
Interview with Bill Seymour

By Keith M. Johnston

Bill Seymour was a trailer producer at National Screen Service [N.S.S.] from the 1950s through the late 1980s, when the company stopped trailer production. He subsequently worked for N.S.S.'s successor, Screen Opticals, who assembled and distributed trailers but were no longer responsible for the writing or creative planning of those trailers. This interview was conducted on 24th January 1995, at Screen Opticals in Perivale, West London. A full transcript can be found in Appendix 3 of my book *Coming Soon: Film Trailers and the Selling of Hollywood Technology* (McFarland & Company 2009).

KMJ [Keith M. Johnston]: Can you tell me something about the history of National Screen here in London, how they went about the process of making a trailer?’

BS [Bill Seymour]: When the war started they came down here [Perivale] in 1942... in those days... National Screen didn't charge for the actual producing of the trailers 'cos they had their own laboratory out the back. They had an agreement that they made all the prints that were required for going round the circuit so they made their money that way. They would make money if they had a hundred prints to make and then they'd also make money on the distribution... they had all the contacts tied up so that they could produce the trailers, make the trailers and distribute them... [later] they started introducing small charges - I think the first one was about £200... It was peanuts when you consider what had to go into it...

In the early days they used to work it that if they had sixty features of the film going round the circuits one week that feature would play North London, South the next week - the same right through the country so that they had these features going round the cinemas week after week after week. The same sort of thing happened with the trailers - if they were working on fifty features they'd need eighty trailers - every week they'd go out to the cinemas a week or two before the feature was due they'd show them. When that week was finished the trailers came back to National Screen on a Thursday night - all those trailers went back out again on Friday morning to the different areas.

They only made a small number of prints whereas today, over the last six years, with these multiplexes and things like that they flood the market - a film comes out and its all over the country, there's none of this crossover now, it's a terrible waste but it averages out. I mean, for a big film you're talking about 750 -1000 trailers... What's happening is that these trailers are shown at one cinema, one multiplex, then they're sent back here and thrown away. They do keep a few of each because sometimes they're called for abroad. We still get calls - two or three a year - from people who want trailers back to 1931, 32...

KMJ: Has the influence of the trailer maker on the finished product been eroded over the years as marketing and publicity practices have evolved?

BS: Esther Harris and people like that decided what they wanted to do but nowadays before they start creating the trailer the publicist of the studio would go down and view the feature and they would give them a rough idea of what they think. Now, the creative people might say 'well, we disagree' - they'd have a discussion to set out what they think, how it should be done. This is submitted to Fox, say, who will make a few suggestions then it comes back and is made to that script.

KMJ: What about approval from the British Board of Film Classification [BBFC]?

BS: Every trailer has to go to the BBFC to be classified. It's always been like that. Sometimes you get the ridiculous thing: the feature will get a 'PG', you'd make a trailer, submit it to the board and they would give the trailer a '15' because they'd say you condensed all the violence or whatever that was strung out through the feature. You'd have to go back and start all over again. But nowadays... they started having complaints because although all the trailers have certificate bands on the front when they go out from National Screen these trailers would get to the cinemas and these bands would be thrown away, discarded - they were running into complaints that when they were making their cake stand the certificates were getting cut off and showing '15' trailers when the feature showing was a 'PG'. Three or four years ago they introduced a system where you actually colour code the side of the trailer with the same brand as the certificate.

KMJ: How did the introduction of different technology affect the trailer makers? Things like television, video, widescreen...?

BS: If the feature is shot in widescreen or 'Scope... well, these days there are no 'Scope trailers, only in specialised circumstances will cinemas show 'Scope trailers... What happens now is if they shoot a feature in 'Scope the same thing happens - we get the inter-positive and we have to un-squeeze it and pan and scan whatever we have to... [in terms of TV trailers] twenty second spots, we'd do them all the time. For each trailer you'd produce a TV spot [in NSS days]. The thing is the cost of transmitting them has gone out the window - you'd talking a prime time spot of £10,000 every time it's shown.

KMJ: What are the different costs involved in trailer production? And how much does it cost to produce a trailer these days?

BS: You're talking about £25 - 30,000 to produce a trailer negative. National Screen didn't have any competition in the early days but in 1962 a couple of the editors who used to do all the Rank trailers - like all the *Carry On's*, things like that - they, with backing from Peter Rogers and Jeremy Thomas, went out and set up a company called General Screen Enterprises and they started making all Rank's trailers. Another company called Creative Partnerships set up in the late 70s - they were in town and had a place in Hollywood. About the same time a company called Picture Productions also started making trailers. So National Screen's monopoly was gradually eaten away. [Picture Production Company] now create the trailers and we [Screen Opticals] put them all together and produce a negative at the end of the day, just like National Screen did.

[In terms of costs] I would estimate that... well, what normally happens is when the creative people order the sections of the picture and the track, that tab is picked up by the production company anyway so that is an 'add on' cost. A trailer might average 250 feet - when they order the sections in the first instance and the labs overprint... we get in excess of 1200 feet - you're talking 1200 feet of inter-positive at £1.30 a foot. Off of that they take a black and white reversal to give them a cutting copy (black and white reversal is thirty pence a foot) so say 2500 grand extra...

For putting the whole trailer together - the creative side, our side, all depends on the amount of opticals (dissolves, fades, titles) that are added on. You're talking between £1000 to £2000. But with all the editing - in the National Screen days, which is going back nine years, it was working out for the whole thing about £15,000. So up that to at least £25,000. It's cheap publicity when you consider you've got 700 trailers going out - 250

feet, the printing cost is nearly £17,000 – each trailer costs you £22. They've got to add that on to their bill for publicity – it's not a lot when you think of how much a film costs, and the revenue they hope to make.

KMJ: What trailers did you work on over the years at NSS? What trailers did you particularly admire?

BS: There are two or three... The Bond trailers... they cost a little bit more because of all the stuff Maurice Binder put into them. They weren't National Screen trailers as such, but Maurice Binder created the main titles, the teaser trailers and the main trailers, all at National Screen. He used to create them, National Screen put them together for him... Stanley Kubrick did it on *Clockwork Orange* as well... he got Pablo Ferra from the States, he came here – created something completely out of the ordinary. Two or three frame cuts... eyes and whatever, colours all flashing... a one-off, when the studio get their own man in.

In terms of my own work... well, up to 20, 25 years ago, almost any film you can think of was probably a National Screen trailer...

KMJ: Over the years what has been the biggest change in trailer style or production?

BS: You never have all these big titles saying 'Exciting', 'Big Romance' and all that anymore, all the gregarious kind of effects and wipes – question marks zooming in and out. Trailers tend to follow a trend – we've found recently we have to put a lot of 'slow mos' in a lot of them.

KMJ: Thank you very much, Bill Seymour...

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