



A different kind of cinema - smuggler Beto in the life affirming Uruguay/Brazil comedy drama *The Pope's Toilet*, a Soda Pictures release

## Soda Pictures — Celebrating films from all cultures

Once they played a game at Soda Pictures, probably as a way of relieving the stress of life in a small office in the heart of London's East End. It consisted in taking the first name of each member of the staff and finding out what movie titles they corresponded to. Co-founder and co-Managing Director Eve Gabereau, should have been the clear winner. It's easy, when your name conjures up no less than Joseph L Mankiewicz's masterpiece *All About Eve*, Bette Davis' finest star turn.

Soda Managing Director Edward Fletcher was not so fortunate. His namesake film, *Ed* is a laborious baseball comedy starring Matt Le Blanc, of *Friends* fame. But it would take a lot more than this to erode Edward's cinephile backbone. A former Project Director at London's prestigious Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), he is one of the few remaining independent film distributors in the UK whose motivation for entering this cutthroat business has been primarily a matter of taste and an abiding passion for films from all the world's cultures.

Before ICA, Edward ran a few emblematic independent cinemas. Back when Ed programmed it, the art house cinema Cambridge Arts was a vibrant and diverse venue, bringing the best of world cinema to a voracious and discerning audience. Croydon's David Lean Theatre, in the midst of South London suburbia, was his next assignment, after the local town council re-opened it as a cultural centre in the mid-eighties.

Edward's bold leap in 2003 from a comfortable tenure at ICA and into the choppy waters of independent distribution, was motivated by his encounter with Eve, then a programmer for the Edinburgh International Film Festival. Both shared a sense that the market was ripe for films outside the mainstream, including foreign language. Both were itching to run their own show. "This was a time when the French distribution/exhibition major UGC had entered the UK market, promising to programme more foreign language movies," Ed reflects. "It was also the years when DVD was reaching its zenith, with more and more speciality titles finding a niche market. And terrestrial TV was still going strong,

with new platforms triggering huge demand for all types of films. Basically, the time seemed absolutely right for us to set up in business as a specialised distributor.”

Soda’s maiden voyage as a distributor was the high quality French period drama *Balzac and the Little Seamstress*, which proved a success for the fledgling team, ending its five prints’ theatrical run with a very respectable box office and finding a market on DVD.

Ed and Eve were inspired by the success of another fledgling independent distributor, Optimum Releasing. “Optimum had been in business for coming on to three years by the time we started and to some extent we took our cue from them. We thought if they were getting it right, so would we,” admits Edward. With the benefit of hindsight, has the gamble paid off? “On reflection, and although we are managing to keep going, we were really two years behind the changes. By the time we were ready to roll, the DVD market had begun to plateau and unit price was in decline. Terrestrial TV revenue was being hit full blast by new media and the ownership of independent cinemas was changing, mostly to the detriment of the kind of films we like to handle.”



[A far cry from Disney – French animated feature \*Azur and Azmar\*](#)

Back when Soda started up, it was still possible for specialised films to rely on second and third run film theatres in London’s West End and other key cities in the UK. Edward remembers how the Argentine comedy drama *Bonbon El Perro*, released by French distributor Pathé’s British subsidiary, took £650,000 (€826,000) at the box office, a remarkable figure for a low-budget Spanish language film, with no stars. “*Bonbon* relied on strong word of mouth, and needed to be held in the cinemas long enough for this factor to take effect. At the time, it was able to secure a ten to twelve weeks’ holdover at the Swiss Centre cinema (near the London landmark of Leicester Square),” recalls Edward. “Today, these theatres have either closed or are under new management which are far less tolerant of foreign language films.” *Bonbon* is closely comparable to another quirky Latin American film, *The Pope’s Toilet (El Baño del Papa)* whose UK release Soda is handling. Theatrical exhibition opportunities for such films have dropped dramatically over the past five years.

Soda’s slate of releases for 2008 illustrates the challenge of fostering cultural diversity in a cinema market driven by the bottom line. *Azur and Azmar*, a beautifully produced French animated feature has won critical acclaim and found box office success in several European countries. The UK release, however, was a disappointment for Soda, who committed a substantial budget to prints and advertising. “In the end, box office was disappointing simply because we could not get the reach. There were not enough cinemas prepared to book the film.”

Soda's story shows the level of commitment, abilities and staying power required to bring a different kind of cinema to a contemporary British culture dominated by the Anglo-American cannon of taste. Its frequent successes in the face of an adverse market, are all the more remarkable; an Austrian feature documentary about daily life in a Carthusian monastery, *Into Great Silence*, grossed £200,000 (€254,000), while the French contemporary sex tourism drama *Heading South* took £225,000 (€286,000).