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## Lights out, curtain up as Open Film Club caters for a homeless audience



Christoph Warrack had the idea for the Open Film Club while helping at a soup kitchen

### Fay Schopen

The world premiere of Rupert Graves's latest film did not take place in Los Angeles or Leicester Square. There was no red carpet for the actor, who sported a fuzzy grey jumper rather than a tuxedo.

Instead, on a rainy night, Mr Graves stepped into The Connection, an organisation near London's Trafalgar Square that offers a range of services to homeless people. He was there to introduce *Jeremy Wolf*, a short film that he has directed inspired by a "strange bloke" he used to see in his local park.

When it was over — and before a screening of the science fiction thriller *V for Vendetta* in which Mr Graves also appears — the audience offered up comments. One said: "It was about a guy trying to figure himself out — like a lot of homeless people [who] have very quiet lives. It's lonely — very, very lonely."

The event was organised by the Open Film Club (OFC), a social enterprise that screens films to homeless and socially excluded people and teaches film-making skills. It was founded by Christoph Warrack, a 35-year-old film-maker who, while volunteering at a Soho church soup kitchen in 2005, was asked by users for some entertainment. Mr Warrack jumped at the chance to show films and bring film-makers in to talk about them.

Inspired by arts groups working with homeless people, including the theatre company Cardboard Citizens and Streetwise Opera, the initiative grew.

The OFC runs in six London venues, and one in Bradford. Between May and October, clubs will open in cities including Bristol and Newcastle-upon-Tyne as part of a six-month pilot, which will see nine more clubs open in England along with a change of name for the network to Open Cinema in a move to reposition the art form as a “more audience-led, participatory, community function,” Mr Warrack said.

He is well-connected to some high-profile film-makers, including Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, who regularly appear. “This week I sat down at a table next to Bill Nighy and said, ‘I’m running a film club for homeless people — would you come in?’ and he said, ‘Sure’. Everyone I meet and tell about it says yes,” he said.

In addition to its star factor, each club presents a carefully curated programme every season, with themes chosen in collaboration with users.

Mr Warrack said: “People come to the film club who don’t enter a building for the rest of the week, and that’s really significant. But once they’re through the door the next step is to hand [decision-making power] to them. What films do you want to see? Would you like to make your own film?”

He cites research by Broadway, a homelessness organisation in Hammersmith, and Westminster Primary Care Trust, that looked into benefits of social and cultural activities for homeless and socially excluded people. “They found there are numerous mental health benefits from getting involved in cultural activities,” Mr Warrack said. These included improved literacy and increased self-confidence.

“Putting people in an atmosphere where they are together in a group but aren’t intensely focused on either themselves or each other, but a film, greatly enhances their ability to be in a group,” Mr Warrack said. “When we have a Q&A with a film-maker, people feel incredibly comfortable asking questions and that is a great boost for their self-confidence.”

In Hammersmith this spring, a mainly Eastern European clientele will watch a season of crime films, concluded by an event attended by a detective superintendent from the Met. “That’s an opportunity for people traditionally very threatened and excluded from constructive interaction with the police to directly pose questions that matter to them,” Mr Warrack said.

The OFC is also seeking to help its users in practical ways. Through its partners, including the NHS, the Salvation Army and Crisis, it helps users to gain access to services and information.

The pilot will be evaluated, but Mr Warrack admits that mental health benefits are difficult to quantify. And because the OFC seeks to reach out to the most

disenfranchised, it has shied away from collecting hard data, although feedback is gathered from users on a quarterly basis.

Mr Warrack says that several long-term regulars have found housing and work, “not necessarily through us, but we have certainly been a support to those people”. Users agree. Many cite the enjoyment of watching films on a big screen and a sense of belonging.

Back at The Connection, Mr Graves conceded that he was “nervous” about showing his short film, but said he was an ardent supporter of the scheme: “Film is quite a bourgeois pursuit, but here you have people talking about things that are ... personal. You have to accept very genuine reactions from people who lead really hard lives.”