

## **CASE STUDY: *THE CRYING GAME* - A MEDIUM BUDGET UK PRODUCTION (NEIL JORDAN, 1992)**

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This film has been chosen as a case study because it is a high-profile example of the TV co-production feature which has dominated U.K. production in the recent past. The project was conceived, written and directed by Neil Jordan.

**Key Book Reference: A. Finney, *The Egos Have Landed*, (Mandarin, London, 1997)**

**Key Book Reference: J. Giles, *The Crying Game*, (BFI Publishing, London, 1997)**

**Script development & pre-production:** In 1982, Neil Jordan produced an outline and partial script for a project entitled *The Soldier's Wife*. The project was proposed to the then new terrestrial tv channel, Channel 4, but was turned down.

Nearly 10 years later, in 1991, the project was set in motion again: to be directed by Jordan and produced by Steven Woolley of Palace Productions. Despite many potential backers (including Miramax, ultimately the film's U.S. distributor) being put off by what were perceived as "difficult" themes - race, transgressive sexuality and Northern Ireland politics - a "pack-of-cards" finance package was arranged through the summer and autumn of 1991. The participants included British Screen, Eurotrustees (a pan-European distribution alliance, and one including Palace Pictures), Channel 4 and Nippon Development & Finance (a Japanese distribution company). Financing was very tight - a modest £ 2.7 million budget (1)- and hard won. Quoting Steven Woolley:

It was only after literally begging on my knees to Channel 4 and British Screen (which later became strong supporters of the film), and a handful of European distributors that we were able to finance the film at all, and then only because the entire cast and crew accepted substantial deferments.(2)

After script changes were made (at the behest of the backers), shooting commenced at the beginning of November.

**Production and post-production:** Despite the fact that the financing of the picture was not fully completed until November 10th, shooting of the picture commenced a week earlier, on location in Ireland (Finney 1997: 25-8). As the film went into production, Palace Pictures - of which Palace Productions was a part - was in serious financial trouble. The majority of its companies would be formally put into administration in May, 1992 (ibid: 262). Despite Palace's problems, however, the production proceeded.

After less than a week's shoot in Ireland, the production shifted to London. Location work occurred in central London (in, for instance, Eaton Square and Fournier Street, Spitalfields). The rest of the film was shot at Shepperton Studios. Shooting was completed just before Christmas 1991.

By the end of January 1992, a rough cut had been completed. Subsequently a new ending was shot at an extra cost of £ 45,000.00 (Giles 1997: 36-7). By April, 1992 the film was completed, and had a new title, *The Crying Game*.

**Initial UK distribution and exhibition:** The film opened in the UK at the end of October 1992, having failed to secure a Cannes premiere, but having been seen at the Venice Film Festival that autumn.

Films with low budgets and no stars tend to have extended exclusive cinema runs upon release, to give the film the chance to build an audience through word of mouth. Not so here, unfortunately.

Mayfair, the UK distributors, decided to book the film into cinemas across the country after only a few weeks' "platform" exhibition in London (Finney 1997: 272-3).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the unfortunate coincidence of the film's release with an IRA bombing campaign on the British mainland, on top of the poor marketing, severely hampered the film's chances. For, despite generally favourable reviews, the film's initial box office performance was weak (only around £ 680,000.00 gross by December 1992).(3)

**US distribution and exhibition:** In the spring of 1992, the partners in the film struck a US distribution deal with Miramax for \$ 1.5 million. Miramax in the early 1990s was an independent distribution company (now owned by Disney) with a reputation for handling non-Hollywood product.

After screening the film at Telluride, Toronto and New York Film Festivals, the film was released in the US at the end of November, 1992. Miramax demonstrated its agility in non-blockbuster distribution with its careful marketing strategy. On its UK release, those marketing the film had requested that the press not reveal the film's "secret" in their reviews. Miramax picked up on that idea as a promotional tool, and enlisted not only the media, but the audience *as well*, in a conspiracy of silence. The film was 'sold' to the public as an action thriller/film noir with a secret (the gay & IRA themes were played down). An inspired ad line - "The movie everyone is talking about, but no one is giving away its secrets" - certainly helped to fire the imagination of the cinema-going public (Fleming and Klady 1993: 68). Meanwhile, Miramax also built a steady Oscar-nomination campaign for the film through late 1992/early 1993.

The promotional campaign was supported by a carefully orchestrated theatrical release pattern. The film debuted on only 6 screens in the US at the end of November (ibid: 68). By early February, 1993, Miramax had taken the film "wide" - it was on at 239 screens (ibid: 1) - and by the 17 February, when the Oscar nominations were announced, the film was booked into 500 screens (ibid: 69). The film received 6 nominations (best film, best director, best screenplay, best actor, best supporting actor, best editing), and, on the weekend following the announcement of the nominations, grossed \$ 5.2 million at the box office: a "400% increase over the previous week" (ibid: 69). By the week preceding Academy Award night - the 29 March - the number of screens had been increased to saturation level: 1,093 in total (ibid: 1).

In the event, the film won only one academy award, for best screenplay. Nevertheless, Miramax's effective handling of the film assured it continued box office success. If US grosses for 1992 were a healthy \$ 4.5 million,(4) grosses for 1993 were outstanding: at around \$ 59.3 million.(5) In the end, the total US gross figure was estimated at around \$ 68 million (Giles 1997: 50).

Miramax's handling of the film in the US proved to be a classic example of how to **build an audience** successfully for a relatively low budget, non US feature (see section on Film Audiences).

**A footnote to UK distribution & exhibition:** Although never outstanding, the UK box office did pick up again as a consequence of the film's US success. For the period December 1992 to December 1993, the UK gross was around £1.4 million. (6)

In summary, the UK distribution windows for *The Crying Game* were as follows:

**1st Commercial Theatrical Distribution**

**30 October 1992**

**Video release: April 1993**

(Polygram's early release date - coming hot-on-the-heels of the Oscar frenzy - was probably timed to maximise profitability whilst interest in the film was still there.)

**Terrestrial TV premiere, C4, 1 November 1994.**

- 1 Source: *Screen International*, no.840, 17/1/92.
- 2 See S. Woolley, " Last Palace Picture Show," in *The Guardian*, 30/10/92.
- 3 Source: *Screen International*, no. 888, December 18-25/92.
- 4 Source: *Screen International*, no.889, Jan 8-14, 1993.
- 5 Source: *Screen International*, no.940, Jan 14-20, 1994.
- 6 Source: *Screen International*, no.940, Jan 14-20, 1994.