

Film

## Bafta boss Amanda Berry: lights, camera, friction

Industry turmoil and a row over Netflix have put Bafta — and its chief executive — in the spotlight



Danny Leigh SEPTEMBER 23 2019

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Amanda Berry, chief executive of Bafta, has a model of Buzz Lightyear in the window of her office off London's Haymarket. Before infinity, there are the builders. Around the corner from the administrative hub she uses as her base, work has begun on the renovation of 195 Piccadilly,

the flagship venue the British Academy of Film and Television Arts has occupied since the 1970s — a grand meeting and event space for its members, the massed actors, directors, craftspeople and technicians.

Like most London building projects, there were snags. Plans to develop the basement were thwarted by Jamie Oliver's neighbouring steak restaurant Barbecoa, since entered into administration. Instead, Bafta is going up, raising the roof to create a wholly new floor. Eventual benefits will include a doubled capacity and a dedicated space for breakthrough talent. Berry receives frequent photographic updates. "Frankly," she says, "it's terrifying."

The building is due to reopen in 2021. The project has required consideration of a longer timeline. If the new building — costed at £25m — was to be fit for purpose, what was that purpose going to be in decades ahead? Berry, originally from North Yorkshire, arrived at Bafta in 1998 as a talent agent. "I thought I'd do three years, sort out the awards, and that would be that." She now sits behind a stack of papers at least two inches high. "I started making notes for this and couldn't stop."

Mostly, these detail the breadth of activity Bafta is currently involved in, reeled off by Berry without recourse to her paperwork, the multi-function as annual awards show and year-round provider of education and support for the British creative industries. They also unavoidably touch on the rolling crisis in those same industries. In 2019, film and TV are in flux, dogged by awkward questions — about streaming and the economic future, about which backgrounds allow access to the business, and the behaviour of those at the top.

One storm broke in February, after four of this year's Baftas, including Best Film, were given to *Roma*, director Alfonso Cuarón's portrait of 1970s Mexico City, funded and released by Netflix. Immediately afterwards, Tim Richards, chief executive of UK cinema chain Vue, published a furious open letter attacking Bafta for rewarding a film he derided as "made for TV" and whose British cinema release — a precondition of Bafta qualification — was, he argued, so token as to be insulting. (Vue, like most UK exhibitors, had been unable to screen the film.) "How could Bafta let this happen?" he demanded, threatening to withdraw his company's support for the awards. Other exhibitors soon made similar noises.

Berry admits to surprise. "We didn't see it coming. In the run-up to the awards, all the complaints we were getting were from the other end of the argument, smaller films telling us the rules were too strict and they couldn't get on enough screens to qualify." And so Bafta found itself at the epicentre of the clash of agendas and business models that defines the modern film industry. Brexit is only a little more fractious.



Alfonso Cuarón's 'Roma' was the source of controversy over eligibility for Bafta awards © Carlos Somonte

After months of intense consultation, Bafta's rules of qualification will now remain unchanged, but with a public recommitment of the need for awards contenders to be released in cinemas with, where required, box office figures made available to ensure transparency. (Netflix, famously, rarely discusses numbers.) Smaller British films will be given online support to reach voters. For now, Netflix — about to release another slate of awards contenders including Martin Scorsese's *The Irishman* — remains in play, while Richards has confirmed that Vue will support the Baftas in 2020. Berry is aware that the wider problem is not going away. "It's an issue for everyone and not without emotion. The stakes are very high."

But the dilemmas keep coming. This month, a mixed blessing for the British screen industry arrived with Disney's deal to lease the historic Pinewood Studios until 2029, with Netflix already installed in nearby Shepperton. "Much of our membership work in craft and technical roles," Berry says, "so having so much high-end production happening in the UK is an amazing thing." There is a significant *but*. "We also have members who say they now won't be able to afford studio space for their own films." The solution, if there is one, falls outside the reach of Bafta, although Berry points to the measures she is taking to promote a role for British film-making beyond staffing American productions. Ringfenced British categories remain part of the film awards. Potentially more significant, a new category of membership is being introduced for early-career film-makers, allowing them to tap into Bafta's internal networks.



Amanda Berry, left, with actor Tom Hiddleston and investor and philanthropist Wendy Yu

Its role as a membership organisation with strict rules of conduct was, Berry says, key during a still graver moment. In 2017, when women began coming forward with their experiences of Harvey Weinstein, Bafta suspended his membership ahead of expulsion while much of the industry appeared paralysed. “We have these incredibly robust membership criteria, so even when someone has been a philanthropic donor, we are able to act very quickly.”

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In an industry obliged to examine its own conscience and where different sectors are at each other’s throats, Bafta now finds itself seen as referee and role model, a remit beyond the glitz of award ceremonies. “I take it as a positive. If we’re in the middle of these conversations, it’s a sign that, actually, we’re relevant.” Berry’s response has been a tweaking of mission. “At this point, it would be shocking if we weren’t doing whatever we could to

support new talent. We know talent is everywhere but opportunities are not.”

This has translated into a series of scholarships and training programmes aimed at talent from under-represented backgrounds. Berry speaks of Bafta as a force for “social change”, while aware of the risk of its apparent double life: a transformative agency with an official champagne partner (Taittinger). “People think of us as posh frocks and red carpets rather than as an educational charity, but in fact they’re both true. Our partners allow us to do the work we do when the cameras aren’t rolling.”

She admits to collegiate sympathy at the recent criticism faced by the Oscars, while aware it has allowed Bafta comparative breathing space. If the job of Oscars host has become such a

poisoned chalice it now appears actively unwanted, Berry was able to recruit Joanna Lumley to replace retiring awards host Stephen Fry last year with relative ease.

Yet for all the chaos of the wider industry, it is still awards night she finds most unnerving. “We’re incredibly good at what we do but like any show, there is always that moment when it just disappears out of your control.” Before another text from the builders, she gives a chipper smile. “But it’s always good to be nervous isn’t it? It stops you getting complacent.”

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