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# Interview with Esther Harris

By Keith M. Johnston

This “interview” is, in fact, a compilation of material drawn from a range of archival sources (noted in the bibliography). By pulling together these interview quotations, my intention is to offer a first-hand account of the early years of the British trailer industry from **Esther Harris**, a woman regularly described as the ‘doyenne’ of British trailer production. Born in 1910 in the East End of London, Esther Harris went to work with the British arm of trailer production company National Screen Service (N.S.S.) in 1926.

Employed by NSS head Bill Bremmer (for thirty shillings), Esther started as an office girl, working as secretary to scriptwriter and director of production Leslie Everleigh...

**EH [Esther Harris]:** Leslie... used to do these scripts and used to take me with him to do the shorthand bits, make notes at the studios when he was making these trailers. He used to... [ask] my opinion. And I was terribly naïve, because I used to tell him what I really thought... he got fed up of this... and said well if you know so much about it, why don't you do it... So the next time I went to the studios with him, instead of taking notes I was making a list of what I wanted... and we both wrote scripts and they took mine and not his... that's how I got into it. <sup>1</sup>

**Originally based in Soho, central London (Denmark Street, then Broadwick Street) NSS moved production to Perivale, West London during World War Two. For over five decades, the company was responsible for almost all British trailer production and distribution...**

**EH:** [NSS] was an American company, they used to make all the trailers over in the States for most of the major companies, and it similarly came to London that way... we had cutting rooms... and camera rooms... We had optical rooms, animators, negative rooms, the whole set up... [but] Nobody ever thought they had to pay National Screen Service... I used to

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get so angry... we're making these damn trailers for nothing, because we had the distribution. That was frightfully important for us to have the distribution and this was hanging over our heads: if you don't do this, we'll take it away... <sup>2</sup>

### **At NSS, Esther quickly learned the craft of trailer making...**

**EH:** It was a very specialised job... It was another media entirely... I learned when I went there, if somebody had lifted a hand, or moved a foot, or flickered an eyelid, there were individual bits that you would take out and marry. It was like a jigsaw puzzle, really, you'd learn that those little bits of action were going to illustrate bits of commentary that you were writing. So you took tiny bits from a film that ran for two hours - the trailer ran for two minutes, you would take bits out that were totally meaningless in the pictures, but added to the aura of the trailer... a smile or a laugh, you took it totally out of context and put this thing together. It was fascinating. <sup>3</sup>

**EH:** We constantly try to be original in the presentation of trailers, even if we do not always succeed, but the most important point is that we must not be confusing; points must be made clearly and quickly in an average of two and a half minutes. The appeal must not only whet the appetites of the sophisticates of London's West End, but the very same trailer must persuade the patrons of the suburban and provincial cinemas and to come and see the film too.

We do not necessarily choose only those scenes which are the most exciting, whether from a romantic, dramatic or humorous point of view. All kinds of small and inconsequential shots are also taken from every reel and these are eventually melded together to become part of the trailer story. For instance, in the case of a mystery story, any isolated shot which suggested mystery would be utilised, although in the feature there may be nothing mysterious about the shot at all. As an example, we would note shots of footsteps, or of a door being opened by an unseen hand; a telephone ringing; a light being switched on; a shadow against a wall. Shots such as these, out of context, can be exceedingly useful to back a piece of narration or a title and to give the trailer a build-up of atmosphere. A chase, or any kind of fast action, is a wonderful aid to the general pace of the trailer. In fact, the more action the better, since a trailer must keep moving or have something equally arresting to grip the attention. <sup>4</sup>

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**Throughout the history of NSS, the trailer remained one of the most important forms of a film's publicity campaign...**

**EH:** The purpose of a trailer is to make a bad picture look good and a good one better. Trailer makers are simply publicists on film. If it is sometimes necessary to exaggerate it must be borne in mind that too much subtlety does not pay in mass selling to an audience of so many different degrees of understanding. It is necessary to be just a little larger than life as in most cases is the material being publicised. It is not easy to convey the greatness of the stars, the story and the scenes, without using superlatives, but we no longer use the "super colossal" adjectives which continue to be attributed to us... Trailers are much larger than life and a little noisier too. We recognise the fact that they are wedged in between the popcorn rattling, seat tipping and ice-cream sales.<sup>5</sup>

**EH:** Trailers got a reputation for this kind of thing [hyperbolic sales 'barking']... [but] the adjectives went out of the window an awful long time ago... they grew up, like the rest of us...<sup>6</sup>

**EH:** The trailer had to go to the cinema before the feature, and they were very keen to get the trailer because it was their main form of advertising... they had a captive audience... and the trailer was terribly important, it really was... you had to go in front of producers and publicity directors... and tell them what you had to do, because you were selling a picture before they had done any advertising or any publicity.<sup>7</sup>

**EH:** Producers, directors, managing directors, sales and publicity directors are exceedingly alive to the value of a trailer, for it is generally conceded by those who should know, that the trailer is one of their most potent means of advertising.<sup>8</sup>

**EH:** Making trailers has never been an easy job... you had to please so many people. The producer has an idea, the publicity people have an idea, the renters have an idea... and everyone has to be clever... you would have to please everybody around this little table. In the end I think they recognised that National Screen were trailer makers and knew their job... and they would listen.<sup>9</sup>

**The British National Screen Service operation followed a particular approach to trailer production...**

**EH:** We used to see pictures before anyone else had a look at them, always in rough cut. Even when they went into colour I would see them in

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black and white... I would frequently go to the studios... Pinewood, Shepperton, wherever... when the picture was in absolute rough cut, and no one was allowed to see the film outside the studio... I was looking at these films when they were so frightfully rough cut, no dubbing no post-syncing, nothing... and through experience I was able to judge them in that state... [because] I came in from the outside and wasn't married to the picture... I had a totally different outlook on the whole thing. You got to the stage where you quite knew... it became inbuilt, you knew what the public would come and see if you sold it in a certain fashion... <sup>10</sup>

**EH:** Generally the film is seen at the Studio in its rough assembly, with an assistant who takes notes of the scenes that may be needed. A print of the picture with a sound track which consists only of dialogue is used, since at this stage the feature has not yet been dubbed with music and effects or furnished with optical [...] Having seen a film, a full trailer script is prepared. The shape of a trailer is decided at this stage... Great consideration is given as how best to sell each particular picture. One goes on jostling with ideas and discarding them wholesale. One wonders whether the Stars are big enough; are the scenes good enough in themselves to sell the seats; how much padding do they need? Does the Director mean anything to the public and is he worth emphasising? Is it a controversial subject, or should one make it so? Dare we sell it on sex, without making it nasty or running into Censor trouble; or if it is a funny film, will the excerpts, divorced from their complete build-up, be funny enough? And always, what is there *new* to say about the same old story? [...]

Once the idea has taken shape, a full trailer script is prepared for comment. Here, all the suggestions for dialogue scenes and material for backing titles and commentary are carefully explained and it is then ready for discussion by studio or distribution personnel, or both. The approval of a script varies very largely with the organisation. In some cases the studio takes the greater interest and sometimes the distributor [...] The scripts, as they are submitted, are largely accepted but during the discussion stages there may emerge some suggestions regarding an additional scene - or a substitution - or both. A title or piece of commentary may be rephrased, but most times the shape of the trailer, that is, the sales angle, is accepted.

The continuity of trailer scenes is not of great importance; the highlights can be given away almost immediately so long as the effect is achieved. You can lead up to your climax by all means, but the cardinal sin is to give away the result of that climax. Leave it in the air... Keep them guessing... a trailer should start in the most arresting way so that the audience is forced to go on looking and listening to the next piece of information and the next [...]

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The physical work on the trailer now begins. The scenes are ordered up around the script and we wait for the necessary materials to be delivered to us from the laboratory [...]some of this time is used to put in hand the titles which are to be superimposed over the scenes. The narration is meanwhile recorded, so that all the facilities for finally cutting together the trailer are available... a discussion takes place as to the type of lettering required, and a rough layout of the titles is prepared... a script is handed to the camera room with specific instructions for title animation. <sup>11</sup>

**Although often discussed in terms of visuals and editing, trailer makers were also responsible for selecting music and effects, and recording voice-over narration...**

**EH:** Nothing can so quickly destroy the mood and build-up of a trailer as an inadequate soundtrack. An indifferent trailer can spring to life given good music, and a very good trailer can be dull and uninteresting because of a bad music track. Trailers, which are made up of so many bits and pieces from every part of the film in any kind of order, gain continuity by the use of music and effects. Trailer cutters spend a great deal of time laying music and are particularly adept in utilising the various chords and crescendos to point passages which need to be dramatised or accentuated. We often go right through the music of the whole feature to obtain particularly suitable bars and we also have an extensive music library of our own.

In laying music for a trailer, we seldom use less than eight separate tracks made up of innumerable small sections so that the cutters' cue sheets for the sound mixer are a positive work of art. <sup>12</sup>

**Although focused on British trailer production, NSS was also responsible for reviewing and distributing American trailers...**

**EH:** [N.S.S.] makes about 140 trailers a year, including several for American pictures which have not met the British distributor's requirements. The Production Department also handles six hundred American trailers, many being re-issues which need considerable re-editing to bring them up to date, and numerous changed titles which can be quite a worry [...] America is allowed much more scope in the use of screen violence and there are consequently greater censorship problems with American trailers. The Breen Office and the British Board of Film Censors do not always see eye to eye on these matters... A certain

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amount of Anglicising... and sometimes re-making of American trailers is done to suit our market, but normally these American trailers are accepted as they come from the States... <sup>13</sup>

**One of the main issues around American trailers in Britain, and British trailers in America, was around the accents of the voice-over narrator...**

**EH:** The right kind of narration and the right kind of narrator play a very important part in a trailer and it is very difficult to find the most suitable man for the job. It is essential for a trailer narrator to know how to act with his voice. A straight newsreader is usually of little use. A trailer commentator must be prepared to be melodramatic without, in fact, giving that impression. He has to get into the mood of the subject – and subsequently add to that mood. He must sell the film without forcing it on the public ear in an annoying manner. <sup>14</sup>

**EH:** [Because] a lot of people wouldn't like the American voices for this country... you had to start re-dubbing... it got to the stage where they would have to send over separate facilities, otherwise I found it awfully difficult to remove the track which was already mixed, you know, but you found that they didn't like American voices... We used to use Tim Turner. You had to look for a voice that wasn't frightfully English and wasn't frightfully American, and that really was not easy, to get a common denominator... <sup>15</sup>

**EH:** Any trailers on British films which are being distributed in the U.S.A. are sent to that country, but whereas we are happy enough to take their trailers with American idioms and narrators, America does not so easily take to our insular peculiarities... Let us hope that one day the American public will react likewise to our product, be they trailers or films. The only major alterations made to British trailers, when they reach the other side, are to voices, rather than to words. One or two lines may be adjusted to sensationalise the sales angle but the shape of the trailer is nearly always acceptable to them. <sup>16</sup>

**All trailers required certification from the British Board of Film Censors [latterly Classification], an arrangement that often caused problems for NSS...**

**EH:** We had tremendous censorship problems of course because every trailer had to be Universal, had to have a U certificate, no matter how X

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certificate the film was.... you didn't know which kind of audience the trailer would be seen by... it wasn't easy by any means. You indicate, somehow or other... you tease them... [in the early days] you mustn't show a man and woman kissing! It was ridiculous... <sup>17</sup>

**EH:** [Of course] a trailer can be made to look "double X" although we do not purposely try to create the wrong impression at any time, just for the sake of it. The Censor restrictions do, however, emasculate the trailer in many respects. We cannot make use of some of the most telling scenes from a film and this can be most frustrating. There are many censor restrictions which appear foolish, but which doubtless have good reasoning behind them... the Censor does not like anyone being the target of any excessive violence. It is all right to fire a gun, but for the audience to see the bullet actually hit its target is seldom permissible. We must not show punching which is likely to distress children. For a man to slap a woman's face is taboo, although on the other hand, a woman may slap a man's face. Screams that curdle the blood as completely out... Risqué dialogue is definitely out, as are risqué scenes... As most films consist of some of these ingredients it is easy to imagine how difficult it is to make some trailers attractive to adult audiences. <sup>18</sup>

### **Through her years at NSS, Esther would work with some of the biggest names in the British film industry...**

**EH:** Michael Winner... said to me once 'this is my film, you know' and I said 'but it's my trailer, you know'... once they found that what I was doing was working for them... [Winner said] "you're a bloody nuisance as well, but you've got style"... he wasn't as bad as people made out... if you were able to work for Michael you could work for anyone in the industry...

I found the Boulting Brothers frightening... there was a kind of arrogance about them... they were incredibly nice blokes behind all that guile... they were terribly kind to me... the fact I was able to work for [them] gave other producers the feeling if they could use her, we can too... it gave me an in that I might not have had otherwise... this silly little woman coming along to tell us how to sell our picture... if they can let her do it, we can too... <sup>19</sup>

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'Esther Harris interview' The BECTU History Project, Tape 465 (18)



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*Frames # 3 Promotional Materials* 05-07-2013. This interview © Keith M. Johnston.

Notes:

1. 'Esther Harris interview' The BECTU History Project, Tape 465 (18 January, 2000). [↵](#)
2. 'Esther Harris interview'. [↵](#)
3. 'Esther Harris interview'. <sup>20</sup>'Esther Harris interview'. [↵](#)
4. Esther Harris, 'The Production of Trailers', *British Kinematography* 23, 4 (October 1953), 98-9. [↵](#)
5. Harris, 'The Production of Trailers', 98. [↵](#)
6. 'Esther Harris interview'. [↵](#)
7. 'Esther Harris interview'. [↵](#)
8. Harris, 'The Production of Trailers', 99. [↵](#)
9. 'Esther Harris interview'. [↵](#)
10. 'Esther Harris interview'. [↵](#)
11. Harris, 'The Production of Trailers', 98-100. [↵](#)
12. Harris, 'The Production of Trailers', 101. [↵](#)
13. Harris, 'The Production of Trailers', 102, 101. [↵](#)
14. Harris, 'The Production of Trailers', 100. [↵](#)
15. 'Esther Harris interview'. [↵](#)
16. Harris, 'The Production of Trailers', 98. [↵](#)
17. 'Esther Harris interview'. [↵](#)
18. Harris, 'The Production of Trailers', 101. [↵](#)
19. 'Esther Harris interview'. [↵](#)