



INSIGHT REPORT

A SYRIAN LOVE STORY

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A SYRIAN LOVE STORY CASE STUDY

A Syrian Love Story is directed by Sean McAllister (*Liberace of Baghdad*) and produced by Elhum Shakerifar. Financed with funds from BBC Storyville, the BFI, 10Ft films, broadcast pre-sales and deferrals, it had neither a distributor nor a sales agent when it was selected to have its world premiere at Sheffield Doc Fest in 2015. There the film played to great acclaim, from both critics and audiences alike, with many influencers promising support of the film where they could (press, exhibition etc). As such, rather than wait and see if a UK distributor would come on board, the filmmakers chose to capitalize on this support, as well as on the continued relevance of the film – with the ongoing significance and presence of Syria in the current affairs - and release the film themselves in UK in September 2015. This date was chosen as it was close enough to the

premiere for it to still be fresh in people's minds, and to benefit from their support, but it was also before the glut of films that often enter the market in October and onwards, post LFF and into the awards season.

This report is an account of the rationale and strategy for that release, and of the results and conclusions drawn from this.

As part of the release, 10Ft Films received a Sleeper award from the BFI Distribution fund on 28 September 2015. This award was made *after* a successful opening weekend in order to cover additional VPFs and buy more media, so that the film could benefit from the strong word of mouth occurring and the regional bookings being offered to them.

TEAM

10Ft Films Ltd managed the film's distribution entirely. The strategy was developed and delivered mainly by producer Elhum Shakerifar, who led on bookings - including print transport, and on marketing and press. As a programmer (formerly at Birds Eye View BEV), and currently at London Film Festival and Shubbak, Elhum drew on her knowledge of the cinema landscape to plan and make contact with exhibitors to book venues. Elhum had also worked on grassroots strategies for projects including *Wadjda* by Haifaa Al Mansour for Soda Pictures and had previously considered film positioning through from the festival perspective, up until the distribution (e.g. successfully championing the BEV 2013 opening night film *When I Saw You* by Annemarie Jacir to UK distributors - it was then acquired by New Wave).

Marketing and communication activities were supported by Joanna Duncombe, who drew on her networks and knowledge as London Short Film Festival Producer / BEV Press and Marketing Manager. Jo worked on the campaign from August through till the end of September.

Director Sean McAllister managed relationships relating to the BBC broadcast and travel logistics for himself and film contributor Amer (who was present in person in the UK for the first week of release), as well as liaising with film contributors Raghda and her and Amer's children (via Skype), who all contributed to the event release through their presence for Q&As and press.

FILM SYNOPSIS

Comrades and lovers Amer and Raghda met in a Syrian prison cell 15 years ago. When McAllister first meets their family in 2009, Raghda is back in prison leaving Amer to look after their 4 boys alone; but as the 'Arab Spring' sweeps the region, the family's fate shifts irrevocably. Filmed over 5 years, the film charts their incredible odyssey to political freedom. For Raghda and Amer, it is a journey of hope, dreams and despair: for the revolution, their homeland and each other.

Known for his unique and intimate portraits, director Sean McAllister received the Grand Jury prize at the 2015 Sheffield Documentary Festival for this 'Bergmanesque portrait of a relationship and love'.

CHAPTER ONE

DISTRIBUTION PLANNING

TARGET AUDIENCE

The film is primarily aimed at a UK or 'Western' audience – it is largely in English and Sean's narration throughout gives an audience who knows nothing about Syria contextualising elements through which to understand a very relatable human journey. Sean insists that his primary audience are always 'his mates in Hull', who wouldn't usually care about the places he goes to film in. He tries to find characters that they will relate to, and his work is consistently relatable in this way.

When considering the film's distribution, it was always the aim to have both a television and cinema audience for the film, and the belief in this decision was reinforced when the project was commissioned by both the BBC as well as being funded by the BFI. In the edit we made a decision to ensure a clear personal and political balance and as the title indicates, it is in many ways a film about Syria, but it is also a love story. This balance was key to the film's positioning, and to the core marketing strategy we chose to adopt – that this is first and foremost a human story with arthouse appeal, and secondly a Syria/political interest story, for documentary fans. Nevertheless, the easiest audience to engage was likely to be the documentary fans, and those who already knew Sean's work, whilst encouraging audiences to see the film for the human

interest angle would be the more challenging part of the campaign.

Primary audience:

- Left leaning / liberal / engaged or politically active
- Political / documentary audience – those following the situation in Syria (and/or similar e.g. Gaza)
- Documentary and existing Sean McAllister fan base

Secondary audience:

- positioning Sean as a 'discovery'
- Independent / art house film audience
- Those engaging with in depth film comment / listening to established film critics / following festival news and buzz

AUDIENCE APPEAL

The film's USP was the intimate family story and the drama and suspense around McAllister's arrest during filming. At point of release, the film's appeal was also that it was a project that had spent five years documenting and understanding a subject that had suddenly become headline news.



CHAPTER TWO

DISTRIBUTION STRATEGY

Self-released by 10Ft Films Ltd, the strategy agreed with funders BFI and BBC was to have a fully collapsed window with a 10-day event-led, day and date (on demand / theatrical) release, culminating in a BBC4 broadcast. One of the principal reasons for such a compressed release (with the BBC agreeing to bring forward the film's broadcast from March 2016 to Sept 2015) was that the marketing and media budget for this release was extremely limited. Therefore the rationale for this compression was to see whether one could utilize all of the reviews for the film (anticipated to be very strong), together with the word of mouth, PR and press which the partners (eg. BBC, BFI, exhibition venues) and supporters might be able to generate, in order to create as much noise as possible, and then offer audiences the most convenient way for them (cinema, on demand, TV) to which they could watch the film once they had heard about it.

This strategy also enabled the films' funders and partners a relatively easy way to engage with the complete life of the release. For example, the BBC was on board to promote and actively engage with the theatrical part of the release (e.g. the Picturehouse Central event was presented in partnership with Storyville; BBC press such as Newsnight and the BBC News Magazine both ran features ahead of the theatrical release, rather than just before broadcast – but still flagged both parts of the release) and the BFI equally promoted both the film's theatrical release and its broadcast.

TIMELINE

June 2015

- UK festival release // World Premiere // Sheffield Doc/Fest
- UK release date pencilled in (BBC Tx initially planned for March 2016)

July 2015

- Strategy meeting BFI/BBC agreeing collapsed windows
- Pre-campaign begins: Trade press reviews + first press screenings
- Trailer and materials finalized but not distributed

August 2015

- Delivery team in place
- Website, Facebook and Twitter accounts opened
- Grassroots strategies developed / marketing outreach begins
- Thunderclap launch – releasing all materials at once

Sept 2015

(see below for more detail) Theatrical release + BBC broadcast

- 15 Sept BFI London premiere + Q&A and Periscope event
- 17 Sept Limited release opens and Q&A tour begins
- 28 Sept BBC4 broadcast
- 29 Sept BBC1 broadcast (additional – see below)

BUDGET

For initial release:

Print costs (trailer / certification / transport) - £ 2825
Digital costs (DCP creation, VPF) - £ 2659
Production costs (posters, leaflets, website etc.) - £ 1831
Travel, per diems and visa costs - £ 3048

Total spend 10Ft Films: £10,363

Note: after the first weekend, BFI approved a 'Sleeper' Distribution Fund lottery award of £12,084 for additional media, following a successful opening on the first weekend and offers of more cinemas:

For sustain, following opening weekend:

Print Advertising: £ 5,301
Online Advertising: £ 5,044
Imaging costs: £414
VPF fees: £1,325

Total additional spend: £ 12,084

Total release costs: £22,447

ACTIVITY SUMMARY

Theatrical strategy

Beginning on 15 September 2015, the theatrical bookings were cautious - strategic and targeted. This was partly because the collapsed window (with a simultaneous VoD release, and a BBC broadcast 2 weeks later) meant that some exhibitors were either not open to screening the film (multiplexes) or were more reluctant to (some independents). But screens were also deliberately chosen where it could be sure there would be an audience for the film and where the venue would support the screenings. Therefore 13 venues were initially booked for Q&A screenings over a 10-day period. These were in the medium to largest screens of each venue, as the Q&As guaranteed that the venues would be supportive of the screenings, treating and marketing them as 'events'. Previews included BFI Southbank (15 September) and Dothouse Curzon Bloomsbury events (17 September).

Special Q&A events screenings included:

Sep 15	18:20	BFI Southbank NFT1
Sep 17	19:30	DocHouse host + Q&A with host Jeremy Hardy
Sep 18	18:30	Picturehouse Central + Q&A with host Nick Fraser
Sep 19	15:30	York Cityscreen Picturehouse + Q&A
Sep 20	15:30	Crouch End Art House + Q&A
Sep 21	18:00	Bristol Watershed + Q&A
Sep 22	18:20	HOME Manchester + Q&A
Sep 23	19:00	Frontline Club + Q&A with host Yasmin Alibhai-Brown
Sep 24	18:30	Ritzy Picturehouse + Q&A
Sep 25	18:30	FACT Liverpool + Q&A
Sep 26	18:45	Oxford Ultimate Picture Palace + Q&A
Sep 27	16:00	Brighton Dukes at Komedia Picturehouse Brighton + Q&A
Sep 28	19:00	Hull Film Festival Fruit, Hull + Q&A

Additional Q&As Added During Run

Sep 27	15:00	BAFTA + Q&A
Sep 27	20:15	Prince Charles Cinema London + Q&A

Other screenings and theatrical runs – September

Other screenings including Glasgow Film Theatre and Queen's Theatre Belfast were planned during the 10 day release. Dothouse Curzon Bloomsbury ran the film for an 11-day period (17 to 27 Sept). Following a successful preview and press screening, the Picturehouse Central run was extended by 2 weeks

(Sep 18 to Oct 7) with an average of 3 screenings a day for the first 2 weeks, and a handful of screenings in the 3rd week. Runs were also planned at Watershed Bristol, Dundee Contemporary Arts, with additional screenings added at the Art House Crouch End and a short run at the Prince Charles Cinema.

Screenings added October – December

JW3, Ludlow Assembly Rooms, Mosaic Rooms, Electric Shoreditch, Quad Derby, BFI, Curzon Soho, Curzon Sheffield, Gulbenkian, Wyaside Arts Centre, with bookings ongoing.

PRESS STRATEGY

Press was managed overall by Elhum and supported by Jo, and the strategy was fed into by the BFI's Press Team and the BBC's Press Office. Three press screenings were held in the run up to the film's release, including ensuring that there would be an FDA week of release screening for reviews. Nevertheless, despite all of these screenings, there was still a request for many online screeners. The BFI provided in-kind support by providing screening space at Stephen Street for these three press screenings, as well as advice on positioning decisions for larger press items.

At the BBC, Ben Whybrow led on directly approaching a range of press outlets. In his own words:

'The film coincided with a huge focus on the Syrian refugee crisis from UK media. Although initially we believed that would be a very good thing because this film gives a voice to that plight, it actually meant pitching was more difficult because many publications had their own editorial around Syria.'

The Observer magazine, Sunday Times magazine, Times 2, Vice, G2 all passed and Sunday Times News Review were all set to travel to France to meet Amer until the editors pulled these visits due to how much other coverage there was on Syria.

Instead, the BBC News Magazine did a feature, which did well on the weekend it was published; BBC World Service Outlook interviewed Amer and Sean, and Newsnight did a nine minute cutdown version of that film with Amer and Sean in the studio, with Raghdha via video link. This compilation was seen worldwide on the BBC

Additionally, Sean, Amer and Raghdha did interviews with CNN, Sky Breakfast and BBC5 Live.

Within BBC platforms, coverage on Newsnight and BBC News Magazine were planned directly through

the BBC Press Office. Elhum arranged the Outlook piece, which was then linked to the Magazine piece, creating even greater reach – getting 236,000 views on the first Sunday after initial publication.

Radio

Alongside an extensive review on Front Row, BBC World Outlook interviewed Sean, Amer and Raghda, and additional interviews were featured on LBC Radio, BBC America, BBC Scotland and was Francine's Stock Pick of the Week.

Targeted Press

We worked across focus areas (refugee / Arab world / women / young people) to target specific press outlets, which led to numerous Arabic language publications and interviews, including BBC Arabic, Al Quds Al Araby, Al Jazeera Arabic, Al Awghat Al Arabi, Al Arabiyya, Levant TV. Additionally, the film has been covered by press focusing on the Middle East, including Middle East Monitor, Al Jazeera English and Al Monitor – who noted that A Syrian Love Story could well be the quintessential document of the Syrian war to date.

Focus on the women's aspect of the film ("can you be Che Guevara and a mother?") was covered through an extensive interview with Raghda by Kate O'Sullivan for The Telegraph, which was picked up by various women's press outlets including the Marie Claire Blog. The refugee angle was covered in numerous blogs, including those of Dost Centre and Open Democracy.

COMMUNICATIONS ELEMENTS AND STRATEGY

Main assets:

- Dedicated website created through Assemble, which included links to all screenings
- A Syrian Love Story Facebook page, Twitter account
- Additionally, existing Sean McAllister Facebook page, Twitter account and dedicated website. The website included clear marketing elements such as an interview with Sean McAllister, which were repeatedly referenced in reviews and coverage of the film.
- Limited number of posters and flyers, also e-vites and a trailer.

We developed a multi pronged approach, which ranged from engaging the industry (partnering with organisations such as Shooting People and MUBI) to engaging with organisations that would connect to the film's different angles (Syria / women / refugees / youth / documentary) as well as doing real grassroots marketing – we flyer'd the Refugees Welcome rally and spoke at Syrian Supper Clubs.

Our campaign began in August and we launched publicly through a 'Thunderclap' trailer launch at the end of August that had a reach of 12.6 million and high profile supporters including Stephen Fry, Jeremy Hardy and organisations including BFI, Refugee Council and Arab British Centre.

Thunderclap Launch

Thunderclap is a new campaign tool, designed to amplify your message with 'the power of the crowd'. It is a 'crowdspeaking' platform that helps people be heard by saying something together, allowing a single message to be mass-shared.

We created a thunderclap campaign to launch the A Syrian Love Story trailer on Youtube with the following tweet:

'Be the first to see the trailer for Sean McAllister's award winning BFI and BBC Storyville backed #ASyrianLoveStory <http://thndr.it/1KzNjQs>'

The idea with Thunderclap is to encourage partner organisations and individuals to sign-up to share the tweet at the same time. Our campaign started on the 18th August 2016, with the aim to have 100 backers by August 26th (the launch date for the trailer).

Thunderclap outreach emails sent:
379 recipients + reminders

By 26 August 2016, we had 215 supporters. Our resulting social reach was **12,609,881 people**.

Significant backers of the campaign included:

- Stephen Fry: 11,246,203 Connections
- BFI: 429,013 Connections
- Jeremy Hardy: 89,915 Connections
- Film London: 78,222 Connections

The approach to sharing the campaign was multipronged. All partner organisations (including the BFI, BBC Storyville, Film London) and venues (Picturehouse Cinemas, regional cinemas) were contacted by email, asking them to sign up to share the tweet. Regular reminders were sent counting down to the deadline.

We also outreached, via twitter and email, to relevant networks and organisations relating to the Syrian Refugee Crisis, including the Council for Arab British Understanding (CAABU), the Refugees Welcome campaign, Refugee Week and the Refugee Council.

High profile individuals with vast Twitter networks were approached both directly on Twitter, and through personal connections. Jeremy Hardy and Stephen Fry contributed a reach of over 12.6 million people to our campaign.

When we launched the Thunderclap, we did so feeling that it was slightly late, but in fact it was timed just right between introducing the film and indicating its imminent release – one lesson learnt though is to be poised to use the buzz and interest generated by the trailer launch. We were poised and used people's sudden interest to direct them to screenings, but all our cinema partners weren't necessarily ready and as active as they could have been.

GRASSROOTS MARKETING ACTIVITY: A MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH

Grassroots outreach was used to encourage London and nationwide networks to engage with the film and its themes. We focused on three key areas of engagement. E-vites and tailored marketing emails were created and personalised to relate specifically to each of the following themes:

WOMEN

We focussed on Raghda's story as a revolutionary spirit who surpasses conventional social expectations of motherhood and womanhood in order to prioritise her politics, and encouraged women's networks and organisations to engage with this narrative in the film.

Outreach included Women in Film & TV, Birds Eye View Films, Underwire, Bechdel Test Fest, Underwire Festival, Club Des Femmes, I Am Dora, Sphinx Theatre, UK Feminista, Female Arts, The Feminist Review, Young Feminists London, The Feminist Library, Soas Centre for Gender Study, Goldsmiths Centre for Feminist Research, Sister Magazine, Suit & Pie Magazine, Feminist Times, The Vagine, Women's Resource Centre

Total Emails sent: 178

REFUGEES

It was, sadly, a timely release for the film, as Syrian refugees in their thousands began to flee Syria to Europe over the summer. We focused on the human narratives in the media to demonstrate the importance of a film that counteracted incessant statistics and political posturing in the mainstream media. Using the hashtag #HumanCrisis, we drew attention to the human stories of the refugee crisis, and encouraged refugee networks, university departments and support organisations to do the same, and engage with the familial narratives within the film.

Outreach included Centre for Arab British Understanding (CAABU), Refugees Internationals, Refugee Action, Women for Refugee Women,

Asylum Aid, City of Sanctuary, Migrant's Rights Network (MRN), Right To Remain, UNCHR, Amnesty International, Syria Relief, Mosaic Rooms, Crossway Foundation, Human Rights Watch, Arab British Centre, Arts Canteen, Shubbak Festival.

Total emails sent: 250

DOCUMENTARY

Capitalising on the success of the film at Sheffield Doc / Fest, where it won the Grand Jury Prize, we encouraged documentary networks and social anthropology departments to see the film in cinemas.

Outreach included Open City Docs Fest, Doc Heads, DocHouse, Front Line Club, Sheffield Doc / Fest, Into Film, Grierson Trust, BritDoc, Chocolate Films, OurScreen, Shooting People, East End Film Festival, Flatpack Festival, London Short Film Festival, Scottish Documentary Institute

Total emails sent: 190

Additional outreach emails were sent to more general film networks and organisations across London, further broadening social media reach and endorsement of the film.

Total Grassroots emails sent: 869

Estimated grassroots reach: 500,000

FLYERING

Eye-catching A6 Flyers were created and distributed at relevant events in London throughout August and September including the London march in solidarity with refugees on Saturday September 12th 2015, which was attended by tens of thousands of people.

Flyers were also placed in-situ at Picturehouse Central throughout release week, and for two subsequent weeks, to promote the film.

Total number of flyers distributed in London: 1,000

ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES

Shooting People

Shooting people is an international networking organisation dedicated to the support and promotion of independent filmmaking.

To raise awareness around Sean McAllister amongst British filmmakers ahead of release week, we collaborated with Shooting People's Film of Month initiative, which was judged by Sean in September.

More information about Sean at Film Of The Month judge can be found here: shootingpeople.org/blog/2015/09/film-of-the-month-sean-mcallister

Periscope

Periscope was launched in 2015 and is Twitter's (new) live-streaming video application – it enables video streams to be viewed for up to 24 hours after initial broadcast, but videos are no longer available after that time.

Periscope was used in this release during the film's London premiere at BFI Southbank when users could log on and see the venue Q&A live online via Periscope.

This attracted 190 live viewers and had 43 further views 15 hours later.



CHAPTER THREE

RESULTS

BOX OFFICE

RANK	THEATRE NAME	CITY	CIRCUIT	REGION	BRANCH	DATE OF FIRST ENGAGEMENT	WEEKS	WEEKS IN RANGE	DATE RANGE GROSS	OPENING WEEKEND GROSS	OPENING 7 DAY GROSS	MARKET SHARE
1	Picturehouse Central	London	PICT	West End	England	18/09/2015	3	3	6,522	2,607	4,639	36.68%
2	Curzon Bloomsbury	London	CURZ	West End	England	17/09/2015	3	2	2,940	410	3,351	16.53%
3	Watershed	Bristol	BFI	Harlech	England	21/09/2015	1	1	1,960		1,960	11.02%
4	Ritzy Cinema	London	PICT	West End	England	24/09/2015	1	1	1,319		1,348	7.42%
5	The Art House	London	INDP	London	England	20/09/2015	2	2	1,167	736	736	6.56%
6	Ultimate	Oxford	INDP	Central	England	26/09/2015	1	1	833	833	833	4.68%
7	Dukes at komedia	Brighton	PICT	South	England	27/09/2015	1	1	594	594	594	3.34%
8	Picturehouse at FACT	Liverpool	PICT	Granada	England	25/09/2015	1	1	518	518	518	2.91%
9	City Screen York	York	PICT	Yorkshire	England	19/09/2015	1	1	462	462	462	2.60%
10	HOME	Manchester	BFI	Granada	England	22/09/2015	1	1	440			2.47%
11	Princes Charles 2	London	INDP	West End	England	3/10/2015	1	1	432	355	355	2.43%
12	Queens Film Theatre Belfast	Belfast	BFI	Northern Ireland	Northern Ireland	28/09/2015	1	1	264			1.48%
13	Film Theatre	Glasgow	BFI	Scotland (Cen)	Scotland	27/09/2015	1	1	187	187	187	1.05%
14	Contemporary	Dundee	INDP	N-E Scotland	Scotland	27/09/2015	1	1	94	34	94	0.53%
15	Quad	Derby	INDP	Central	England	2/10/2015	1	1	49	49	49	0.28%
							20		17,781	6,785	15,907	-

BROADCAST - BBC VIEWING FIGURES

BBC One - Tues. 29 Sept at 10:35pm

0.8m

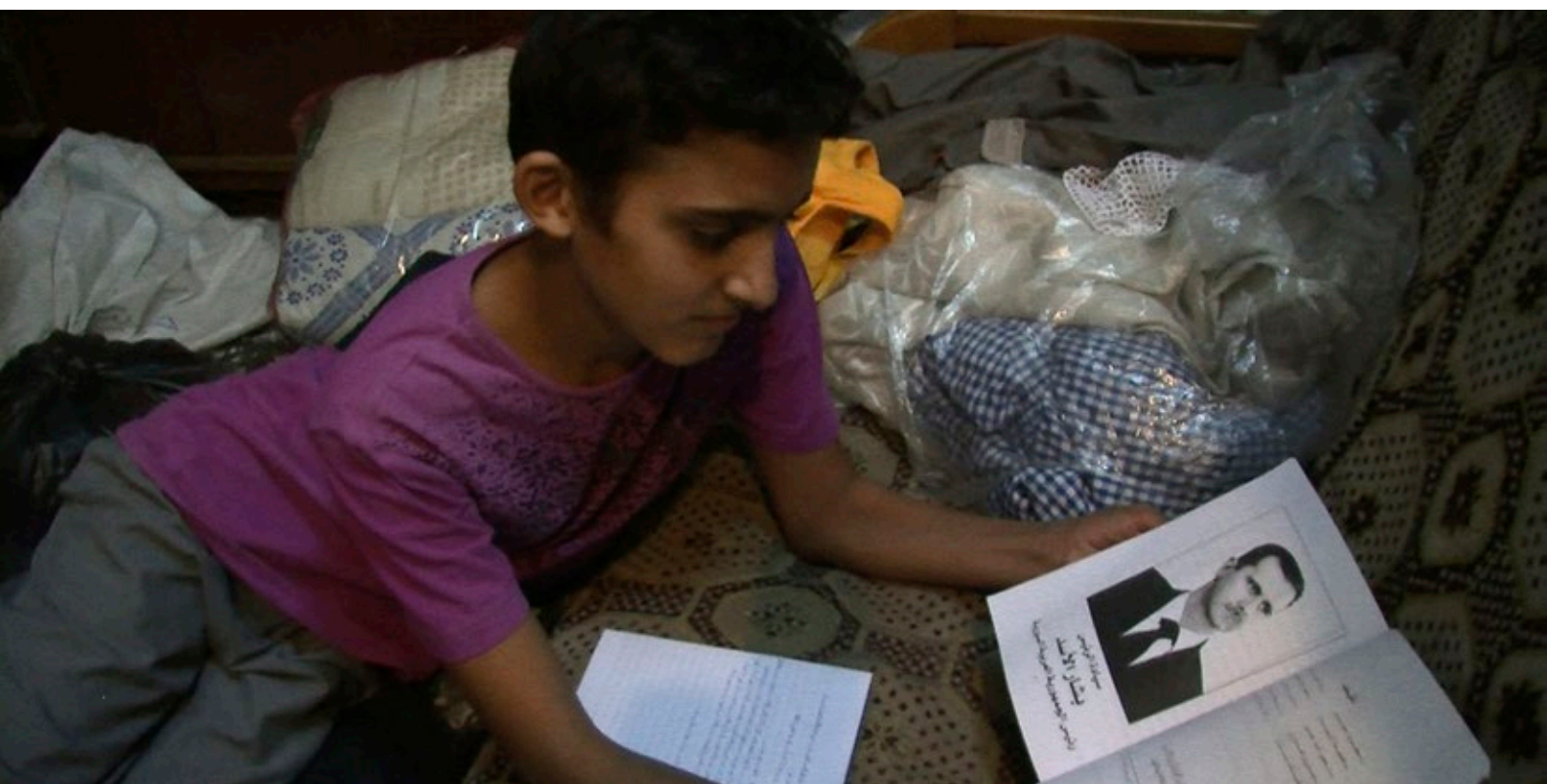
9.8% share

At peak, 1.5m people tuned into the film

BBC Four - Mon. 28 Sept at 10pm

92K

0.7% share





BBC CATCH UP - IPLAYER FIGURES

A Syrian Love Story was viewed a total of 111,080 times on iPlayer between 28 September and 2 November 2015.

DATE	WEEKDAY	VIEWS
28 Sep 2015	Monday	3040
29 Sep 2015	Tuesday	25620
30 Sep 2015	Wednesday	12980
1 Oct 2015	Thursday	9860
2 Oct 2015	Friday	7340
3 Oct 2015	Saturday	4880
4 Oct 2015	Sunday	6340
5 Oct 2015	Monday	3280
6 Oct 2015	Tuesday	2880
7 Oct 2015	Wednesday	2640
8 Oct 2015	Thursday	2400
9 Oct 2015	Friday	2520
10 Oct 2015	Saturday	1680
11 Oct 2015	Sunday	1560
12 Oct 2015	Monday	1420
13 Oct 2015	Tuesday	1780
14 Oct 2015	Wednesday	1180

DATE	WEEKDAY	VIEWS
15 Oct 2015	Thursday	1140
16 Oct 2015	Friday	1060
17 Oct 2015	Saturday	1240
18 Oct 2015	Sunday	1700
19 Oct 2015	Monday	2100
20 Oct 2015	Tuesday	1480
21 Oct 2015	Wednesday	720
22 Oct 2015	Thursday	1280
23 Oct 2015	Friday	840
24 Oct 2015	Saturday	1420
25 Oct 2015	Sunday	1520
26 Oct 2015	Monday	1160
27 Oct 2015	Tuesday	980
28 Oct 2015	Wednesday	1240
29 Oct 2015	Thursday	1600
30 Oct 2015	Friday	100
2 Nov 2015	Monday	100

Total		111080
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VOD (TRANSACTIONAL)

BFI Player

The film was exclusively released on BFI Player day in date (from Friday 18th September 2015) and priced at £6.

It was the BFI Player's best-selling title on weekend of release total transactions:

First weekend	48 transactions
First week	61 transactions
First month	109 transactions

PRESS OVERVIEW

'The film itself received universal praise amongst reviewers for the Storyville broadcast of it but did not get the coverage it merited in the mainstream media.'

Ben Whybrow, BBC.

Time Out gave the film 4 stars on Tuesday 15th setting it up well and the second review was Peter Bradshaw's for the Guardian, released online on Thursday 17th stating the film 'unmissable', Film of the Week with 5 stars – it not only generated a lot of audience response but invited a number of blogs and smaller reviews as well.

In part due to the collapsed windows, and in part due to the outstanding reviews the film got, the film was consistently present in the papers for the 2 weeks of it's planned release, with major pieces and new reviews appearing daily. Because of the film's broadcast at the end of the fortnight of screenings, the film maintained visibility in the press for a further week.

Critical response to the film had been consistently outstanding but we had only had trade reviews until the film's UK release and struggled with 'quotable' critical praise and the trailer and poster materials made use of the Sheffield Jury quote 'Bergmanesque' along with The Hollywood Reporter's 'Remarkable' statement. Not having much press traction to work with perhaps also limited the number of venues that booked the film on its opening weekend or for runs, with venues preferring to focus on one off Q&A events instead. This may also though have been to do with the windowing strategy.

Below is an overview of major reviews:

'Sean McAllister's doc about a family of Syrian refugees would be compelling at any time. Now it's unmissable'

Guardian, Peter Bradshaw, ★★★★★ and Film of The Week

'the deeper human truths of this documentary are here to stay'

Financial Times ★★★★★

'Heartbreaking portrait of a marriage unravelling'

Independent ★★★★★

'Sean McAllister's intimate, achingly poignant documentary couldn't be more timely.'

Times ★★★★★

'Strong powerful film... conveys much more than any fiction could'

Front Row / Observer ★★★★★ and Mark Kermode's Film of the Week

'An essential act of witnessing; a crucial conduit to understanding

Timeout ★★★★★ and Critic's Choice

'This heart-wrenching film gives an idea of the human cost of seeking asylum in Western Europe.'

Morning Star ★★★★★

'Tender, topical and inspirational'

Evening Standard ★★★★★

'A wonderful, powerful piece of filmmaking'

HEYUGUYS ★★★★★

'A timely and necessary reminder of what Syrian refugees face today'

Cine-Vue ★★★★★

The film was also reviewed in the Metro, on I-D, Open Democracy, Radio Times, The Daily Mail, The Sun, The Upcoming, Cultural Whisper, The Arts Desk, Daily Express, Press Association, Reuters and Hull Daily Mail.

SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT

Trailer Views

The Thunderclap campaign was activated on August 26th 2015 by 215 Twitter users, launching the trailer for *A Syrian Love Story*.

The social reach of the Thunderclap campaign was 12,609,881 people.

In the first 12 hours, the trailer was viewed over 8,000 times on Youtube, the *A Syrian Love Story* Facebook page, and the BFI Facebook page (where it was simultaneously launched).

In October 2015 (one month after the film's release) the trailer had over **30,536 views** across the channels listed above.

Trailer on Youtube [stats correct as of 15.46PM, Mon 26 October 2015]

No. of views: 17, 446

Estimated minutes Watched: 24,142

72 likes

5 dislike

268 Shares

38 Videos in playlists

12 subscribers

Facebook Metrics

facebook.com/ASyrianLoveStoryFilm

Account created: 19th July 2015

Followers: 1,571 (9 Nov 2015)

Gender: 59% F / 38% M

830 in the UK, 385 in London

93 in Syria

Twitter Metrics

twitter.com/SyrianLoveStory

Account created: 19th July 2015

Handle: @SyrianLoveStory

Hashtag: #ASyrianLoveStory / #HumanCrisis

Followers: 827 (9 Nov 2015)

Average daily follower increase: 10 followers per day over 91 day period

Gender: 49% M / 51% F

72% UK

42% London

Top interest: Movie news and general interest

245.7K impressions over 91 day period

Website Metrics

Website Stats: [Correct as of 13:45PM, Monday 26 October 2015]

6,243: unique Website Visits

23,053: Total Views

421: Links to site

2: Trailer Embeds

7399: visits to the website's 'screenings' page

REVIEW OF FACEBOOK AD REACH

Frequency remained low across all targeting groups

Documentary fans were the most engaged.

The Facebook activity reached 897K unique users at a frequency of less than 2 per user which was good as it showed that there was not much crossover between the separate audience groups.

The activity drove 250k video views at a cost of only 1p per video view. This was also good as it meant that the advertising was achieving important engagement for a very minimal cost. On average, users watched 16% of the video. This is slightly lower than the 20% benchmark, however this is a good result for a video longer than 1:30. In future, the recommendation is to serve video copy shorter than 1 minute on Facebook wherever possible to increase retention rate.

198 users shared the post after seeing the ad.

The promoted activity also increased the likes on the page by 300.

Unsurprisingly, the 'documentary fans' targeting group was the highest performing in terms of cheapest engagement and highest number of clicks. Interestingly, 'forbidden love' category followed closely behind.

Females were most engaged across all targeting groups. Interestingly, 18-24 year olds were most engaged on 'documentary fans' whereas 25-44 year olds were most engaged on 'forbidden love story' and '45-54' year olds were most engaged on 'Current affairs'.

The 'Picturehouse Central' activity was best performing when the targeting was split out across the two cinemas and BFI player.

Formats: Both a link ad and promoted video post were run.

The link ad ran on the weekend of the 25 September.

The promoted post ran with the majority of the budget from Friday 2 October – 4 October. Activity was then picked up again with the remaining bit of budget on the 5th which ran for 2 days geographically targeting areas in which there were screenings as well as targeting users with BFI Player.

AUDIENCES

The activity was split into four different targeting groups as follows:

- Documentary, Foreign film and Film festival fans (£1680)
- Users interested in Current Affairs (£840)
- Interest in Syria (£1260)
- Epic/Forbidden Love Stories (£420)

NEGATIVE COMMENTS

There were some negative comments on the promoted posts from users who were targeted within the 'interest in Syria' category.

All negative comments were monitored and hidden so that they could not be seen by other users (the users that commented cannot see that their comments were hidden to avoid them complaining that we were hiding their opinions).

We paused the 'interest in Syria' targeting group, which definitely saw the negative comments reduce. The positive comments overrode the negatives and there were some really fantastic feedback and users recommending other users to watch the film.

AWARDS

The film was nominated for a range of awards:

- Grierson Award - Best Documentary on a Contemporary Theme
- British Independent Film Award for Best Documentary
- European Film Award for Best Documentary
- UK Critic's Circle Award for Best Documentary
- Official Selection: European Parliament's LUX Film Prize 2016

The release was nominated for a Screen Award for Specialist Film Campaign of the Year.

And Sean McAllister and Elhum Shakerifar were both nominated for a BAFTA for Outstanding Debut by a British Director, Producer or Writer.

It was also recognized amongst a number of the 2015 round ups, most prominently, it was named The Guardian's #3 film of 2015.



CHAPTER FOUR

LESSONS LEARNT

RELEASE DATE

The groundwork for the film's release began to be laid in May 2015 when the film's Sheffield Premiere was announced, but dates and strategies weren't locked down until July and the campaign began in August.

The release date was planned for September to springboard from it's festival release but also strategically before London Film Festival began and brought in a batch of potentially similar titles. The specific date was set after discussion with exhibitors about the release schedule of other independent documentaries that had their UK premieres at Sheffield Doc/Fest and were slated for release in September (*How To Save The World*, *Cartel Land*, *Orion: The Man Who Wears The Mask*).

The release was also timed to coincide with the return of universities, and that of Parliament – and what we anticipated to be return of the political focus on Syria (although we expected it to be in relation to a decision on whether to take military action in the country or not).

Given the number of releases in this month, it had seemed that September would be a good time for documentary releases but it is also tricky to pre-prepare a film during the summer and to be vying for the attention of press when their focus is on Venice / Telluride / Toronto. On the other hand, timing before the wave of London Film Festival titles was a good strategy, and releasing September was also perfect timing to be in high visibility before major award seasons begins.

TIMING / THE NEWS

The zeitgeist of the news at the end of the summer – with the sudden focus on the millions fleeing Syria and the millions claiming asylum outside the country, brought into sharp focus through the image of Aylan Kurdi, the little Syrian boy on the sea shore – had a double edged sword effect on the film: on one hand, we lost a large amount of planned press because there was suddenly 'too much Syria/refugee stories already' but on the other hand, it also gave additional relevance to the film, in that it had been filmed over five years and stood out as decisively as something more than a 'newsbite'. The fact that we were already in contact with refugee organisations and not jumping on the zeitgeist felt like something organisations were sensitive to. We were able to 'pivot' our marketing angle to highlight how we were

holding a screening in Parliament for MPs to think about these issues (this had also been planned since July) and we flied the 'Refugees Welcome' march on 12 September 2015. We also added a page on the website indicating how people could help after seeing the film.

PRESS

The assumption that the Sheffield win and Sean McAllister's existing profile would encourage critical reviews of the film was largely disproved by the overall lack of take up to the first two press screenings – possible reasons for the low take up were also that they were in the summer months and that they were just before Venice when many critics needed to be watching those titles instead. It was probably also difficult to build press interest given that the film hadn't been reviewed in Sheffield. Elhum arranged a review with The Hollywood Reporter in July – thankfully very positive, but not very quotable – and there was a press lull until the week of release. Therefore the FDA screening just before the release was fundamental in ensuring that it put the film on the radar of critics who needed to be reviewing new release titles. Those who couldn't attend this screening now actively requested links. The press snowballed during the film's release, with the combination of the news and the positive word of mouth.

Social Media

Social Media is a horizontal tool for engagement – engaging and responding to people is part of what social media is about. The more people within a team who can take part in this side of things, the better. Audience reactions to the film contributed to keeping the film in people's minds. We were a small team but able to stay relatively active on this front – though the extent of the response following the broadcast was very hard to keep on top of.

Partners / Marketing

We realized that whilst partners are important and necessary to deliver a strong campaign, but they're not necessarily as invested as you are. For instance, the buzz generated by the Thunderclap was far reaching and we were able to direct people's interest in the film and trailer views to cinema bookings, but all our cinema partners weren't necessarily ready and as active as they could have been. Likewise, we noticed that there was a lot of goodwill with partners on social media but it made a significant difference

to our campaign when we started to provide daily round ups or press and Twitter/Facebook suggestions to all our venues and partners every morning. Likewise, whilst it was a huge asset to have the contacts and knowledge of two major press teams (BFI and BBC) behind the film at times, it was also a challenge in having to rely on two parties to respond to ideas – sometimes drawing out decision making and response (e.g. signing off on the poster/trailer, and most significantly on the agreed text to be used on press notes ‘at cinemas and on BFI Player on 18 September, on BBC at the end of September)

But partners are incredibly important: large organizations and well-known individuals have huge reach – they can access and communicate with more people than you ever can alone, and they can bring large reach to your campaign. When BFI launched the film’s trailer on their page, it was seen by over 1,000 people within an hour. When Stephen Fry tweeted the trailer, its reach added 11 million to the 1.6 million that we had combined from other organizations. When Louis Theroux tweeted that he had heard *A Syrian Love Story* was McAllister’s best to date, tens of people engaged in a conversation with him after having seen the film – this is more than would ever engage with one of our own Tweets.

Impact of broadcast on theatrical / VOD

The BBC double broadcast had the effect of continued visibility, buzz and press around the film. In terms of cinema bookings, these did continue despite the broadcast but exhibitors were more reluctant to book the film for long periods or beyond one off screenings (Picturehouse numbers dwindled in the third week; Dothouse didn’t put the film on beyond the broadcast; other exhibitors e.g. UPP in Oxford noted that they would have had the film for a week if it wasn’t being broadcast). There have been a number of one-off bookings but rooms and overall numbers are smaller, sporadic Q&A screenings continued to sell well, with regional take up overall smaller than in larger cities.

Booking Cinemas

In the planning of the theatrical release, the combination of working through the summer months and with an ‘unknown’ (the film hadn’t been released anywhere else – and didn’t have anything beyond a few trade reviews to go on) did make it more difficult to book certain venues as exhibitors were less likely to have seen the film. Elhum’s prior working relationship with Chris Harris at Picturehouse and Sean’s long standing relationship with Dothouse meant that runs in Picturehouse Central and Curzon Bloomsbury were the first to be locked in. Further nationwide Picturehouse screenings were arranged through Chris, but limited to the short run pre-broadcast (usually independent film releases have nationwide Q&A events over a

longer period). Elhum’s prior working relationship with Mark Cosgrove, programmer at the Bristol Watershed and chair of the BFI FAN Forum, ensured a sense of trust around booking the film and flagging it to BFI FAN members – four exhibitors booked one-off screenings this way. Further venues were arranged directly – Ultimate Picture Palace and The Prince Charles Cinema contacted us themselves and had flexibility to adapt their schedules to add the film in late. And since the film’s release and broadcast, further screenings were booked by exhibitors directly (they generally made contact through the film’s website) or through the ICO.

Q&As

The value of Q&As was significant – these were sell-out events in every venue except York. In several instances the screenings were upgraded to larger venues after selling out early.

Venue Logistics

Logistically, communication with all venues, marketing and communicating consistently around all screenings and managing print transport was the most time consuming element of the film’s release and I’d definitely recommend that one individual manages each one of these elements – what was difficult in this instance is that it was all managed by one person! The financial cost of traveling around the country in such a short space of time means that there were some less than ideal travel costs and journeys that had to be undertaken by Sean and Amer, who did the majority of Q&As. Finally, the ongoing reality of logistics after the ‘big event’ make it attractive to envisage a third party service or system for managing bookings and associated logistics going forwards.

VOD

We agreed exclusivity with BFI Player for the film’s release. We since agreed that Dogwoof would act as an aggregator and put the film on various UK online platforms for us.

Logistics

Logistically, the team was very small but the delivery was contained and within our existing knowledge of the landscape so it was not unfeasible. You definitely need a team to distribute a film – ours was tiny (1.5 people) and though we believed that audience feedback would be strong, we didn’t expect that the film would suddenly become so topical and so our preparation was the only thing that enabled us to respond to the deluge of press / feedback / screening requests (UK and international). Partnerships and networks were very important but it’s likely that we could have achieved more with a bigger set up. Moreover, the ‘back end’ logistics of the release and ongoing visibility of the film became challenging after such a significant focus, and the need to pivot

to other major areas of the film's release (release in other major territories for instance) are where the self-distribution model becomes more challenging to manage.

Facebook ads

It was recommended by a media agency that we spend the BFI Sleeper Fund award on print and Facebook ads but from the combined figures, it would seem that these didn't have a palpable effect. Given the dates that the ads were running, there was no noticeable difference on iPlayer views or in cinema admissions. Given the size of the team and other costs, I wouldn't recommend such a larger online spend in future and would rather bolster the team, to be able to extend bookings and manage those, building on the existing buzz.

Windows

In the initial set up for the film's release, the agreed strategy was to collapse windows but navigating this, and also expectancies was tricky. The collapsed windows did close some doors, as some exhibitors said that they would have screened or kept the film in their venues for longer had it not been broadcast. And agreeing where the VOD release fitted into this preview / premiere / release date (with the knowledge that broadcast was 10 days away) was not very straightforward and involved a lot of negotiations, particularly with the venues. However, the objective of this strategy (collapsing all of the windows), was to see whether more people would ultimately watch the film this way, than they would if the film had followed traditional windows. The comparables below help to see whether this worked:

Comparables

It's difficult to draw comparisons but most documentaries released in 2015 had at least a 3 month window before any television broadcast – for example *Orion: Man Behind the Mask*, *Dreamcatcher*, *Palio*, *Amy*, etc.

As noted by BFI's head of audiences, Ben Luxford, *Amy*'s broadcast on Channel 4 had 2.3m viewers at its peak on Friday 8th January, following its £3.7m box office. This makes *A Syrian Love Story*'s approx 1.8m broadcast reach and small box office an impressive feat.

Good comparables in terms of subject matter or 'style' of documentary would be *Return to Homs* (Talal Derki) or *Dreamcatcher* (Kim Longinotto).

In July 2014 following considerable festival success *Return to Homs* was released by Picturehouse with the support of Amnesty International and garnered £1,344 from 4 sites in its opening weekend.

In March 2015; Sundance winner *Dreamcatcher* from veteran British director Kim Longinotto was released by Dogwoof achieving £3,710 from 3 sites in its

opening weekend.

In context, and working without the support or resources of an exhibitor or distributor, *A Syrian Love Story*'s opening weekend box office of £9,426 (including £5,211 previews) from 4 sites was a healthy debut.

FINAL COMMENTS

Given that the film was part funded by BBC Storyville, who therefore kept the TV rights, the remaining rights were seemingly an unattractive prospect for a UK distributor to take on, because of the assumption that only a limited audience would engage with a film about Syria – and that that audience would only watch the film on its TV broadcast. Therefore self-distribution was only partly a choice if there was to be a theatrical release.

Whilst a larger team might have been able to release the film on a bigger scale, the release strategy which was eventually pitched was that which was feasible to be delivered by such a small distribution team. And looking at what was achieved, particularly on such limited resources and budgets – in terms of audience numbers, feedback and critical response – these were arguably outstanding results. The box office returns for the film were healthy and comparable with, if not more successful than, other independent documentary releases in the month of September and that year; the broadcast figures were competitive with other shows transmitted in the slot – particularly when the catch up figures were taken into account; and BFI player reported some of their highest buys for a title (albeit still fairly small numbers).

As of January 2016, the film was still being booked for one-off screenings and so is still generating a small income. It's difficult to know whether a longer run would have been more successful – would it have snowballed and generated greater box office returns, or be eclipsed by the next big release? The press certainly wouldn't have continued in the same way had there not been a broadcast to maintain audience response and press write ups, and that suggests that had there been a longer release window, this would not have meant that there would have been the same engagement with the film as there was by innovatively collapsing the theatrical and broadcast window.

This was not anticipated to be a film which would generate significant revenues on release, primarily due to it being a Storyville commission, however it was a film which all involved felt needed to be seen by as wide an audience as possible. The purpose of this unusual release strategy therefore was to find a way of distributing the film so as many people as possible would find out about it, and then be able

to watch it, in the easiest way which worked for them. Looking at the success of the film through that lens – and taking into account the amount of press generated by bringing the broadcast forward and by utilising partner support – and then looking at the reviews generated, the audience response, and the number of views across all platforms, whilst hard to predict what the outcome would have been if released in a more traditional manner, it can be argued that the objective was achieved by releasing the film in this way.

Audience response has been overwhelmingly positive – we have received hundreds of emails, tweets, Facebook messages and countless hugs after screenings. A huge number of people write to enquire about the family’s well-being, and many people write moving messages and notes, thanking Sean and the team for making the film. Response from audiences can be found in Appendix A.



APPENDIX A

FEEDBACK

Emails sent to Sean McAllister and A Syrian Love Story's websites.

'Your film is so amazing. Genius really. I salute you. I'm just blown away. A masterpiece that will live forever'

'This is such an amazing film, so powerful and beautifully made. If everyone could see it, the whole discourse about Syria and refugees would be changed. That you were imprisoned gives another dimension. Thank you!'

'This film has touched me so much. So real. It has changed my views on refugees. I had to let you know.'

'With deep gratitude for your film. I have watched the news coverage of the Syrian crisis on the news for months but nothing has brought home the real cost of the tragedy like this.'

'I don't know if you remember but we bumped into each other a fair bit in Iraq, I think, way back when. I just wanted to say that I saw your film last night. My wife could barely watch it, through her tears. I couldn't take my eyes off it. Huge congratulations.'

'I have just watched 'A Syrian love story' and read briefly about the rest of your work. Completely awestruck/moved/emotional. Everything sounds so trite right now but I had to write and tell you how incredibly talented you are and how much it moved me. More people who watch this film, the better.'

'Hey Sean,
I had the absolute pleasure of watching your beautiful film. The family were such resilient, intelligent and wonderful people. You did a fantastic job telling their story. I couldn't take my eyes off it. It turned everything I thought about Syrian refugees on its head. It made me want to do something to help. And that's a pretty powerful thing. I've recommended the film to everyone who will listen. It's important people see it. In a world where our ignorance is fuelled by the way groups of people are represented in the media – this was incredibly refreshing and brutally honest. And that's a credit to your style of filmmaking.

Thank you for dedicating five years of your life to tell this tale.

All the best, Josh

PS. Bob is just about the cutest little guy I've ever seen.'



Feedback from the Q&A screenings:

Film London evaluation forms indicated that 82% of people gave the film 5 stars and 18% gave the film 4 stars at London Q&A screenings. Below are a few examples of the feedback we collected from these screenings:

‘Illuminating, extremely moving’

‘Insightful, educating, a real eye opener’

‘Incredible’

‘I feel like I’ve been hand held through an emotional roller coaster’

‘The film blew me away!’

‘An experience I won’t forget – thank you’

‘Overwhelming topic’

‘Fantastic film and very interesting Q&A – felt very lucky to be in the presence of one of the main contributors in the film and to hear more about his experiences. Very special.’

‘Moving, informative, unique’

‘Life affirming’

‘Left me speechless. Very moving. Made me think and feel, and I want to show the film to my students’

‘Illuminating and moving. Increased respect for Syrian people. Less seen as victims’

‘Amazing - such a beautiful insight into a families life - really intimate and personal. Incredible way of filming but also really insightful Q&A. Thank you!’

‘It was eye-opening - should be more advertised and viewed by everyone.’

‘Amazingly great crafted story, putting a human face on the situation, destroying perceptions, prejudices - very important.’

‘Absolutely amazing and a fantastic tale of human struggle wonderfully told - wish it was a bit longer.’

