

Coping With COVID-19 Crisis: Director Terence Davies & Producer Mike Elliott On Halting Long-Gestating Movie 'Benediction' Days Before Shoot

[Andreas Wiseman](#)



Story Arc

Terence Davies on recce for *Benediction*. Nicola Daley

Editors' Note: *With full acknowledgment of the big-picture implications of a pandemic that already has claimed thousands of lives, cratered global economies and closed international borders, Deadline's **Coping With COVID-19 Crisis** series is a forum for those in the entertainment space*

grappling with myriad consequences of seeing a great industry screech to a halt. The hope is for an exchange of ideas and experiences, and suggestions on how businesses and individuals can best ride out a crisis that doesn't look like it will abate any time soon. If you have a story, email mike@deadline.com.

Acclaimed Brit filmmaker [Terence Davies](#), known for movies including *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives*, *The House of Mirth* and *The Deep Blue Sea*, was only three days from start of shoot on passion project [Benediction](#) when the film was shut down due to the [coronavirus](#). Writer-director Davies, who is 74, had been in development on the movie for five years and it has been his sole focus since the launch of 2016 Emily Dickinson biopic *A Quiet Passion*.

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BAFTA Rising Star nominee [Jack Lowden](#) (*Dunkirk*, *Fighting With My Family*) is starring in the £3 million-budgeted (\$3.7 million) drama as celebrated World War I poet and soldier Siegfried Sassoon, who was decorated for bravery on the Western Front, and is best remembered for his poems about the war that brought him public and critical acclaim. Sassoon became a focal point for dissent within the armed forces when he made a lone protest against the continuation of the conflict.

UK producer Mike Elliott of Emu Films (*Dirty God*) is producing. Financiers include BFI, BBC Films, M.Y.R.A. Entertainment and Lipsync. Bankside launched sales at the EFM. We can reveal that *Doctor Who* and *Paddington* star Peter Capaldi has also joined the cast to play Sassoon in his later years.

We spoke to Davies and Elliott – who also had a movie due to launch at SXSW and another whose release has been disrupted in the UK – about the

emotional and practical challenge of bringing an independent production of close to 70 crew to a halt just hours from the start line, and about how they hope to maintain momentum and ultimately rise from the ashes of coronavirus chaos to get their feature made.

DEADLINE: *Terence, I don't suppose you've known anything like this in your life or career...*



Terence Davies & DoP Nicola Daley Nicola Daley

TERENCE DAVIES: I've never known anything like this in my career, and neither in my life. I was born in the last year of World War II so I didn't experience that, and in the 1950s there were major flu epidemics but I was only a young boy. This is genuinely unprecedented because it's not only national, it's global. We are in uncharted waters.

It has been five years of working to get this film to the point of shooting. And then this. What has been wonderful is the amount of support from the cast, crew and financiers. It was a blow when we couldn't go ahead but when people are dying that obviously needs to come before entertainment.

Before I started researching Sassoon, I didn't know about the Craiglockhart hospital which was so important in his life, about how he got married despite being homosexual, how he became a Catholic and the extent to which he was a great socialist and knew so many of the important figures of the 20th century. I think his real love was for fellow war poet Wilfred Owen, though that was never consummated. I read three biographies of him. I truly identified with Sassoon and his poetry, so it was a real blow when we had to admit defeat. When you have spent such a long time on something and

when you only work on things that you truly care about, it was initially hard to bear. I truly hope we will make it. We view this as a pause rather than a cancellation.

DEADLINE: *When was it clear you couldn't go ahead?*

DAVIES: We were doing camera tests at Pinewood and it became clear that we couldn't continue given that things were closing down.

MIKE ELLIOTT: We halted production three working days before shoot. Start date was March 23. There was a feeling on the Friday before we made the decision that we may just be able to get the movie out but in the space of 48 hours that view changed completely and there was clearly not going to be the infrastructure or the will for us to work in this climate.

We are fortunate that our backers – BBC Films and BFI are our two main funders – are doing their bit to support the production and the freelancers who we had to give notice (two weeks). They have really stepped in on that front and they are standing by the production in terms of whenever we are able to remount it. The other financiers are the same. It has been refreshing to see.

All our locations were done and sorted. It is quite contained and we had a lot of dressed sets and period interiors. We are due to shoot in a number of private houses and National Trust properties in the West Midlands. We're in pretty good shape to get back in the swing of things. We think we could get back up and running with just over a week's prep.

DEADLINE: *Wow, that would be fast...Just to cycle back on the notice period. What provision is there for the freelancers?*

ELLIOTT: We are in the middle of working this out with BFI and BBC Films (I



think Film4 are also involved in broader discussions and they are looking to come up with a joined up approach) and we're still working out costs. I can't say exactly what we're doing just yet but there's definitely a collective will among the funders to do what they can for the freelancers and we have kept them informed. There is something in the

works.

DEADLINE: *Terence, I gather you sent a rousing message to the troops before disbanding?*

DAVIES: I wanted to thank everyone. It came from my heart. I sent a letter to them all and I wanted them to know how much I was appreciative and moved by their support. People have been so committed to the film and still are.

DEADLINE: *Are you concerned about losing cast and crew if this stretches into or beyond the summer?*

ELLIOTT: I think we are small scale enough that we could be right at the beginning of the curve. I feel like the bigger productions are the ones that might find it harder to remount. I'm quite optimistic that we'll get up to speed. The shoot is six weeks. Everyone is raring to go on it. We've embargoed the costumes, we've left our art work where it was, construction has been left in place. It will take an effort and it's very frustrating but I'm really hopeful.

Jack [Lowden] loves the project and is committed to it. We all left the camera test in the right frame of mind about coming back when we can. I

can't see many productions getting out of the blocks as quickly as us. The production base is tied over. The locations are still aboard.

DEADLINE: *How have agents been during the process so far? There's always a chance their clients may get other offers in the meantime...*

ELLIOTT: They've been extremely supportive to date. I think everyone recognizes that this is such a universal issue and that it is hitting every sector. It wasn't that long ago that it was impossible to find cast and crew here because everyone was so busy on studio and streamer projects. To have this cessation all at once, it is hitting everyone. But we're trying to keep the spirit of the production alive.

DEADLINE: *How much will the delay cost financially and who will pay for that?*

ELLIOTT: We're doing it in phases. The stand down costs, our main costs, are something in the region of £150,000-£200,000. These are in addition to the budget and they are being paid for by the BFI and BBC.

The next thing is for us to look at what the cost will be to start up again, a week and a half of prep. That's a slight unknown but we hope this will be helped by the fact we've left the production in good order and done a proper wrap. We need to talk to our financiers about this, we don't have a figure yet. All in all, we're probably looking at an additional increase of around 10% of the budget.

DEADLINE: *Coronavirus is affecting everyone, but especially senior citizens. As a young man of 74, will you be more aware of the potential dangers of going into production, Terence?*

DAVIES: I think we would all have to be aware of it given the dangers. Now

that it is here it is on everyone's mind.



ELLIOTT: We'll want to think about how we run the set and how many people we have on set. We were already thinking about different ways we were going to approach the food and catering, and how many people we have around the camera, for example.

DEADLINE: *Will your insurance premium go up now?*

ELLIOTT: We don't know. We'll have to get closer to shoot to know. I suppose there will be a collective take across that sector on what they'll insure and what they won't. Our insurance policy at the time didn't include cover against a global pandemic. Even in January no one was taking out that cover.

DEADLINE: *What's taking up your time now?*

ELLIOTT: How we work out the notice of the crew and thinking about what we can prepare even more. For example, there's a sequence that needed a lot of storyboarding which we can work on with visual effects artists and Terence. Those things can keep going. We are also still closing the finance so we can still work on that so there are no issues around cash flow when we do shoot. It's about making sure we're match fit when we come to shoot.

I've also got more time than I've had in a long time to think about projects we have in development as a company...

DEADLINE: *Being a producer strikes me as being a lot about about momentum and energy. But you've been stopped dead in your tracks...*

ELLIOTT: We've had a really busy time in production in the last couple of years. We had Alan Moore's movie *The Show* about to have its premiere at SXSW, but that obviously couldn't happen. We had movie *Sulphur And White* with Modern Films in the UK but it was released just as the the outbreak hit here. So you could say it has been a pretty disastrous couple of weeks. But you have to keep going. Producing is blind faith. You can't apply any rationale to it, it's a bizarre occupation.

DEADLINE: *What happens with Alan Moore's movie The Show?*

ELLIOTT: We have to keep talking that through with the sales agent Protagonist. Who knows. Maybe an opportunity will present itself...In all of this, we've got to work out a way to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Even if things look different today, at some point we will get back to living and working communally, so we'll deal with it.

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