

The Rise of The Actor-Led Production Company

SunnyMarch. 22Summers. South Of The River. One Trick Poné. Juggle. Left-Handed. This collection of words and phrases are in fact the names of film and TV production companies founded by British actors - Benedict Cumberbatch, Idris Elba, Olivia Colman, Martin Freeman, Kate Winslet, and Riz Ahmed, respectively. It's companies like these, founded by the UK's leading acting talent, that could help independent filmmaking find its footing again in the UK film & TV industry.

These companies are, of course, just a few examples and whilst some have been around considerably longer than others (Andy Serkis' Imaginarium Productions was founded in 2009), these production vehicles are now enjoying growing legitimacy within the industry.

We Live In Time counted Cumberbatch's SunnyMarch amongst its production companies. James Norton's Rabbit Track Pictures is co-producing *Foxfinder*, a film receiving Film4 and British Film Institute (BFI) financing. The upcoming film stars Owen Cooper, an actor whose breakout show, *Adolescence*, was co-produced by Stephen Graham's Matriarch Productions. The recent *Hamlet* modernisation starring Riz Ahmed involved his company, Left-Handed Films.

The growing attention the industry is paying to actor-led production companies is a welcome sign for independent filmmaking. Financiers are more likely to invest in commercially risky stories or projects by emerging talent when these projects have the support of big-name-backed production companies.

For example, in 2025, Lumina Media, an entertainment investment company purchased a significant share of Cumberbatch's SunnyMarch. Together, they will produce *The Annency Murders*, a thriller series based on the 2012 killings in Chevaline.

Steve, starring Cillian Murphy and produced by his company, Big Things Films, was able to receive Netflix backing. A claustrophobic, moving drama about a teacher (Murphy) in a young men's reform school, it is not the kind of film that typically perks the streamer up. However, with a bankable and recognised actor attached, the situation changes.

Nonetheless, actor-led companies aside, independent filmmaking has had something of a resurgence. Viewers are growing tired of big-budget remakes and pre-existing intellectual property. *Supergirl*, the live-action *Moana*, and *Star Wars: The Mandalorian and Grogu* have all recently struggled to make a profit.

In their place viewers are drawn to independent films like *Obsession*, currently the industry's darling. Made by 26-year-old youtuber, Curry Barker, the film had a budget of \$750,000 and no seriously recognisable leads. Its box office sales are reaching close to \$490 million, making it one of the most profitable films in history. Relative to budget, it is a far more profitable film than Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey*.

Compared to traditional production outfits, actor-led companies are more easily able to build a rapport with mainstream studios and distributors. Working sometimes on bigger, better-financed projects can give them the flexibility and capacity to also work with smaller, independent voices. Next year, Serkis' Imaginarium Productions are releasing the Warner Bros-financed *The Lord of the Ring: The Hunt for Gollum*. At the same time, they are developing a feature film with young playwright, Laith Elzubaidi, whose 2025 play at the Bush Theatre, *Insane Asylum Seekers*, received critical praise.

In April of this year, Cumberbatch's SunnyMarch teamed up with larger production company, A24, to successfully pitch for the TV rights to Nick Brucker's upcoming heist novel, *White Smoke*, set during a papal conclave. With Cumberbatch attached also to star, they won out against other bids from names including Ben Affleck and Daniel Kaluuya.

Of course, when a company's unique selling point is the actor running it, projects risk becoming creatively dominated by the star. Freeman's One Trick Poné will see Freeman leading in their first feature film project, *The Greatest*. Serkis is directing the *Gollum* film. Under her Juggle Productions' flag, Winslet was set to star in the Hulu series, *The Spot* (before creative differences meant she departed from the project in 2025, according to Deadline).

If these companies exist as star vehicles to drive only their own projects then their benefit to wider filmmaking is limited. However, the current creative output suggests this is not the case. Steve Coogan's Baby Cow Productions produced the critically-acclaimed 2025 film, *The Ballad of Wallis Island* starring Tim Key, Tom Basden, and Carey Mulligan. Elba's 22Summers released the documentary series, *Erased: WWII Heroes of Colour* in June 2024. Freeman co-founded One Trick Poné last year with relative industry newcomer, writer/actress Rachel Benaissa. No doubt some of the appeal of an actor-led production company is their creative involvement in projects, but this does not seem to be swallowing creativity.

What's more, almost all of these companies in fact have co-founders. Adding in development and production teams, these companies are the work of many experienced individuals - not simply a lone wolf actor.

Fresh, original narratives backed by reliable talent or their company is a recipe for a more lucrative UK filmmaking industry. Baby Cow's *The Ballad of Wallis Island* made \$6.2 million on a \$1.5 million budget. SunnyMarch's *We Live In Time* made \$58.7 million on an approximately \$20 million budget. Big Thing's 2024 *Small Things Like These* made \$15.2 million on a \$3 million budget.

The rise in popularity of actor-driven production companies provides opportunities for the UK film & TV industry. Independent projects backed by recognisable names, and produced for a relatively low cost, enable artistic exploration and the potential for significant returns.