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MOVIE MEMORIES

Helen Gilmour.

I heard a report recently that Cinemas are on the way back. Memories immediately took over.

I could recollect my earliest visits to what was no doubt one of the first custom built Picture Houses in the area. The frontage was in its time quite impressive with large billboards on either side of the entrance door on which the coming attractions were displayed. The small ticket office was just inside and to the right of the entrance door and one could gain admission for a few pennies. Inside the hall seating accommodation was on one level and I can remember that the "cheap" seats were simple wooden forms [benches], certainly not designed for comfort. When the film appeared on the screen a continual 'ticking' sound came from the projection box, presumably caused by the reels of film passing through the ratchets of the machine there.

At that time of course the films were Silent; 'actions spoke louder than words' – but dialogue appeared on the screen to help the story along. Background music was provided by a pianist at a piano discreetly placed behind a trellis section at a position from which the pianist could watch the film and change the music appropriate to the scene – quite an accomplishment. Seated behind the trellis the pianist could also be the target for mischievous youngsters armed with 'pea-shooters' seared in the front rows!

Much depended on the ingenuity of the Manager to supply other sound effects appropriate to the action; for instance, when the silent version of the religious epic “Ben Hur” was screened the Manager of the local cinema devised special sound effects in the form of a hand-revolved barrel with chains inside to represent the chariot race, very effectively.

The whole atmosphere of the cinema might be described as “magical” and it certainly attracted patrons from miles around. Saturday matinees brought queues of excited children anxious to see the next episode of the on-going serial particularly. Saturday evening programmes might include a local Talent Competition when members of the audience went on stage to sing, dance or play a musical instrument. This was referred to as a “Go-As-You-Please”.

In 1930 a new Cinema was built in town and with it came “The Talkies”; as well as comfort in which to enjoy them.

There were the lavish Musical extravaganzas with top class dancers and gorgeous chorus girls; the Romances with handsome heroes and beautiful heroines; and the Westerns with the rugged cowboys and their faithful four-legged friends. In many of the Westerns there appeared an old cowboy called “Gabby” Hayes, wrinkle-faced and toothless [referring to George Hayes]. “Gabby” must have been a Star if for nothing else but aiming his tobacco spit very successfully at a spittoon laced some distance away and causing it to rise several inches off the floor of the saloon.

In addition to the main features there were the Comedies – remember Our Gang with Spanky, Alfalfa and their pals? There were the Serials which kept us in suspense from one Saturday to the next; and no programme was complete without Mickey Mouse and Minnie, Pluto and Donald Duck, or Popeye the Sailor Man.

All this for Sixpence, Ninepence and a Shilling over fifty years ago!

Then there was the Special Christmas Matinee when all the children went home with an Apple, an Orange and a bar of Toffee. The “House Full” notice was certainly on display at that performance.

How nice it is to recall these happy days when the Cinema was a place of escape from the realities of the workaday world.

Recently I watched one of the old films on television and still shed a tear for the “happy” ending; a sure sign of a good film. But if we shed a few tears at the emotional films, we also laughed heartily at the comedies. I wonder if the young folks of today enjoy such reactions?

Let us hope therefore that if Cinemas are on the way back, so also are the films of what might be termed “pure entertainment” and escapism; and, who knows, some of the old picture-going public might be on the way back too.

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