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"Going to the Pictures" in the nineteen thirties.

In nineteen thirty I was seven years old and lived in the small town of Nailsworth (pop.circa 3000) in the Stroud valley in south Gloucestershire. Despite its small size, Nailsworth boasted its own cinema, called, in fact "The Cinema" which was a conversion of the main hall of the Subscription Rooms. The proprietor was Mr.Beech whose son, squeaky voiced "Ticker", was a contemporary of mine. Mr.Beech also wore the hats of manager, projectionist and ticket salesman according to need. The cinema consisted of the Front(sixpence), the Body(ninepence), and the Balcony (one shilling). The Front was curtained off from the Body and was normally occupied by the less affluent and unaccompanied children, known colloquially as the "Chicken Run", local folk lore had it that its regular patrons developed such a crick in the neck occasioned by looking up at the screen that they were permanently incapable of looking their fellow citizens in the eye! The Body had the attraction of being on a sloping floor, whilst the Balcony offered an even better view of the screen.

I would occasionally accompany my parents to this palace of delights in the evenings, no matinee performance then. Initially the films were all silent with subtitles. In spite of the limited vocabulary of a seven-year-old I was quite able to sus out what was going on: this, of course would not be too difficult when watching Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, Felix the Cat and Harold Lloyd.

Appropriate music for the chase, the approach of the villain, or lovers' meeting was provided by one or other of the panel of two lady pianists. I have no abiding memory of Great Silent Films, with one

exception, Charlie Chaplin in "The Gold Rush", the scene in which Charlie eats his boots threw me into paroxysms of hysterical laughter, much to the disgust of my mother who forbade mention of this piece from that day on. The neighbouring real town of Stroud introduced "Talkies" as soon as they were on general release, and not all that long afterwards Nailsworth followed suit. My main memories of the talkie era at Nailsworth are of Laurel and Hardy, particularly of the film in which the comic couple find their feet firmly planted in bowls of cement by gangsters who intend to dump them in the river. What was that film? I was very taken by a Laurel and Hardy "musical", a parody of Tauber's opera "Fra Diavolo", and also by "Swiss Miss". Other favourites were anything with Jack Hulbert and Cicely Courtneidge and Wheeler and Woolsey. I have no recollection, during this period, of crime films or romantic "dramas": perhaps my parents' selection of films decreed that such heady stuff were not to be on the menu. I recall seeing the odd "costume" film--was one of these "Congress Dances"?--and another costume drama with dream sequences which I believed to be real and provoked frightening dreams in my sleep. Mum and Dad just loved musicals featuring Jack Buchanan but which I found either very tedious or incomprehensible.

By 1936 Stroud had acquired a second cinema which showed talkies a long time before they eventually reached Nailsworth. By this time I was attending secondary school in Stroud and was able to use my bus season ticket to travel to Stroud on a Saturday afternoon to enjoy a matinee performance. I did not recall either of the Stroud Cinemas having an organ but distinctively remember the (later "Gaumont") Palace providing stage "turns" during the interval and being entranced by a young girl's virtuosity on the piano accordion! Among films of this era were the much hyped "Thirty Nine Steps" and "The Ghost Goes West" featuring Robert Donat. I do not remember newsreels being shown at Nailsworth, but recall the Stroud cinemas showing British Movietone, Gaumont British, and Pathe News. With hindsight and the occasional archive showing on television I now realise that newsreels were very jingoistic and propagandist in their selection of news items and choice of words by Leslie Mitchell (Movietone) and other commentators.

During this time the weekly "comic", "Film Fun" (Amalgamated Press, two old pence) was much swapped and much loved by us boys. It featured comic strip adventures in black and white of such favourites as Laurel and Hardy and the occasional film-inspired short story. The comic strips frequently ended with our heroes being rewarded with a huge cake! Oddly enough, several of the artistes featured in the strips predated my own acquaintance with the cinema, namely Chester Conklin, Ben Turpin, Joe E. Brown and Buster Keaton, although I now know who the latter was.

By this time Mickey Mouse had long seen off Felix the Cat and Donald Duck, and other Disney characters were beginning to make an appearance.

In 1936 the family moved to Watford a hybrid dormitory/industrial town fifteen miles northwest of London. As far as cinema going was concerned I could hardly believe my luck, Watford boasted six cinemas. The Plaza (later Odeon), The Gaumont Palace, The Charlton, The Regal, The (fleapit) Coliseum (later New Plaza) and North Watford Odeon [where] I saw my first full-length colour film, Annabella (whoever she was) in “Wings of the Morning”, a sentimental weepie about a racehorse which gave its name to the film title. I had my Warhol-like fifteen minutes of fame at the Regal: I had won a prize in (an adult!) competition for the best short essay on the History of Watford promoted by the “West Herts Post”. I was presented with the prize on the cinema’s stage during the interval, my dad and I were given the best seats in the house and a huge box of chocolates into the bargain. The feature film starred Wheeler and Woolsey (they were in “Film Fun” too) in a comedy involving adventures in a mummies’ tomb in Egypt.

The Coliseum staged a Saturday morning children’s matinee, the so called twopenny “rush”, later becoming the threepenny rush, an early lesson in the evils of inflation! The films were usually westerns, crude science fiction featuring monsters, and comedies. A serial would usually leave one wondering whether our hero would rescue our heroine from the octopus, bandit, or monster from another planet as the case may be. At about this time the Gaumont and Odeon Cinema chains started their own (sixpenny) children’s Saturday morning matinee clubs complete with Uncles and Aunties together with opportunities to do “good deeds” like saving silver paper for hospitals. The films were sanitised and made especially for children, allegedly to counteract the pernicious antisocial content of the more robust fare offered by the Coliseum, which, I regret to say continued to hold the allegiance of myself and a good many others. I do not think my adult attitudes were much determined by my youthful visits to the pictures, but then again films, in general, were not so “nasty” as many are now.

My father occasionally would accompany me to the cinema to see a film which he obviously thought would be “improving”, I can recall two of these, one was Robert Flaherty’s “Man of Aran”. I can only say that to my immature mind this was a case of “when you’ve seen one shot of mountainous waves crashing on the rocks you’ve seen them all!” The other improving film was “Spanish Earth” which had a background of the then raging Spanish Civil War, and which quite impressed me at the time.

I must be unique for my age group in never having actually seen a “Tarzan” film, as I have nothing against “jungle” films in principle. At some stage in the first half (?) of the thirties I was taken to see “The Ghost Train”. I think too, that it was in the thirties that the late Will Hay became one of my favourites along with his two foils Graham Moffat and Moore Marriott.

By now school and homework were becoming a serious business and my cinema visits became less frequent; but one more chapter remains, in 1938 the family moved yet again to Rye (pop.circa 4,000) on the East Sussex coast. Rye boasted a modern well-managed cinema, "The Regent", one of the small Shipman and King chain. One cameo that I recall, my father was then the proprietor of a watchmakers and jewellers business, and when Walt Disney's first full length feature film "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" was launched he laid in a stock of Snow White and Dwarf enamelled badges and brooches. When the film came to The Regent he teamed up with its manager to have a display of these items in the foyer together with posters directing would-be buyers to the shop.

As the thirties drew to a close the newsreels embraced ever more material about the activities of "Adolf" and "Musso" as the commentators called them, [and] we would soon be going to the cinema in the blackout!

Looking back, I find it difficult to articulate what going to the cinema did for me exactly. It certainly gave me a great deal of harmless (?) pleasure and some idea of what other parts of the world, especially North America, were like. I think that the social occasion of "going to the pictures" gave me and my contemporaries a bit of a buzz, something exciting to which to look forward at the end of the week. I can still recall the smells, the tobacco smoke from hundreds of cigarettes, the thick pile carpet in the plushier cinemas and the scent of the "Flit" air freshener sprayed in the older ones. Happy days!

JOHN FORD

Langney, EASTBOURNE

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