

## SILVER SCREEN DREAM TEAM

With a string of international hits over three decades, including *Four Weddings*, *Notting Hill* and *Elizabeth*, the British production company Working Title has restored the fortunes of the nation's film industry. HANNAH ROTHSCHILD discovers the key to its success: the inspiring vision of Tim Bevan and Eric Fellner

PHOTOGRAPH BY HENRY BOURNE

CARRY ON SCREENING  
The Working Title team  
at the film-production  
company's London offices,  
with (front row, from  
left) chief operating officer  
Angela Morrison, producers  
Tim Bevan and Eric Fellner  
and head of development  
Amelia Granger

Almost 20 years ago, the actor Hugh Grant asked a group of friends, including myself, to a screening of his new film. It was, he apologised in advance, 'frightfully embarrassing'. Having sat through Hugh as Chopin, as Lord Byron and as a bewigged highwayman, we were inclined to believe him. Outside the cinema, the film's co-executive producers, Tim Bevan and Eric Fellner, stood like anxious parents waiting to deliver their child. Hugh, if I remember correctly, stayed in the pub. 'We had no expectations at all,' Fellner admitted later. What followed was a glorious example of why film has remained such a potent source of entertainment for over a century. Made for less than \$5 million, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* has continued to surprise, touch and tickle audiences around the world, taking over \$245 million at the box office and making Hugh Grant a star.

Since then, Bevan and Fellner have established one of the most successful partnerships in film-making history and their company, Working Title, has grossed over \$10 billion in total film revenue and notched up 123 Baftas, 52 Golden Globes and 53 Oscar nominations. This January, the 21st anniversary of Bevan and Fellner's partnership, they have become the first British producers to be awarded the prestigious David O Selznick Achievement Award, and their new musical *Les Misérables* is strongly tipped to win Best Picture and a slew of other Academy Awards in February.

To date, they have made close to 100 films together, ranging from archetypal home-grown comedies including *Four Weddings, Notting Hill, Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Bean* to low-budget unexpected hits such as *Billy Elliot* and *Shaun of the Dead*, and edgier critical successes like *Elizabeth*, *Fargo*, *The Interpreter* and *Dead Man Walking*. In addition to its big-screen success, Working Title has produced a stage version of *Billy Elliot*, which has been seen by more than eight million people, and the company's documentary feature *Senna* is the fourth most successful documentary at the box office. 'In the UK they are the gold standard, without rivals,' says Peter Morgan, a long-term collaborator and the writer of *Frost/Nixon* and the forthcoming *Rush*. Emma Thompson, who has acted, directed and produced for the company, goes further: 'They are the British film industry.'

Since the first motion picture was shown commercially in New York on 14 April 1894 at an Edison peep-show parlour, British companies have struggled to survive in an American-dominated market. Over the decades, governments have tried implementing an assortment of quotas and subsidies but, although our technicians and talents have achieved individual success, few British companies have survived for long in the shark-infested international waters of the film business. This country has consistently produced great actors, but there is an inherent weakness in our core strength; the much sought-after British qualities of idiosyncrasy, eccentricity and originality can neither endure nor be replicated. There could only

ever be one Charlie Chaplin, Alfred Hitchcock or David Lean. There have been lucrative, quintessentially British franchises like the *Carry On...* or *Harry Potter* films, but only Bond has endured. Before Working Title, the great British success story, Ealing Studios, had its heyday in the 1930s and 1940s. 'In the past, the moment anyone British did well, they shot off to America,' Fellner explains.

For many years, the bedrock of Working Title's success was based on a deal with Universal and Studio Canal that guaranteed financing and distribution up to certain levels, leaving Bevan and Fellner free to concentrate on creating films. Their competitors, in contrast, had to raise investment for each new project. 'We got lucky,' admits Bevan, adding that the studio deal and 'us doing well in the Nineties coincided with a new generation of great creative talent'. He compares Working Title's arrangement with the American studios to the British motorcar industry. 'Bentley is owned by Volkswagen, while Rolls-Royce is a subsidiary of BMW.' Working Title's average annual sales revenues are on a par with Manchester United and Ferrari; culturally and financially, Working Title's product is an important British export.

Most of the company's films are created in-house. It has an average of 50 screenplays in development and four or five movies in production at any one time. This year, it is making eight films. 'When Richard Curtis, Edgar Wright and Joe Wright say they want to make a movie, you don't exactly say no,' Bevan says. These directors are part of a group of (mostly) men who have grown up with Tim and Eric. The first generation of collaborators includes Curtis, Grant, Colin Firth, Thompson and the Coen brothers. The 'old timers' have been followed by a younger generation: this year two screenwriters, Hossein Amini and Dan Mazer, have been given their first directing break.

'There is an unrivalled buoyancy and energy to the way Working Title approaches the development and production of films,' says Cate Blanchett. 'They just seem to innately know which coin to flip.' Rowan Atkinson, who has made several films with Working Title, reflects: 'They have done it in a very British, familial way, working with the same people time and time again.' He concedes that 'some are critical of this, saying that they take the easy route', but Atkinson, who could work anywhere, chooses to remain with Working Title. 'They have a particular British sentiment combined with unbelievable Hollywood budgets. Best of all, I retain control of my work and they help insulate me from the outside world.' Curtis, who has directed three films for Working Title, including the forthcoming *About Time*, calls Bevan and Fellner 'my two wives' whose strengths include treating 'those two imposters, triumph and disaster, just the same'.

If the directors, writers and actors are part of an extended family, the core of Working Title's success is its home team. Angela Morrison, the chief operating officer, has been there for 20 years; Liza Chasin, who runs the LA office, for 21; Amelia Granger, head of development, for 19; and the office manager Nicky Garrett for 16.

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'There is no other company in Hollywood that has such a low turnover in staff,' Bevan says proudly. The company's offices are in a chic townhouse in Marylebone; everyone is on first-name terms. On a given afternoon, you can catch the director Stephen Daldry having a cigarette on the terrace, or another director, Nick Love, challenging a runner to a ping-pong match in the canteen.

So what of Bevan and Fellner, and the dynamic that has made their partnership so successful? 'We are functionally dysfunctional,' Bevan suggests. 'No, we are dysfunctionally functional,' Fellner counters; then they both laugh. One observation is that both men lead separate, independent lives, in and outside the office. They have a distinct group of friends and strong families; Bevan has an older daughter with his ex-wife, and a young family with the artist Amy Gadney; Fellner has three sons by a previous marriage and two small children with the model/writer Laura Bailey. At work they share credits, but not productions. Peter Morgan, who has known both men for nearly 30 years, describes the pair as 'decisive, muscular, confident, unflappable, wise, weary, attractive and equally good over lunch. At heart Tim is more Ryanair, Eric more Learjet; Tim brusque, Eric silky smooth. Tim is at home on a camping site, Eric only at the Colombe d'Or.'

Bevan, 55, a genuine movie aficionado and still better looking than most of his leading men, is the more inscrutable. 'He's very self-contained,' Atkinson says. 'After 10 minutes he wants the meeting to end, drums his fingers and gets the "wibblers" on.' Fellner, 53, is utterly charming and an ace deal-maker, although also known for a slight tendency towards gloom. Morgan recalls when *Frost/Nixon* was nominated for five or six Academy Awards and Eric still looked depressed. Blanchett remembers meeting 'Tim at a rather nerve-racking screen test for *Elizabeth* - his God-like appearance did nothing to quell my nerves. I met Eric in Mayfair, when he tapped me on the shoulder at Cipriani and said, with the suaveness of a race-car driver, "I'm Eric, I believe we are making movies together."' Thompson says of the partners: 'I have a great affection for them, despite their deep emotional eccentricity.' Asked to elaborate, she roars with laughter: 'They are British men! You don't have to explain what that means.'

Bevan and Fellner started their careers as runners for pop-video

productions. Before meeting, they had achieved critical success, Bevan with *My Beautiful Laundrette* and Fellner with *Sid and Nancy*, two era-defining films. Early lessons learned in low-budget productions are still used. 'Our cost level is much lower than in Hollywood because we come from a background of line producing,' they explain. 'We instil in our film-makers that if you keep costs down, you are more likely to have autonomy, as a film that costs less than \$25 million stays under a studio's radar.' Their first film together, *Romeo Is Bleeding*, was a critical and commercial flop. The critic Roger Ebert called the film 'an exercise in overwrought style and overwritten melodrama, and proof that a great cast cannot save a film from self-destruction'. Both men acknowledge that failure is part of the learning curve: 'We have exposed ourselves on a couple of occasions,' Bevan concedes. 'You have to take those mistakes on board.'

In an industry with a higher-than-usual quotient of nutters and narcissists, Bevan and Fellner seem remarkably sane. 'One of the reasons they are so successful,' Thompson says, 'is that they will fight back, and they are always honest.' Curtis remembers an occasion when Working Title was receiving a special award from Bafta. 'Before handing over the award, the presenter showed a fast-cut compilation of Tim and Eric's work, with quite a lot of films I'd worked on represented. Tim leaned over to me and whispered, "Thank God for *Elizabeth* - apart from that, it's all just middle-of-the-road shit." I felt slightly hurt, as he was referring to my life's work.'

As *Les Misérables* makes its voyage from screenplay to awards ceremonies, Bevan and Fellner admit to being 'absolutely terrified', feeling as if they are 'on the edge of a precipice'. Surely their years of experience allow a modicum of confidence, a degree of foresight? 'We're proud of it, and it has turned out better than we ever hoped,' Bevan says. Fellner adds: 'It's different and it's good, which are big positives.' The film is, incidentally, absolutely extraordinary: beautifully performed; a brave and moving musical melodrama.

*Les Misérables* is a high point of Working Title's achievements and takes its place alongside classic films and magnificent entertainment. Behind the scenes, the company has provided a secure platform for talent outside the Hollywood system and has nurtured two generations of directors, writers and actors. It has championed Britishness in an increasingly culturally homogenised world, employing thousands of people and flying the flag for UK industry. 'We have lasted because our intent is to make quality pictures,' Bevan says. Blanchett goes further: 'They are all that is optimistic and rewarding about film-making. They are why so many persevere.' □



THE HIT FACTORY  
Working Title films, from top:  
Emma Thompson in 'Love  
Actually' (2003). 'Four  
Weddings and Funeral' (1994).  
Cate Blanchett in 'Elizabeth'  
(1998). Keira Knightley in  
'Anna Karenina' (2012)



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