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REMINISCENCES OF CHILDHOOD CINEMA GOING 1925 - 1935

Douglas Rendell

The noise from the uproar created by the kids at the matinees in the mid-20s at the original Savoy Cinema, Sale, Cheshire, still rings in my ears and I was not the first to become hooked on the cinema through the influence of those exciting Saturday afternoons. Chaplin, Lloyd and the rest became my idols and cinema going on my own or with my parents was part of the order of things for as far back as I can remember. On at least one occasion it was extended to school when a special performance for school children was given at the Savoy of a film made in Africa, "Chang" [referring to Chang: A Drama of the Wilderness (1927)]. We were warned beforehand of what our elders regarded as a particularly frightening sequence - a herd of elephants charging towards the camera.

I must have caught the cinema bug rather badly, for while my contemporaries saw themselves as future steam railway engine drivers, my ambition was to become a comic film star. One day in the garden, acting out my Chaplinesque fantasies in front of an imaginary camera, I took a backward leap with feet apart on to a garden spade which was leaning against a wall - WHACK - the handle came forward and burst open the back of my head.

Film star ambitions faded after receiving a birthday present of one of those German made tin plates 35mm projectors which transferred my interests to the mechanics of the process. The model was the cheapest of its kind, probably costing five bob (25p), but for that price a take-up and shutter were not supplied - you had to pay 7/6 (37½p) or more for such luxuries. No one seemed to mind the heap of nitrate film that the projector deposited on the carpet, but I was very disappointed at the "rainy" effect of the image on the screen. This, my father explained, could be remedied by means of a shutter which could be made with Meccano parts. Being well acquainted with Meccano I had no difficulty constructing a shutter with a bevel gear, axle, two short girder lengths and a piece of cardboard. However, the result was only half successful, the image now alternating between "rainy" and "clear". Again my father came to the rescue - no the correct number of teeth in the gear

wheel he explained and being an engineer he had a special gear made at this place of work. Such was the manner in which I learnt the principles of cinematography.

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My family became archetypal filmgoers of the period, making at least two weekly visits to the cinema in their case on the days of the change of programme Mondays and Thursdays. There was a choice of two cinemas in Sale, the Savoy and Palace and the venue was decided more by the “stars” appearing in the film than other considerations. After the acquisition of a car a wider choice of cinemas became available and I sampled many in South Manchester. The arrival of the “super” cinemas, the Pyramid (Sale) and the Regal (Altrincham) did not change the pattern, merely giving more choice. The organs, the dancing girls (Pyramid) and the lighting displays (Regal) were all very well, but if the likes of William Powell and Myrna Loy (father) or Jack Buchanan and Jessie Matthews (mother) were appearing at the ‘fleapit’ (Altrincham Picture Theatre) then the fleapit it would be. In over 30 years of film going my parents favourite cinema was the modest Hale Cinema built in 1923. At holiday time by the sea precedence was given to the concert party (Ronald Frankau at Llandudno) and the band on the end of the pier, cinemas becoming somewhere to go if it rained. (Does any member have information about a small cinema beneath the Pier Pavilion at Llandudno? The entrance and steps down to it can still be seen near the pier entrance).

I was allowed to go to the cinema on my own an age that I would now consider far too young. Certainly age 6 at the childrens matinees, possibly 5; and I recall solo expeditions to Manchester and seeing silent films at the Piccadilly, Oxford and at what is now not now! Cinema at Oxford Road Station. I could only have 11 or 12 at the time. In early sound days at the Oxford I remember large screen presentations - the supporting films were shown on a small screen and when the feature started the screen expanded to an enormous size, or so it seemed. Also at the Oxford a revival of the silent “Beau Geste” was given with orchestral accompaniment. The first obstacle to cinema going was the introduction of the “A” Certificate which brought about the request to strangers “will you take me in, please”.

Cinema going was not without its discomforts. My young sister would not simply cry quietly at the sad bits - she howled the place down. The choice of seat was decided by my mother who did not like circles and refused to sit beneath one. Her idea of a good seat was “near the front”, invariably the front row of the rear stalls, the “ninepennies”, a position not favoured by me. Protests might produce a compromise, but only by one or two rows. On the other hand it has to be said that there was usually a gangway between rear and front stalls which gave an uninterrupted view of the screen and an opportunity to stretch ones legs. However, when the rear stalls were full rules were broken and it was not unusual to find myself amongst the posh lot in the “shillings” (5p) or the rowdy lot in the “sixpennies” (2½p). I first saw “The Gold Rush” with the family split up

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in single seats, mine the extreme end seat on the front row of the “sixpennies” with consequent eye and neck strain. (Nevertheless, the film was never forgotten) There were other occupational hazards; you might get a free cup of tea at the Palace on a Wednesday afternoon, but you were just as likely to get a spray of disinfectant in your face the queues; the bad seating arrangements resulting in an obstructed view of the screen due to hats, heads and lovers: cigarette, cigar and pipe smoke; the rustle of toffee paper; the lack of leg room and the talkers who gave a running commentary. (Today there is another hazard- out of focus images). There was also a risk, as now, of seeing the most awful films. Having been brought up on a diet of silent action and comedy films

within the traditional programme of news/cartoon/interest/comedy/feature the arrival of sound for me as a child was a mixed blessing. Excessive talk became tedious and some of the supporting films changed in character (1 reel musicals etc). The theatre organs and other embellishments of the super cinemas has to be suffered like the slide advertisements and I was always relieved to see the censor's certificate appear on the screen.

And yet ... We all went back for more.

Coincidentally in the late 20s my grandfather, who lived in Accrington, became the owner and director of the "Queen's Picture and Variety Hall" otherwise known as "Queen's Hall" situated in the nearby town of Church. My grandfather had ended his career as a textile designer and I can only presume that this enterprise was an investment and something to occupy him during his retirement. It became a regular family routine to visit my grandfather on Saturday afternoons, have tea and go down to "Queens Hall" for "first house pictures". We arrived at the cinema by car, unusual for that area at that time, to be met at the entrance by the manager, a tall well built gentleman who always had a big fat cigar in his mouth. The hall was set back from the road and the entrance was through a corridor between two shops which faced the pavement, the box office at the far end. Modest queues were thus protected from the weather, if indeed competition in Accrington and Blackburn but a tram ride away. My grandfather would go into the manager's office to discuss business matters and we went to sit in reserved seats in the front row of the circle. Sometimes I was invited into the office and given old trade magazines (regretably only one has survived) and when older I received trade show tickets and recall seeing the trade show of "Turkey Time" (Tom Walls & Ralph Lynn) one morning at Piccadilly, which would make me 15 at the time.

The seating in the stalls was provided by wooden forms, the rear seat being covered with long cushions. Upstairs the tip-up seats were covered in a black

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shiny material whose roughness gradually worked its way through the seat of my trousers during the show, to produce an itching sensation. There was little to absorb any sound except an audience, and there was little of that, and it is the reverberations of the audience reactions that vividly come to mind. I recall two in silent days - the laughter which got louder and louder as the title "CURSES" [possibly referring to: *Curses!* (1925)] repeated several times, got bigger and bigger until it filled the screen.... In another sequence a lady helped herself to a neighbour's milk bottle outside a door, took it to her kitchen, emptied half into a pan, filled the bottle up with water and returned it to her neighbour's doorstep - this produced not so much a laugh but that long Lancashire "EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE". There was a small stage which was used for a short time for "Go As You Please" competitions in an unsuccessful attempt to improve takings towards the end of the silent era. The "curtain" was a roller type covered with brightly coloured advertisements.

Sound was a long time coming to the Queens, certainly the last in the district to convert, perhaps one of the last in the country. We were at the Saturday show of the first week of sound and for the first time I was shown the projection room, entered by a Jacobs ladder and saw the sound on disc equipment. My grandfather expressed satisfaction that there had been few technical hitches during the week and takings had improved. But on that evening I saw for the and only time the effect produced by my old toy projector with its Meccano gearing - the image on the screen suddenly alternated between "rainy" and "clear". I was able, very proudly, to explain to my grandfather the cause of it.

The manager of the Queens died suddenly and it came to light that he had been a heavy drinker, the big fat cigars being an attempt to camouflage the smell of his breath. His successor was a dapper little man who did wonders to the place in a short space of time. He redecorated, reseated and caused something of a local sensation by appearing in evening dress on Saturday nights. One night, when a storm was raging outside he kept the cinema open until after midnight, the audience keeping themselves happy by singing. He was more adventurous with film booking and on one occasion showed "Man of Aran" for 3 days, but my grandfather said it would have been a disaster had it not been for the supporting film.

And then...inexplicably..after business has greatly improved, the new manager disappeared one Saturday night with the takings. When an usherette failed to turn up for work on the following Monday it was rumoured that she had joined him, but not so, she merely had the flu. All this was too much for my grandfather and "Queens Hall" was sold.