

Long Interview: Sean Welsh and Megan Mitchell | (BBC Radio Scotland 17/01/21)

Presenter: You're listening to the Good Morning Scotland Weekend Edition podcast. Now, lots of people have found tasks to be done during lockdown, but spare a thought for film enthusiasts Sean Welsh and Megan Mitchell, who spent their lockdown subtitling hundreds of films for Deaf and Hard of Hearing audiences. Well, Sean and Megan normally run Matchbox Cineworld, providing cult films for festivals. Cage-a-rama, their celebration of Nicolas Cage, should have taken place this month but they're confident it will return and perhaps bring the eccentric actor himself to Glasgow. Well, our Arts Correspondent Pauline McLean spoke to them at the tail end of 2020.

John Waters: Hello, I'm John Waters, and I'm supposed to announce there's no smoking in this theatre.

Megan Mitchell: Myself and my colleague Sean Welsh are Matchbox Cineclub. We're currently based in Bristol, having just recently moved but we originally were active predominantly in Glasgow and Scotland. And we're independent film exhibitors. And all that means is that we screen films, we run film festivals, we work with cinemas to put on film events. Our ethos, in terms of programming and what films we like to screen, we call them the outcasts, orphans and outliers of cinema,

Nicolas Cage: He jumped over three line-backers in mid-air. He sprouted antlers, like a gazelle. [He laughs] Like an elk?! [He laughs] He landed again and he ran, ran, ran. He scored a touchdown! [He laughs]

Megan Mitchell: We like to screen films - cult films for cold audiences - but also we place a keen emphasis on accessibility. So, we use a pay-what-you-can-afford sliding scale ticket model, from zero to £8, and we also present all the films with captions, for and Deaf and Hard of Hearing audiences.

Pauline McLean: So, this is where the Lottery Award comes in, because a lot of people during lockdown, I guess, kicked back and thought, "Well, there's not much for me to do." The two of you actually decided that there was even more to do, in terms of subtitling films and you did, how many? About 250 in that time?

Sean Welsh: The number's a little elastic. It's actually still in a sense, it's still going. It was 150 at the kind of midpoint. And it's 300 now, I think. So, it's, day-by-day it increases, because it's still ongoing, of course. Over the summer, it was certainly about 200.

Pauline McLean: And what does that involve for you? What does the work actually involve?

Sean Welsh: It's really varied, in fact. I mean, sometimes it's a case of we have a subtitle file that we just have to adapt, which is to say that it's an English language file and we need to add SDH or captioned elements, which is sound labels and sound effects and things like that. So, sometimes, it's relatively straightforward. And other times we have to do the whole thing from scratch, which is that we have to transcribe the English dialogue as well as add these elements for Deaf and Hard of Hearing audiences. And the quality of the films, or rather, the content of the films, is really varied as well and it depends on who we've been doing it for. We've done a lot

of work with the Glasgow Short Film Festival, who were actually one of the first to embrace this, the idea of making their programme as accessible as possible. We worked with them a little bit last year and they've been building up their provision year on year, until this year, when, of course, initially, they were supposed to happen earlier in the year, but they had to postpone and then eventually delivered their whole programme online. And their whole programme this year was accessible in terms of captions, which is a huge undertaking for us. And it's a real big investment and time for them as well. So it was really nice to see that.

Pauline McLean: And this kind of lockdown time gave you that chance to be able to sit down and do this, didn't it? I mean it, it sounds like quite a dream job, but, in other ways, it also sounds quite laborious. You're not just sitting watching films, you're having to basically take them apart and put them back together again, with words anyway.

Sean Welsh: Ah, sure, I mean, if you want to stop enjoying something, you make it work. But, at the same time, we're really grateful to be able to work like this. I mean, it's great to have a sense of purpose about it, it's great to work with films, but, of course, if you are working with films, day-in, day-out, it can become a little onerous. And of course, when you're working on a film, it's potentially up to six times as long as the film itself, you're spending, even more than that, in fact, to produce the subtitles. So, if you imagine a film is an hour, an hour and a half long, you're talking around a day, a day, maybe a working day, at the very least, usually about two days to do the subtitles, which is a long time to spend with any film.

Pauline McLean: So, Megan, are there particular films that you think, "Never again, I just don't want to see that one again."

Megan Mitchell: I think we're quite lucky, because we've been able to work with a variety of festivals and exhibitors, that, every week, there's something new and something interesting. And I think that, personally, we've been exposed to films that are just so varied and so interesting, in terms of their different content and approach and style that, actually, even though it can be quite arduous, I guess, to be doing it day-in, day-out, that there's still always something fresh and exciting and you're always reminded how important film as an art form and as a medium is,

Pauline McLean: Tell us a little bit about the original organisation that you set up Matchbox Cineclub. You originally, I guess, had five festivals that you've added to that, and you're looking particularly at cult film. I think the only one that I have been to in the list, and I thought it was fabulous, was Cage-a-rama which is devoted to the films of Nicolas Cage. How did that come about?

Sean Welsh: The potted history of Matchbox is that it was founded by a chap called Tommy McCormick, who is very creative and very active in producing these kinds of organisations and events. And he started Matchbox as a way to screen short films, because, at that time, there wasn't that many options for seeing short films on the big screen. And I got involved pretty quickly afterwards, because I wanted to get experience as a film programmer and basically took over almost entirely, but Tommy was on to bigger and better things. And then we screened pop-up screenings of cult

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films, essentially. And then Megan came onboard, and then our shared love of Nicolas Cage begat Cage-a-rama.

Nicolas Cage: Going to detain a blighter for enjoying his whisky?

Man: Enough.

Cage: Bangers and mash! Bubbles and squeak! Smoked eel pie!

Man: Sir?

Cage: Haggis!

Man: That's it! Dismount the banister!

Sean Welsh: We decided that it was probably a good idea to spend an inordinate amount of time celebrating Nicolas Cage. And so we've done that.

Pauline McLean: Well, I was going to say, you're not alone. For some reason, there's a real love for Nicolas Cage in Glasgow.

Megan Mitchell: I think that, one, he's just the best actor that's ever lived. I'm actually the world's leading academic on Valley Girl, which was Nicolas Cage's first feature film, as "Nicolas Cage".

VO: Valley Girl.

Cage: She's out there somewhere.

VO: This is the story of a boy from Hollywood who never dreamed the girl he'd want most was down here.

Megan Mitchell: I think that me and Sean and the audience of Cage-a-rama have this shared sincere interest in Cage as an actor, as a an entity larger than life. And I think that that's how we came to this idea of Matchbox being cult films for cult audiences, because, of course, programming Matchbox normally, outwith Cage-a-rama and our KeanuCons and things, which are maybe more known films, we're screening stuff that you can't see anywhere else - lost films, unknown films, cult in the sense that you really need to dig to find them. So, that unifying thread across our programming is really that cult, in, I guess, a more flexible and fluid sense, but always has that sincerity and joy that you find within these films.

Pauline McLean: But I guess also not taking itself too seriously. I think one of the films that I saw, I think last year, at the second festival was almost like a sort of pantomime audience, you know, people were kind of cheering the, you know, the particular lines that appealed to them, or...

Megan Mitchell: I was just gonna mention an event that we did that, I think, is a really nice example of audience participation in that heightened event. We hosted a funeral for the six-second video platform Vine.

[New Orleans second line funeral music]

Megan Mitchell: Some people might know that have, I guess, cult status, in terms of some of its videos and creators. And we hosted a very elaborate funeral with a mourning band and Puke, who's a drag queen performing this amazing performance with which the audience joined in, completely unprompted, with their phone lights, and had been repeating all of the Vines back to the screen itself.

[Music continues]

Megan Mitchell: And I think that we create or we try to create an environment within Matchbox events where all the audience and I think that this is where captions and accessible ticket pricing come in, feel comfortable and feel that they can engage to a level that they're comfortable with and feel supported to do that in an environment that maybe ordinary cinemas or ordinary film screenings don't create or haven't been able to quite grasp yet. And I think that that's core to the things that we want to continue to do is achieve that environment of... welcomeness, I guess, and feeling that you can be a part of all of this.

[Music continues]

Pauline McLean: And, Sean, is the ambition, eventually, to have either Nicolas Cage or Keanu Reeves come to their own festivals?

Sean Welsh: Well, we're always, since year one of Cage-a-rama, we've been in contact with Cage's agent and we've always been heartened by the fact that, in year four of a similar festival in the States, he took part, he came down, he had programmed the films, he came along, he officiated an engagement, I think, and he read some Edgar Allan Poe poems, before sitting and watching his own films with the audience. So, we've always been encouraged by the fact that that happened. So far, we haven't quite been able to tie the knot. It's always exciting, because he tends to spend his festive period in the UK, he has a house in Bath. And so he is usually around when we, when our festival happens, or, because we do it around about his birthday, which is in early January. And so we always think there's a possibility is gonna pop in. But we're kind of like a dog that chases a car. I'm not sure what we'd do, if we got him.

[Music - "Old Lost John" by Sonny Terry]

But one day, one day, and the invitation is always open, and we're always having that kind of communication. Keanu's a different thing, I think, because I think he's quite humble, and a wee bit shy, and I think he'd probably be... I'm not sure he'd necessarily be comfortable in that kind of scenario. But we'll see we've, we've got a lot of room in our hearts for Keanu, I'm sure everyone else does as well.

Keanu Reeves: When I left home, the maid asked me where I was off to. I said, "Wherever, whatever. Have a nice day."

Sean Welsh: We thought we'd extend the invitation vice versa. I mean, they're always welcome to come to any of our events, as is anyone - that's the idea, open, open to everyone.

Megan Mitchell: Well, we delivered an online festival Tales From Winnipeg, which was actually more of a showcase, I guess, of purest Matchbox programming, so we had a Matchbox favourite John Paizs' Crime Wave. We had Guy Maddin's Cowards Bend the Knee, scored by the wonderful Ela Orleans, and the Tales from the Winnipeg Film Group documentary. And that was really interesting, because that was our first foray, I guess, into online programming. And we were even on the local Winnipeggian news chatting about it and that was quite fun. But I think, for us, we have been really lucky this year in terms of keeping busy, I guess, with captioning and the advocacy work that we've been doing around that. And of course, the award, for the captioning work that we've been doing, has been really nice and there's been something really comforting, I guess, for us, being able to be busy during such a uncertain time. But I think moving forward, audiences are always going to want to come together and join in on something really special and I think cinemas and our festivals particularly offer something above and beyond watching films on Netflix or on streaming sites. So, 2021, we'll see how comfortable we are delivering things to audiences. I also think, as well, that we're really lucky in being independent film exhibitors, in that we can take the choices that feel right for us and our audiences and not have to take any, I guess, risks based on any economic factors, if we were cinema, for example. So I think, for us, we're just biding our time, I guess. I don't think you ever stop programming, there's always things squirrelled away, you know - a Tik Tok festival might be next.

Sean Welsh: We have, it's fair to say, lots and lots of ideas. And just like everyone else, it's a real, a real shame that we've had to kind of wipe the board clean this year. But we've always said we'd prefer to be best rather than first, so even, there's all these challenges, like Megan says, in terms of safety and looking after your audiences, because that's the most important thing to us, and so...and we also have to deal with that thing that a lot of people in groups that are in the same position as us are in because it's difficult for us to screen mainstream films online, you know, so we couldn't necessarily present Cage-a-rama online. Obviously, I think we'd prefer to be able to see our audience and experience the films with them in real life. But even a version of it would be tricky for us to deliver online because...just because of the way the industry works. So, there are things we can do and there are things we may do and, like I say, we're bursting with ideas. But we'll just have to wait and see.

Pauline McLean: I think, in of your discussion forums, you were recommending in a sense that for some festivals, the right thing is to do nothing, to kind of step back and not to attempt to push everything online. You were just explaining there why it's not always possible to put things online. It also doesn't always have the same feel, there is that balance to be achieved, isn't there?

Megan Mitchell: Yeah. And I think that, particularly in the early point of lockdown, and going through the pandemic, quite a lot of cinemas and festivals and independent exhibitors, very rightly so, were concerned about their audiences and wanting to stay very actively engaged with them. And I think that when, we, I guess, it was during Scalarama, said that perhaps doing nothing is a better use of time, I think that none of these people in the sector are ever going to be doing nothing, but advocating for taking the time to think about how we can better the sector and

improve our own events when we do get back to doing the big in-real-life things that we love. And again, we come back to captioning. Captioning's a big part of that. And I think we've seen a lot of festivals and independent exhibitors who, one, have had maybe more time to think about access in a slightly different way, really engaging with captioning as a process and a real way in for audiences who maybe wouldn't be able to engage with their events otherwise, online or not. But also cinema might be in a crisis at the moment but it's also an opportunity and we're seeing a lot of really exciting, urgent and important issues being discussed, not just access, but across the board in the sector. And I think that actually, that's a really heartening thing. Even if it's quite a scary time for cinemas themselves.

Pauline McLean: I was going to say, one of the interesting things has been, aside from Tenet, there hasn't really been anything blockbuster-wise, this year. So, it's given any indie films that are out there a little bit more scope than they normally would have. And I presume it also allows for those audiences, and those kind of films to have a bit more of the attention.

Sean Welsh: I think it's fair to say that, in one sense, like, doing stuff online is great and to be able to embrace it is great. And there's lots of different elements of online that the in-real-life events can't offer and one of them is accessibility. But on the other hand, we don't have the pressures that a venue has, in terms of overheads and staff and continuity of their audience. And one thing that we're very aware of is that it would be great if more of us this kind of niche content and lesser-exposed films had a chance. But, truthfully, there's such shifting sands for cinemas, because they have to try to get bums on seats, but they're also dealing with an ever-changing landscape. And it's not just about whether or not films will or will not be released, you've seen Wonder Woman 1984 is now going to get released day and date streaming and in theatres. That kind of thing disrupts planning for cinemas because, in a normal run of things, they have things booked several months in advance. And they also know that they're going to be open. So, if you don't know you're going to be open from week to week, and you don't know what studio releases are going to be available to you, it's incredibly difficult to plan. And so that's... We're aware that, in the sector, there's, like, a real challenge and a real need for venues and cinemas to be supported through this. It would seem that there's an opportunity to programme these lesser known films. But unfortunately, it's not always as simple as that.

Pauline McLean: Going back to the subject of access to films and the subtitling work that you've done, the reminder in the midst of all of this is that not everyone has broadband, not everyone has internet access. Is there a danger that we may have taken a step back in making film accessible because it's going to be small, when cinemas do reopen, they're going to be much, much smaller capacity. So, you know, how do you then cater for the people who felt they'd been left out?

Megan Mitchell: I think that this is a big question for cinemas in terms of access overall, because I don't think it's about stepping backwards with access online or the progression of online versus in-venue. I think that these are all deeply interconnected and very hard to untangle issues of barriers to access for audiences. So, digital poverty is playing a big part now, in terms of audiences who maybe would regularly

attend cinemas but don't have the digital technology or the internet to do so. But we're also seeing a rising awareness I guess, in cinemas, of these issues, so, digital poverty, even when cinemas are able to or do open their doors, we have high-risk audience members, we have audience members who just can't step over that threshold any more, even from their own home and so I think it's just about all of these different - as it always has been in cinema - different issues of barriers to access interplaying. But, again, I think cinemas are starting to untangle all of that. And, even though there may be some deeply rooted problems, in terms of access - I'm thinking particularly around the cost of a cinema ticket, and the actual ability to enter these independent cinemas and feel that they're a space for yourself - that we're slowly starting to address different issues of access in a way that sets out a really strong model for addressing all of the other issues. And again, captioning being a brilliant example of exhibitors really starting to consciously think about how they can unpick these barriers and be proactive, because, actually, underpinning all of the issues within independent exhibition and independence cinemas is actions that are necessary to bring about change. And I think that we're seeing a really exciting energy around independence cinemas that want that change and, hopefully, the pandemic has sped up some of the really useful ways of doing that. So, taking things online, thinking differently about access online and hopefully bringing that back into the cinemas.

Pauline McLean: So, rather than taking a step backwards, it could actually be an important reset moment?

Megan Mitchell: Definitely, I think the pandemic's allowed cinemas to accelerate some of the changes that were already slowly in place, with going online, thinking about access differently online. But it's also gave cinemas, I guess, a shock in terms of audiences and thinking about their audiences. So now, older audiences are maybe less likely to want to attend cinema screenings, but younger audiences might. And that's a real question, I guess, for independent cinemas who have previously struggled with young audiences and maybe have rested on their laurels slightly with their access commitments and now is the time, I think, we're really seeing an urgent need for change, but also the will for that to happen as well.

Sean Welsh: It's important to note that we didn't invent access, and we didn't invent captioning for screenings, but what we were able to do is to show how it was possible to do it and to do it affordably. Because there was a will there, it's just that we had to kind of... we helped to join up the dots. And we've kind of seen a real, real sense of a sea change, even over the course of this year. Because we can see that some of the people we're working with year on year, the distributors and the film-makers are more likely to have caption files already, because they're thinking about it. So we can see that there's a change there that's kind of coming in. And particularly across Scotland, obviously, we've done a lot of work with a lot of festivals, and even the ones that we haven't had complete coverage, they're starting maybe one strand, and then next year they'll look at doing more. And we're also showing them how to do it internally, to an extent, if they can manage that, so that it's a bit more sustainable, you know, because it's not just screenings, of course, it's, like, trailers and any content they put online - clips, or if they do Q&As, all of these

things. And so it's progress. And I think, on one hand, it's important to see it as a continuity. And, on the other hand, it's a really good idea to lose patience with this stuff and to say, "No, it has to happen now." Because it should happen now, it should have already happened. And, so, the more you kind of kick it into the long grass, if you allow that to happen, that's what will happen, it'll be put off and it'll be put off. And, so, this pandemic, and everything around it has really been horrendous. And so when there's an opportunity for something positive to come from it, I think it's really good that we can seize it. And I would add to that also that audiences as a whole, and even specific audiences for cinema are much more comfortable with subtitles. In fact, before the pandemic, when we had committed to having open captioning on all our screenings, which means that subtitles are always on, no matter what, we never had any complaints from audience members. And I think there's a wee bit of people assume that audiences are going to kick off if they're presented with a subtitled screening. And I think it happens less than, less than people might expect and I think it's no longer a viable excuse to not do it. It's great to see organisations taking it on to the point where they can explain to their audiences, why they're doing it, and bring audiences with them. Because that's really what it's all about.

Pauline McLean: You mentioned that you both relocated to Bristol, but it sounds like you're still very much able to do what you do and be involved in everything that's happening in Scotland from there.

Megan Mitchell: Definitely. I think, thanks to Zoom, and the pandemic, we probably could have moved and no-one would have known we weren't in Glasgow any more, but it's been really exciting for us to just come to a different context and particularly Bristol, where it has so many wonderful independent exhibitors and the Watershed Cinema that we're able to, I guess, re-route and continue our activism for captions in a new context and a context that's also hungry for change and are really proactive in terms of accessibility. But we're still keeping our hands in Scotland.

Sean Welsh: I think there's another thing that goes hand in hand with the kind of accessibility that we've always, we've chased and we've tried to bake in, more and more increasingly. Collaboration and cooperation have always been really important to us. We don't believe in gatekeeping for the industry and we believe in sharing resources, and sharing advice and expertise. And, so, I think that increasingly, there's a there's a strong network, and it's a network based on that kind of collegial atmosphere. And I hope we've been able to contribute to that and we certainly have seen there's other people who have really responded to the fact that we put a lot of import on that. So, I think that's the kind of thing that is portable. And we would like to stretch across the UK...and beyond!

Pauline McLean: And also, I guess, if you're in Bristol, you're just that little bit closer to Nicolas Cage, if he happens to pop in to his house in Bath.

Sean Welsh: If we happen to pop down and wait outside his house?

[Laughter]

Nicolas Cage: No, not the bees!

Pauline McLean: One last question for you, which is, you, know... And I ask this of so many people who work in the world of film or cinema, do you still get a joy out of going to the cinema? Can you still switch off and relax and go see a film just for the joy of it?

Megan Mitchell: Oh, absolutely. When we moved to Bristol and managed to get to the Watershed Cinema, which was the first time that I had been to the cinema since February, and the longest time that I hadn't been inside a cinema for maybe 15 years, It just was joyful. It just felt like you were coming home. And I think that we still retain that passion for cinema in the purest sense, that we understand how transformative and how impactful films and cinema can be for people, because we still feel that. Yeah, I can only agree with that. It makes such a huge difference to have a venue that you can trust to make it safe and make you feel welcome and make you feel looked after. If nothing else, you know, people can get an idea of what a cinema really is. Because it's not just putting films on. You could put films online and people can see the films - the same amount of people could see the films you screen, but from your website. And that's not the cinematic experience. That's not what a cinema is, and I think, if nothing else, again, the pandemic has pulled that into focus.

Presenter: Thanks for listening and don't forget to tune in to the programme live, at 8:00 every Saturday and Sunday morning.