

## **SIR SYDNEY SAMUELSON CBE**

### **Cameraman, founder of world leading Samuelson Group and pioneer in the British film and television industry**

The life and career of Sir Sydney Samuelson CBE is a history of the British film industry in microcosm. At the centre of the industry for more than 50 years he was instrumental in making the UK a worldwide leader in film and television production, rivalling Hollywood.

Having left school at 14 to work as the “rewind boy” in a cinema projection booth, he was later a cinematographer and founder of the Samuelson Group, which he built with his three brothers into the largest film equipment servicing company in the world. He was appointed the Government’s first British Film Commissioner and served as leader of BAFTA and many other industry organisations and charities.

In 1985, he received BAFTA’s Michael Balcon Award for Outstanding British Contribution to Film, in 1993, a BAFTA Fellowship for his contribution to the film and television industry, and in 1997 a British Film Institute Fellowship, amongst many other industry awards of merit. In 1978, Sir Sydney’s work in film was acknowledged with a CBE, followed by a Knighthood in 1995.

But these honours will not be what he is remembered for by hundreds of people working in the industry who were given their start, mentored, inspired and encouraged by Sir Sydney. Despite business success, he remained firmly connected to his humble roots, indeed he was often surprised by the recognition he received. His constant refrain was “How lucky can you be”? At heart he was always a film technician and a proud lifelong member of BECTU, the technicians’ union. He remained curious about the people he met to the very end, whether those he sat next to on the bus or a server in a restaurant. He regularly spotted outstanding individuals and then sought to elevate their careers. Once he built it, he believed the purpose of his prodigious network was to use it to help others who, like himself when he began, had little or none of their own. All of this was accomplished with constant good humour and in the very close company of his large, loving family and many friends.

A quiet but determined man whose word was his bond in every facet of his life and career, Sir Sydney was renowned for his professionalism, efficiency and flexibility. He would never turn down a request for involvement or help, indeed he was determined to give more back to the industry than he ever took out. He gave his time to organisations including the BFI, the British Society of Cinematographers, the BKSTS (now IMIS), The Producers’ Association (PACT) and the Guild of British Camera Technicians; and to charities including Medicinema, the Young Person’s Concert Foundation, the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women, UK Friends of Akim, the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign, First Star Scholars UK and the Plaza Community Cinema in Crosby. He completed the London Marathon in 1982 to support the Cinema and Television Benevolent Fund and Akim. Alongside his leadership roles he devised and hosted film quizzes for many of these causes.

Sydney came from a UK film industry family. His father, George 'Bertie' Samuelson was a pioneer producer of silent films, making more than 100 movies from 1910 onwards; his mother Marjorie (née Vint) ran a draper’s shop in Shoreham-by-Sea, Sussex. He was one of four brothers; David and Michael, who were distinguished cinematographers in their own right and Tony, who was a lawyer. While Bertie had been an important producer in his heyday, he suffered badly from the vicissitudes of the film industry and in latter life could only find menial work and had long periods of unemployment.

Sydney entered the business in 1939 aged 14 in the projection box of the Luxor Cinema in Lancing, West Sussex, going on to work as a relief operator in several cinemas in the Midlands for ABC cinemas. He then trained as a Film Editor with Gaumont British Newsreel in London.

In 1943, he signed up to be a flight navigator for the RAF, and when de-mobbed in 1947 he joined the Film Unit of the British Colonial Office as a trainee cameraman. He met his wife at a film club screening of *Pride and Prejudice* in 1946; the projector broke down and he fixed it on the spot, impressing Doris. They married three years later, and mere weeks after that he spent six months living in a tent in Nigeria to photograph the disastrous colonial Groundnut Scheme. They were married for 72 years, until Lady Samuelson's death in April 2022.

Sydney worked on many shows for the BBC and the independent television companies and, as a part of a camera team recording the Coronation in Westminster Abbey in 1953, he was responsible for the famous shot of The Queen being crowned, repairing the broken spring in his camera just in time.

In 1954 Sydney purchased a clockwork Newman Sinclair film camera, and thus began to explore the possibilities of renting out equipment to other professionals. Originally operated from their home, he and his wife Doris formed Samuelson Film Service, later joined by his brothers. "Sammies" as it became known, made available the highest quality equipment with 24hr complete service across camera, lighting, grip, sound, crew and transportation. The availability of this facility enabled international films of any scale to shoot worldwide for the first time and galvanised the UK production industry. It allowed the fledgling ITV network to produce efficiently and supported the boom in commercials created by the advent of ITV.

The company established branches around the world, with offices in Australia, Holland, France, South Africa and the United States. The company established a prolific reputation, working on all of David Lean's films including *Doctor Zhivago*, 13 James Bond movies, Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (where he refused to pull the equipment when the production lost its financing), Richard Donner's *Superman*, Fred Zinnemann's *A Man for All Seasons*, Norman Jewison's *Fiddler on the Roof*, Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Milos Forman's *Amadeus* amongst many other films. He was instrumental in making the Panavision Group a world leading technology company.

Sydney had a long history with BAFTA, an organisation he cared about deeply. He was a driving force in the Cinema and Television Veterans, expanding the Cinema and Television Benevolent Fund (now the Film and TV Charity) and developing the annual Royal Film Performance. As Chairman, Vice-chair of Film and a founder Trustee for BAFTA he took a fundraising leadership role establishing the Academy's iconic (and recently refurbished) headquarters on London's Piccadilly and the installation of the Princess Anne and Run Run Shaw auditoria in 1976. His efforts are credited with saving BAFTA from financial ruin during the redevelopment. He produced the highly successful *Filmharmonic* concerts at the Royal Albert Hall raising funds for the CTBF.

Following Downing Street talks with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Lord Richard Attenborough, Sir Sydney was appointed the first British Film Commissioner in 1991. In this new role Sir Sydney campaigned to promote the UK as the leading destination for international film production and as a provider of world-class crews and facilities.

Sir Sydney encouraged the Government to introduce a tax incentive for international productions that based themselves out of the UK using UK crews, talent and production services, and the set-up of a network of film commissions across the UK. As a result of what was a long-term strategy to position the UK as the leading centre for international film production outside of Los Angeles, he

established the foundation for the UK's phenomenal film and high-end television production boom, now worth over £5.6 billion a year.

At a special tribute to Sydney in 2011, the late Lord Richard Attenborough said of Sydney, "For me, you represent all that is best about the wonderful industry to which we have both devoted our adult lives."

Lord David Puttnam said: " Sir Sydney's contribution to our industry has been as long as it's been remarkable."

Lord Michael Grade has said, "Throughout his lifetime of achievements in the film and television industries, he has been a beacon of probity, generosity and common sense."

Retirement came officially in 1997 for Sir Sydney, but as his late wife Lady Doris Samuelson said afterwards, Sydney would be the first to admit that he never really retired.

Sir Sydney Samuelson CBE was born on 7 December 1925 and passed away from old age on 14 December 2022, surrounded by his loving family.

He is survived by his sons Peter, Jonathan and Marc and their families including eight grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

For further enquiries:

**Tina McFarling**  
**[tina.mcfarling@bfi.org.uk](mailto:tina.mcfarling@bfi.org.uk)**  
**07879 421 578**