



Still making THE CUT

Twickenham Studios has been making movies for a century. But last year the cameras nearly stopped for good. Rob Edwards meets the woman whose determined campaign has given the studio a new lease of life

The receptionist laughs as I swap seats, dodging the shower of dust and masonry that follows a succession of loud bangs. Refurbishment of the admin block at Twickenham Studios is under way and I have no wish to be killed off in the first scene.

I am, in fact, waiting for a tour of the venerable old studios in St Margaret's, where so many of my favourite cult classics and big budget blockbusters were made. The place has endured a turbulent life since it first opened here, on the site of an ice rink, exactly 100 years ago. Gutted by fire, bombed by the Luftwaffe and tossed by the waves of financial misfortune, it has done well to make the centennial cut.

"I'd rather concentrate on the future than dwell on the past," says Maria Walker, the new Chief Operations Officer, above the din. "The studios have a rich history, but we hope they'll have a rich future too."

Maria, who boasts 30 years of post-production experience, took on her latest role after leading a decisive campaign to save Twickenham Studios when it was placed into administration last year.

"Neglect. Complete neglect," is her bitter summation of the years before property magnate Sunny Vohra rescued the premises. "Absent owners, out-of-date work practices, no active sales and marketing: all of that was a problem. But a lot of the trouble I'd put down to poor management."

Maria takes her time in choosing her words, but when they come, they are laden with a gravity that betrays a huge depth of passion.

"I have an affinity with this studio," she reveals. "I had an office here for seven years as a tenant. A lot of the people are personal friends. It was sad watching the place decline."

The name Twickenham Film Studios was first registered in 1928 by German-born producer Julius Hagen, after the founder, The London Film Company, and its successor suffered crippling losses in spite of regular box office success.

As technology advanced, Hagen brought the 'talkie' to Twickenham, investing in equipment and building a brand new studio. But in 1935 the original studio burned to the ground, and two years later the company was bust. Hagen died in 1940, a ruined man.

Despite the setback, the studios kept going through the war, with superb work from the likes of Noel Coward and David Lean, before emerging into 60s sunlight with such cult classics as Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* and the Beatles movies *Help!* and *A Hard Day's Night*.

"It very much came into its own in the 60s," says Maria. "We did some seriously iconic movies. Things like *Alfie*, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *The Italian Job*. There was a real cool factor and that's what we'd like to bring back."

In the sound resources studio, staff gleefully demonstrate how subtle film-world effects, like the realistic sound of footsteps on gravel and sand, are overlaid during post-production. A collection of doors and windows leading nowhere, along with an Aladdin's cave of everyday objects, adorns the room where countless Hollywood stars have dubbed or enhanced their performance. Soon a troupe of actors will be descending upon the studio to create 'zombie noises' for Brad Pitt's latest blockbuster, *World War Z*, now in its final stages of production. The staff here are clearly in their element.

"Twickenham has a nice ambience because it's not huge and anonymous like Pinewood," says Maria. "There is an intimacy about it. You do get to know people."

"When I first worked here, this was the place to be. Movies like *Ghandi* and *American Werewolf in London* had just been made here. It was the centre of excellence for post-production. So when the studio first closed last year, I suppose I had all that in my mind and wanted to get back to it."

"There were rumours about the place being sold, and there were certainly attempts to buy it that didn't come off. Then it went into administration, which made me really angry, because it was just being written off. So I decided to start a campaign."

Signatories flocked to Maria's online petition. Twickenham MP Vince Cable, as well as the then Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt, were besieged with letters of protest.

"A lot of people thought it was a shame, but they were talking about it as though it was a fait accompli. But I thought that there had to be something we could do."

"As a local resident, I found the idea of the studio being flattened and replaced by a housing development horrific. It's densely populated here, so amenities are stretched as it is. In any case, this is a bloody good studio and I knew that, with investment and the right management, it could still work."

"What this shows is that, if you really care about something, you can win"

Big showbiz names weighed in: John Landis, Sir Paul McCartney, Michael Palin.

"The momentum grew, as more and more people got on board. We spoke to the prospective developers, and I think they realised that, politically, it wasn't a good move. The land is worth a lot more as a property development than a film studio, so the moment they pulled out, the price came down. That's how Sunny was able to step in and buy the studio."

With no background in the film industry, however, is the Sarova Hotels owner really the right man to reverse its fortunes?

"Sunny is the right man for the job," insists Maria. "He's a successful businessman and there are lots of parallels between a hotel and a film studio."

"First and foremost, both must have good service – and that's a concept that Sunny completely understands. He knows that you need the right equipment, that you can't cut corners, because paying clients will notice."

And it was Maria that Sunny placed at the helm of his new acquisition, into

which he has so far invested £1m in refurbishment, new state-of-the-art equipment and doubling the number of staff.

"I was so passionate about saving this place," reflects Maria. "I think what it shows is that, if you really care about something, you can win. Other than the odd student demonstration 30 years ago, I'd never done anything like this. I just really cared about it."

"You've walked round the site and you can see it's been neglected. But now we're investing. This building is full – it certainly wasn't full before."

As for this year's centenary, the studio has an exhibition planned for Richmond's Riverside Gallery in August. Public tours, however, may be fewer and further between.

"What you have to remember is that a film studio is a place of work," cautions Maria. "There are A list Hollywood stars in and around the place, so you can't have people just wandering round. You wouldn't have that at your office. It's just not how things function."

"Even so, we're endeavouring to work more with the community and we intend to offer services. We're in the process of restoring our preview theatre, which we will open to private views of films."

"We've got plans for a private members' club for local people who work in the arts. They'll have a place where they can hot-desk and have meetings."

The British movie industry may have changed beyond all recognition since 1913, when the cameras first rolled in TW1, but there's little doubt that Twickenham will remain a force in film for many a long year to come.
n twickenhamstudios.com



Facing: The Beatles at Twickenham while filming *A Hard Day's Night*. Behind them (l to r): Pattie Boyd (later married to George, and then Eric Clapton), Tina Williams, Pru Berry, Susan Whitman. Image courtesy Barratts/EMPICS/Press Association. Above: *Black Coffee*, an Agatha Christie murder mystery filmed at Twickenham in 1931. Image courtesy Associated Newspapers/Rex Features