Films Inside: Film clubs in three prison libraries and a community library in Staffordshire

“The community film project at Wombourne Library was an excellent way to demonstrate the value of libraries in offering people access to innovative, quality, cultural activities within their community, perhaps creating a template that could be used at libraries nationwide. The project not only offered an interesting range of challenging film titles, but also provoked discussion and further exploration of the world of film through the library collection of book stock. This was also a great opportunity to work in partnership with organisations such as the BBFC and BFI and to learn more about how they work and to explore how we can cooperate on future projects.’ Scott Whitehouse and Stuart Hill, Wombourne Library

Introduction
People in prison watch many films, but usually on their own in their cells and drawn from a small selection of unoriginal, restricted, mainstream titles on DVD which are all that are available in prisons. They rarely get the opportunity to receive any education in film and cinema, to watch a wider range of genres and subject matters on film or to discuss their reactions and reflections with others who have also seen those films. In short the educational, social and cultural value of film as a creative medium in itself and as an opportunity for reflective learning are not part of prison life at all, a significant missed opportunity in terms of wellbeing and resettlement for people in prisons. This is particularly surprising considering that films and DVDs are a relatively cost effective educational resource, compared with more labour intensive activities such as art teaching or drama workshops.

The idea of Films Inside was to draw together organisations with expertise and a track record in films to fill some of these gaps in education and experience of film watching and potentially film making for people in prison and to see whether the obvious potential benefits can be realised. Working with films has other attractions and benefits for prisons and their residents. Film can create an opportunity to explore difficult issues which would otherwise be neglected. Mark Reid of the BFI notes:

“We feel very strongly that films offer a ‘third space’ between people of different backgrounds that can bring them together into conversation and exchange. Well-chosen films can stimulate discussion between people that enables them to explore aspects of experience and identity that might be difficult to manage otherwise. The Films Inside project demonstrated to us how films could facilitate sharing and
exchange between people of very different backgrounds, enabling them to meet in
the common experience of watching and talking about film.”

Film for education
Prisons have dedicated educational facilities, but there are also many formal and informal
educational activities that happen in other settings in prisons: in psychology groups, via the
chaplaincy, in employment workshops, activities organised by voluntary organisations for
example. Prison libraries are also an important part of that mix. They are run by local
authority library services, not directly by the organisation managing the prison, and are
therefore part of the wider library community in a locality.

Education in the broadest sense is obviously important for people in prison, but which types
of education and on what subjects? Those convicted of criminal offences are widely
stigmatised in society. In one sense, a prison sentence of any length is a sentence for life:
those who have been to prison can always be reminded of their past demeanours and the
harm they have done. With that in mind, one important characteristic of successful
educational opportunities within a prison environment is that they should not add to the
weight of stigma already borne by offenders in prison. Unfortunately, many forms of
traditional educational draw attention to deficits, not capabilities. They seek to redress the
absence of, say, literacy skills or the professional skills needed to get a job. All too often they
do not build on the learner’s enthusiasms and capabilities. As a result the learning deficit
can sometimes be reinforced, not removed. The great advantage of film as an educational
medium is it does build on interests and enthusiasm. A well-established verity in pedagogy
is seeking to teach those without the motivation to learn is almost certainly doomed to
failure; that is the main reason so many prison education programmes - and indeed
educational programmes in many other settings - do not achieve their goals. The learners
may need to learn whatever they are being taught, but they may not want to learn. With a
following wind of learner enthusiasm film represents a good answer to the question how
can people learn?

Why films in prisons?
Turning then to the question: what do people need to learn? If someone has committed a
criminal offence and is given a prison sentence by the court, the first duty of the offender is
to make amends, to pay their due for the wrong they have done to the victim of their crime
and the wider community. Depriving someone of their liberty by sending them to prison is
how we in this society choose to ensure that people pay this debt to society. Beyond that
making of amends education while in prison should enhance the personal attributes and
qualities of offenders in ways that seek to help them to live a better life in future, free of
crime; a life which gives them self-respect and respect in the eyes of those whose opinions
and values they cherish and acceptance as citizens of society at large. Critics say
imprisonment can, by definition, never achieve those gains in self-esteem. The problem, however, for many offenders is that nothing else has either. Prison is the last resort. Over more than a century of prisons in more or less their current form in the UK we know a great deal about the capabilities that give people the best chance of a good life after their release.

The first and most important thing is that most crimes are committed by young people, particularly young men, who, as they get older, in almost every case commit less or no crime. Growing up and becoming an adult is a key factor in desisting from most forms of crime. Second, we know that ex-offenders who have strong relationships with their families during their imprisonment and after their release are a good deal less likely to re-offend. Third, those ex-offenders who go on to change the way they see themselves and their own identity, moving away from the risk factors that lead to crime, criminal identities and criminal groups, have the best chance of changing the way they are seen by others and by society at large. It is perhaps not a coincidence that growing up and becoming an adult, loving relationships and family life and transforming identities are among the most common tropes around which numerous films are created and narrated. Films therefore represent an enormous store of resources on key themes that feature in the rehabilitation of offenders. In other words, the power of film as an educational tool in a prison context in part stems from what so many films are about.

Film as shared experience within and outside the prison walls
Although some films are obscure or difficult to fathom, film as a genre is not an esoteric medium and the love of film is widespread, not specialist. It is widely enjoyed by a large swathe of the community of all ages and social backgrounds and in any number of settings. It therefore offers the benefits of shared experience. For people who are locked up there are few opportunities to feel part of the wider community; few opportunities for shared experiences with people outside the prison walls. A film club where the same films are watched, reflected on and discussed in the mutually understood context of a library is an opportunity to create a unifying shared experience. Such an exchange between those on the inside and those on the out in one locality is almost unheard of in prison life and therefore invaluable.

About Films Inside
These ideas were the genesis of Films Inside, which is a partnership between Lemos&Crane, Staffordshire County Council's Prison and Public Library Services, BBFC, BFI and Picturehouse which is designed to harness knowledge and expertise about film, in particular film for reflective education, with delivery capacity in prisons in the relatively neutral, unstigmatised space of libraries and a developed theory of change about how film can represent part of the education needed for a rehabilitative journey. There is obviously a wealth of material on film to draw on. Early on, the partners decided that there should be a range of familiar
and unfamiliar films, short and long, discursive and action-packed, presented to the people watching the films. In order to harness the educational and social benefits of discussion and reflection, we decided that it made sense to select the films to be shown thematically, underpinned by a theme that would resonate with the educational and rehabilitation needs of people in prison. This would create the opportunity for personal reflection and group discussions, as well as exchanges about films as a medium and the specific merits or otherwise of the films watched. The partners settled on the theme of fatherhood as a reflection of the priorities for rehabilitation already enunciated. Fatherhood is a theme that is represented in rich and multi-faceted ways in different types and genres of film and is central in the minds of offenders in re-thinking who they are in the world and who they are to become after they leave prison.

Objectives of Films Inside

- Screen thematically selected and relevant films to groups of young offenders and adult prisoners in several prisons
- Form an educational film club in each of the prison libraries facilitated by a librarian to discuss the films and reflect on points of learning for the residents which would be shared with members of the community who had watched the same films in a community setting
- Engage an audience of the general public in a public library in the community to watch the same films and share notes and impressions with the prison residents who had also watched the films
- Break down barriers between people on the inside and outside so young offenders and prisoners feel connected to and part of the wider community
- Explore and encourage participants to reflect on and learn about their experience of fatherhood before coming to prison and while in prison stimulated by the films they had watched and discussed together
- Raise the profile and use of the libraries among residents of prisons
- Enhance media and film literacy of participants, to engage them in wider aspects and genres of films and film making
- Build confidence and enhance basic skills to enable access to future learning opportunities

The programme and film showings and discussions

During the summer and autumn of 2017 Staffordshire Prisons Library Service, led by Alan Smith, delivered a pilot programme in the libraries at HMP Brinsford, HMP Featherstone and HMP Oakwood. A selection of films on the theme of fatherhood, an important and difficult subject for many prison residents, were shown to groups of 15 nominated residents in each
prison all of whom were fathers. To curate this list of films, Lucy Brett, BBFC, worked with Mark Reid, BFI and Leah Byrne, Picturehouse. The films were chosen to represent a wide range of genres, film making styles, short and feature-length films and to reflect aspects of the history of film. The list also included well-known and less well-known films.

The final list included a silent short animated film which won an Oscar (Father and Daughter), a British film (Wild Bill), a contemporary US film (Father of the Bride), a 1950s black and white comedy and a classic 1960s Hollywood adaptation (To Kill a Mockingbird). The showing of the film was followed by a discussion facilitated by library staff. Lucy Brett provided notes of prompts for facilitators of points of discussion on each film. Where necessary, permission was obtained. During the same period a film club was established by Staffordshire Public Library Service at Wombourne Community Library. Participants in Wednesday evening film showings and discussions watched the same films and also received information about reactions to the films from the residents of the prisons. The films shown were:

- Wild Bill
  “A street-toughened parolee finds his two boys abandoned by their mum and fending for themselves. Time to step up, or not.”

- Creed
  “The former World Heavyweight Champion Rocky Balboa serves as a trainer and mentor to Adonis Johnson, the son of his late friend and former rival Apollo Creed.”

- To Kill a Mockingbird
  “Atticus Finch, a lawyer in the Depression-era South, defends a black man against an undeserved rape charge, and his children against prejudice.”

- Father and Daughter
  “A father says goodbye to his young daughter. Time passes and the daughter moves through life age by age, but within her there is always a deep longing for her father.”

- Father of the Bride
  “With his oldest daughter's wedding approaching, a father finds himself reluctant to let go.”

A talk was also arranged at Wombourne Community Library by the director of Father and Daughter, Michael Dudok de Wit, and Lucy Brett of the BBFC.

Feedback
The feedback on the structure, delivery and content of Films Inside was excellent from participants in prisons and in the community and from prison staff. Some comments from participants in the prisons and in the community are collected thematically below.
Education about film
"I absolutely loved this and it has made me start to watch films properly." Participant, HMP Oakwood

Non-stigmatised education
““I was very happy to take part and, more than that, I appreciate being asked to be involved in something as diverse as this.” Participant, HMP/YOI Brinsford

“It’s a great concept. Films are a fantastic way to convey important ideas that can lead you to startling realisations about your life.” Participant, HMP Featherstone

Collaborative learning
“The scope of some of the genres and the age of some of the films really allowed for everyone in the group to find something they could relate to and then consider their own experiences and attitudes towards fatherhood.” Library staff, HMP Oakwood

“There is very little opportunity to talk to other prisoners in places like this, only when you’re on association or at the gym, and in those settings you don’t really talk about anything of real importance. There are a lot of prisoners who like to watch films and to read about films and the prison library and schemes like Films Inside give like-minded prisoners the chance to do that in a peaceful setting. I think the fact that we then know our thoughts are being shared with other groups in the wider community is fantastic.” Participant, HMP/YOI Brinsford

“It takes a lot of work to put together a group of prisoners (security checks/changes in the regime etc.) but, when you see the obvious impact of a project like this, behaviour/attitude changes, enquiries about further reading and questions about when we will repeat the project again, you know that the whole process was worth being part of.” Adeline Fergus, Library Service Advisor, Staffordshire PLS

Connection with the community
"The young offenders often feel that there is a major barrier between themselves and the wider community. Within the prison system they are often asked to be involved in projects that are very much 'in-house' projects. Films Inside offered them an opportunity to share their views with members of the public and to hear the opinions of the community group as well as older prisoners. For many of these offenders they had never been part of such a group and the change in their behaviour became clear very quickly just from sitting quietly and watching a film they needed to comment on." Louise Mason, Library Supervisor, HMP/YOI Brinsford
“I hope that being involved in this pilot project will help develop a wider understanding for people in the community that prisoners react to these films in a similar way to themselves.” Participant, HMP Featherstone

"I was a little sceptical at the start but I have been pleasantly surprised by the reactions to the films by the prisoners and this has helped to change my (clearly wrong) first impressions of how I thought they would react." Wombourne Library film group participant

Films as a prompt for reflection on fatherhood

“I felt like it was me being away and my little one always wanting me home, and waiting....” Participant in HMP/YOI Brinsford discussing ‘Father and Daughter’.

"This project has given me a lot of pause for thought about being a dad. I'm not sure if I would have thought about all these issues by myself or even just through reading." Participant, HMP Featherstone

“This has been very thought-provoking for any fathers in prison. We are all missing our children and often find it difficult to communicate this to other prisoners, so to find like-minded prisoners and share a movie and our experiences has been a very changing experience for me personally.” Participant, HMP Oakwood

“I tend to work with fathers inside on a one-to-one basis, so it was a wonderful opportunity to put a connected group together within the prisons and share the discussions and themes of fatherhood through a new medium.” Member of prison staff

Comparative review of the films

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HMP&amp;YOI Brinsford</th>
<th>Wild Bill</th>
<th>To Kill a Mockingbird</th>
<th>Father and Daughter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Watching this has encouraged me to keep striving to stay on the straight and narrow and family is the most important thing in life.”</td>
<td>“I felt moved by the racism of that era in America and also how they tried to justify two wrongs making a right.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film</td>
<td>Comments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Father of the Bride</strong></td>
<td>“I was moved by the film because I feel like it’s what I’m going through except I’m always seeing walls she was looking out at the sea and all she wants is to see her family again.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Father of the Bride</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I related to this from the point of view that I’m a struggling father trying to do the right thing and it always goes wrong.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Creed</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I found this film difficult because of everything Rocky goes through. I’ve seen this happen to people in my family but it did make me think about how important it is to respect older people and their wisdom.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>HMP Featherstone</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Wild Bill</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Wild Bill encourages people who are required to change their behaviour to adapt a more positive lifestyle and put their children first.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>To Kill a Mockingbird</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It is very sad to watch this film and realise that after so many years these prejudices still exist today.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Father and Daughter</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I struggled with grasping the concepts of the film but I was so impressed of the visual aspects of the animation and after discussing it with the group I want to watch it again.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Father of the Bride</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It made me think how old do your children have to be before you can actually let them go?”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Creed</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“This film made me realise how much you need the support from a father or a father figure. It also made me appreciate that you should try to put others first.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Film</td>
<td>Quote</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMP Oakwood</td>
<td>Wild Bill</td>
<td>“This film moved me more than any of the others particularly in the scene where Bill fully realises how it feels to be a dad.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To Kill a Mockingbird</td>
<td>“It’s startling how supposedly good people could treat another race so horrifically because of the colour of their skin.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father and Daughter</td>
<td>“I have never watched a silent animated film before. My initial thought was that I would hate it but out of all the films I have watched, this is the one I know I shall never forget.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father of the Bride</td>
<td>“It’s hard to relate to a film where the father is clearly so rich but deep down he’s still an ordinary man trying to do the right thing for his daughter and just like me he doesn’t always make the right choice. “</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creed</td>
<td>“Creed is all about fighting for your goals and future no matter where you are from.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wombourne Library</td>
<td>Wild Bill</td>
<td>“We were surprised by how heartfelt, sweet and funny the story was despite such a realistic, gritty and uncomfortable setting.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To Kill a Mockingbird</td>
<td>“This shines because of the naturalness of the children’s acting.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father and Daughter</td>
<td>“Quite simply beautiful, evocative and moving.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father of the Bride</td>
<td>“Far better than the Steve Martin version.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creed</td>
<td>“Didn’t expect to ever enjoy a Rocky film but found myself absorbed.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How the films affected the groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HMP YOI Brinsford</td>
<td>“Whenever I have watched films in the past I have never really thought about them or even talked through them. Being part of a group, watching together, discussing the films at the end has changed my whole outlook on film and how many hidden meanings can be found within them.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMP Featherstone</td>
<td>“We were all a little sceptical in case there was a hidden agenda to this, but in fact watching films about fatherhood made us all open up more to discuss our own experiences and feel comfortable enough to do that in front of fellow prisoners. Definitely worthwhile.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMP Oakwood</td>
<td>“Fantastic scheme, great choice of films. These have had a real impact on all of us, made discussions very interesting and inspired us all to find new films to discuss.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wombourne Library</td>
<td>“All excellent choices with ‘Wild Bill’ and ‘Father and Daughter’ standing head and shoulders above the rest.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

*Films Inside* was a great success overall. Many of the underpinning hypotheses set out in the introduction have been borne out. The choice of material being varied and sometimes unfamiliar was clearly appreciated. Introducing participants to unfamiliar material and the discussions that followed clearly did help participants to think about film in new and more holistic ways, sparking a renewed enthusiasm for discovery in film. Building a theme around fatherhood clearly paid dividends personally and educationally for participants. Watching films in groups as well as discussing them, not just watching films alone in a cell, clearly greatly enriched the experience for many participants. The sharing of viewing experience and reactions between those in prisons and those outside evidently also added to the interest and perceived value for the people on both sides of the prison walls.
There are no immediately obvious obstacles both to re-running the programme on the same format but with a different theme and a new set of films in the prisons in Staffordshire. There are also many opportunities to expand the approach across libraries in many other prison.

Gerard Lemos
Lemos&Crane
April 2019