the biggest success of the release. Highlights include:

- Nearly 200 people at a Q&A, featuring Mark Kermode and Phil Davis at Curzon Soho
- A full house for a cast Q&A and masterclass at The Ritzy Picturehouse, Brixton
- A packed audience for a taxidermy-themed event at the Hackney Picturehouse, Hackney
- A 160-ticket Tugg screening at the Prince Charles Cinema, off Leicester Square.
- Close to 300 people attended a screening at Ealing Town Hall

- There was an outdoor screening at Strawberry Hill, Twickenham with a Q&A
- And a Q&A screening was also held at Peckhamplex.

Overall, however, the theatrical release generated just £7,245 from 31 total screenings, across six traditional sites and additional one-off special screenings. It was undermined by a series of issues, beginning with problems in agreeing a date.

Having assembled the team, the plan was for an August release, where the film was intended to act as counter-programming against a Hollywood summer tentpole blockbuster.

Difficulties in coordinating the team and finding a consensus on dates, however, forced the film back into a September launch.

The delay had a number of consequences. The film was forced to compete against heavyweight independent films, including *Rush* and *The Great Beauty*.

The initial day of launch on September 13, saw just one day-time screening at Curzon Soho and the planned Q&A screening with Mark Kermode, intended to launch the film, had to be postponed to September 18 because of a last minute clash of schedules, limiting the impact of a packed event.

Modest first-week returns curtailed the planned regional expansion.

A second critical factor is one faced by all films experimenting in new release models. The team opted for a near day-and-date model, in which theatrical would have a two-week window, followed by a VOD, DVD and Pay-TV launch. It was agreed the approach would allow time for the cinema release to build word of mouth, while allowing a single marketing push for all platforms.

The breaking of the standard 17-week window between theatrical and all other formats meant that many cinemas, including all multiplexes, refused to show the film.

Even those which were willing to screen the film were not generally offering premium slots.

Even with an experienced team, it was still difficult to drive the deals that might have been achieved by a conventional distributor with long-term relationships and bargaining power with cinema owners. (Although it is important to note that there was no conventional theatrical deal on the table when the decision to opt for a Direct Distribution approach was taken).

#### 4.4 MULTI-PLATFORM RELEASE

The Direct Distribution team opted for an unconventional 10-day all-platform release, which it believed had some key advantages: A brief window of exclusivity for cinemas both honoured the commitment to theatrical made to Kickstarter backers, and, it was hoped, could avoid cannibalisation of the big-screen audience.

It was also felt that a short burst in cinemas could drive word of mouth, which might translate into ancillary sales.

The producer believes the 10-day holdback had positive results: *Borrowed Time* reached number 16 in the iTunes chart and generated net revenues to the producer of more than £5,000. Matchbox said it had been the best performance of any film it had handled on the Apple platform, acknowledging the influence of the social media and marketing campaign.

The film was sold to Sky to play on their premier movie channel.

Kaempfer is convinced, in retrospect, that the film would have enjoyed a stronger performance on all platforms, if there had been a single, integrated release strategy under the command of the Direct Distribution team.

While acknowledging that High Point and Matchbox created deals with Sky, iTunes, Blinkbox and FilmFlex, the producer believes that splitting theatrical and ancillary rights was not as efficient and effective as managing them together through a centralised control.

Parkville was not free to make executive decisions on VOD deals, for example, which contributed to the delays on release date.

Kaempfer suggests that, in retrospect, that keeping control of all rights would have been the best way to create an integrated and dynamic Direct Distribution release.

*"When we started out, the key ambition was attaining a theatrical release. It was something I felt I could get my head around – it was much like event organising – but VOD, DVD and TV appeared to be more of an unknown territory, and we felt more comfortable bringing on board an experienced Sales Company."*

*"It was only later, especially through participation in the Artist2Entrepreneur scheme, that the possibilities and opportunities for film-makers in retaining full control of ancillary rights became clear."*

While acknowledging High Point's ability to pull together the Sky deal, which would have been challenging, Kaempfer believes that other options are worth exploring.

Direct-to-fan VOD options with established video-sharing platforms, such as Vimeo, and engaging directly with a rights aggregator, he suggests, could have led to interesting and innovative results.



#### 4.5 AUDIENCE REACTION

The film made an immediate impact on audiences, winning the Best of the Fest award at Edinburgh.

And two weeks before the release, there had been a successful Sky screening tour at venues around the UK, testing the film on 25 screens. The performance was strong with 75% of audiences offering a positive response.

Social media response also suggests strong engagement from audiences; the Facebook page picked up more than 1,000 Likes, there were 436 Twitter followers and the Assemble website attracted more than 6,400 visitors.

The YouTube trailer attracted more than 24,000 views.

The critical reaction however was mixed, with some influential reviewers disliking the film. There were one and two-star reviews in The Telegraph and The Guardian respectively. The Telegraph called the film “a mess through and through”, while The Guardian suggested that a “certain low-key charm” was undermined by “sloppiness.” Empire gave it two stars

But there were much more positive views in The Standard in London, The Express, Total Film and Time Out, all praising the film as a promising debut for the director and a strong performance from Phil Davies in particular. Reviews aggregation site Rotten Tomatoes scored the critics ratings at 73% positive (“fresh”)

The reaction from Sky audiences, and the support of the more popular press, may suggest that the film had potential to succeed as a mainstream release and to have been a more natural fit in multiplexes.

The fact that the film release was dominated by London arthouse venues may have excluded the younger target audience around the country. Those venues tend to be more sensitive to reviews in newspapers, such as The Guardian.

The decision by many cinemas, including all multiplexes, to pass on the film (in protest at the altered release windows), clearly limited the reach to the main audience.

#### 4.6 LONG TERM BENEFITS

The producer is convinced that the profile of the theatrical release of *Borrowed Time*, coupled with the attention afforded it through the use of new media tools has brought longer-term benefits to his company.

It raised the awareness - and the confidence - of Parkville Pictures in digital distribution, audience development and the international market.

Parkville's second production, *Appropriate Behavior*, premiered at Sundance in 2014, and they are now handling their own Direct International Sales for the title.

The company believes it has learned lessons which will allow future Direct Distribution ventures to be much more successful.

*“I am still so excited about the possibilities. If producers and production companies want to continue making independent film, paradoxically they have to begin thinking more like studios. You have to become more integrated and cannot be happy just being the content creator – it is not going to make it through the system. It is incredibly liberating.”*

## 4.7 OVERALL CONCLUSIONS FROM THE PRODUCER

**1. Momentum:** Kaempfer believes that if the Kickstarter campaign had begun immediately after the Edinburgh International Film Festival award (See 3.2); and the actual Direct Distribution release soon after the crowdfunding campaign, then it would have led to considerably stronger returns. The momentum would have created unstoppable word of mouth with benefits across all platforms. “If you just collapsed the entire story of what happened with *Borrowed Time*, I think it would have allowed for far greater results.”

**2. Forward planning:** Kaempfer believes that it is necessary to start thinking about release strategy at the earliest stage of the film. “Studios know what they are going to do with a film before they go out and make it. Strategy has to be built in right from the start, building the online community interest.” Waiting until a film is finished does not leave enough time to create a team and build momentum.

**3. Buzz is the critical factor:** Most successful films in the current crowded market are built on some form of pre-awareness (genre, adaptation, remake, etc.). Building word of mouth is indispensable to a film without pre-existing audience knowledge and that means engaging audiences at an early stage and working the crowdfunding support hard, so that it becomes a key marketing tool: “*If you don’t have the money to blast presence, you are relying on human excitement, and human excitement lasts only so long.*”

**4. Build a strategy before a team:** Direct Distribution means engaging, and paying for, a team for a limited period of time. It is essential, suggests Kaempfer that the time is used to maximum effect, and so it is important to have devised a strategic plan before setting up a team and, crucially before conceding any rights. “*Bring on the*

*partners when you fully know your goals for the release strategy, so that they can help you put together a campaign that aligns with those goals.*”

*“If you don’t yet have a fully-formed vision for the release, and you’ve already brought partners on board, it can be very dangerous and potentially compromise your capacity to achieve your new objectives.”*

**5. Control and leadership:** A major part of the ethos of Direct Distribution is keeping control of the destiny of a project, and inspiring others to help achieve clear goals. With a clear plan, it is possible to delegate some parts of the release to third parties. It is not necessarily a problem bringing in a sales agent, or distributor, for example, if they are working together with your agenda and delivering common objectives, suggests Kaempfer.

**6. Know what you don’t know:** In constructing a team, it is important to know where it is necessary to buy in expertise, and where work can be kept in house.

**7. Flexibility:** The beauty of Direct Distribution seems to be its flexibility and that it can be adapted to any form of release. Each team is selected for the specific needs of individual projects; the experts do not dictate the strategy, but are chosen to service the strategy. The theory does come with problems in implementation: scarce skills may be expensive, and the expertise accumulated for one film disappears at the end of a film.

**8. Theatrical remains important:** Kaempfer remains convinced of the importance of a theatrical platform, not just as an end in itself, but also as a key driving factor for other platforms. He is, however, also convinced that a relatively small release, perhaps based around special events (such as Q&As), can be more efficient and potentially as effective as a traditional or wide release. He is also a

believer that Cinema On Demand has the potential to become a way of increasing reach without putting too much strain on budgets; the market needs to mature but the theory is sound, as long as producers are willing to put the time and energy in building demand through social media, crowdfunding etc.

**9. Knowing the audience:** All independent film drama, outside certain genres, is struggling to make an impact in an overcrowded market. There are few reasons to believe that the conventional market will improve: new competition for screen space is coming from Event Cinema, such as opera and theatre, while hard-pressed distributors are becoming more risk averse. Alternatives, such as Direct Distribution, are predicated on the idea of appealing to audiences over the head of the normal channels of marketing and distribution.

**10. Building influence:** *Borrowed Time* was forced to recognise the harsh reality that even a great team assembled for a single film lacks clout in the market. Long-term relationships are important with all platforms. One lesson from *Borrowed Time* may be to manage those relationships in-house with a focus on the long term.

## CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps the most significant commentary on the *Borrowed Time* approach is that the producer wants to have another go.

Kaempfer's natural and infectious enthusiasm was acknowledged in all the interviews for this report but his determination to continue with Direct Distribution is perhaps surprising given that the release of *Borrowed Time* managed to generate only modest revenues, particularly in cinemas and on DVD.

One could argue a case that it was a failed experiment.

Such a judgment needs to be balanced with the reality that there is little evidence that conventional industry models offered a viable alternative.

According to BFI research, revealed in December 2013, low budget films are at the bottom of a sliding scale in terms of profits. Just 4.1% of £0.5m-£2m budget films break even, compared with 17.1% of films with budgets above £10m. It is fair to assume that micro-budget films below £0.5m have a still greater struggle.

And it is possible to make a case that *Borrowed Time* offers reasons for optimism for those looking to pursue a similar model.

From a standing start, and with no prior experience, a first-time feature film producer, with a micro-budget drama from a first-time director, managed to assemble and implement a deeply ambitious strategy. He avoided short-term options for recoupment and set up a small but significant theatrical release.

Kaempfer also believes that new and alternative distribution models will require further evolving and refining, and one must be willing to not get it completely right the first time.

The willingness to share the experience and to offer an honest appraisal of mistakes and opportunities is a welcome outcome of the release.

### 5.1 ALTERNATIVE VIEWS

SampoMedia gathered a number of alternative perspectives on the release, interviewing members of the *Borrowed Time* team.

In broad terms, they shared the same basic assessment of the release as the producer.



Each pointed to the same problems in the release, particularly of lost momentum as release dates shifted.

There was also general recognition that such an ambitious strategy ought to have been considered much earlier in the development of the film, not constructed some months after its completion.

Everyone, however, pointed to the relentless ambition and strong leadership of Kaempfer as the key factor in pulling all the disparate elements together.

There was, however, a sense that the film – and perhaps the Direct Distribution approach more widely – was too reliant on the drive of an individual.

### **Budget**

There was a feeling among team members that even the final £50,000 P&A budget (supplemented by the BFI and BBC) was barely adequate, and may still have been inadequate for the scale of the ambition of the release model.

Most of those involved in the *Borrowed Time* release worked for a significantly reduced fee, and sometimes pro bono. Such advantages will not be available to every film in future. A bigger budget may be important in ensuring the availability and commitment of the experts recruited.

The efficiency and cost of creating a Direct Distribution team is also reliant on ruthless planning and coordination. In the case of *Borrowed Time*, Kaempfer was unable to exert control over all the parts of the release for reasons beyond his control.

### **Market Positioning**

The market positioning of the film was also an issue for team members. Kaempfer acknowledges himself that *Borrowed Time* was difficult to categorise.

Direct Distribution may be easier for genre films than for drama. Important questions were raised about whether such low-budget dramas can really succeed as theatrically-

led films. There was a suggestion that such dramas might work better as television, or perhaps as one of the growing number of VOD-funded small-screen productions.

### **Direct Distribution potential**

The excitement generated by the new approach has left most participants with a belief that it has long-term potential, and that it was in tune with the indie production spirit.

Issues of time and money have already been discussed but there is a sense that the technical barriers will be resolved, and with them, perhaps, consumer acceptance.

Picturehouse Cinemas investment in Cinema On Demand may build demand among audiences, which might translate into a serious market. Whether Tugg, or other services, will be serious players in that field remains to be seen.

Low-cost web, social media and audience development platforms, including Assemble, will help reduce costs and increase reach; while services not used in this release, such as Vimeo, YouTube channels or VOD aggregators, are maturing fast.

## **5.2 FINAL CONCLUSIONS**

*Borrowed Time* has made a serious contribution to the debate about the future of low-budget independent film.

An overcrowded market, particularly in theatrical terms, has made it extremely difficult for new drama to make a mark.

Distributors are becoming more risk averse, which is understandable in a crowded market, where key sources of revenue, such as DVD and television are falling.

But that leaves two options: either all films are made to meet the conservative criteria of conventional sales and distribution, or new forms of reaching audiences are found.



As a concept, Direct Distribution is attractive, certainly when compared to the idea of DIY self-distribution, which suggest a great increase in the skills, workload and motivation of producers.

The notion that distribution might become a service layer, with companies offering expertise and skills, rather than buying rights is intriguing.

*Borrowed Time*, however, offers just a hint of the potential for these new models. Bigger tests are likely to come.

The biggest driver of experimentation is likely to be the lack of conventional alternatives, rather than the excitement of producers. Nonetheless, there is a powerful logic to the Direct Distribution concept and, as more producers pursue and perfect the approach, its potential will become clearer.

*Borrowed Time* has made a huge contribution in offering an open and transparent case study, from which others will learn.

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