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Thurs. 9 Feb. 1995

Dear Annette and Valentina

I read with interest your letter which appeared in this month's issue of 'Mature Tymes' newspaper, and would like to commend you on your method of approach towards gathering the information you'd like about the cinemagoing of the '30s. Several years ago I helped a local amateur publishing group with gathering nostalgic material about the way people used to live, and it took a very conscious effort to establish the specific age groups who were actively involved in the years concerned - and then hope that their individual memory banks were still active, and not damaged by ill health, etc.

Anyway, although the letter printed was in broad, general terms re filmgoing in the 30s, I have been on the 'nostalgia train' and have written out for you a whole load of observations and recollections, mainly perhaps from the human interest angle, and our responses

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to a very great influence in our lives. After all, the film became the visual translation of the age-old art of the story-teller. There was so much naivety in the 30s that little wonder that many of us then-time filmgoers thought that most of America was one city, New York, and a huge prairie.

I remember a recent radio programme involving one of the old-time 'heavy' actors - might've been a clip of a conversation with Edward G Robinson; the interviewer asked him did the

scenes reflect the crime of those times. The actor said that what most people didn't realise was that the actors playing the crooks and cops were really having a helluva [hell of a] lot of fun - I simply don't know why, but his remarks, obviously true, came as such a surprise to me remembering how criminal and tough the 'criminals' seemed. And that's the illusion, to make the stories believable.

Anyway, I do hope you find me own reminiscences of use, maybe evening amusing - we did have great times going to the pictures, and I rejoice in the recollection of the special atmosphere that 'going' to

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the pictures produced. When I served in the Royal Navy - Fleet Air Arm - in World War II, cinema going was the mainstay of our entertainment, even aboard ship. Fortunately I was on board a large ship, an aircraft carrier, and our cinema area centred on one of the very large lift-wells where aircraft were normally put up or taken down from the flight deck. There was a built in projection room, facility for a large screen, and a whole load of timber planking set up for seating.

- favourite films: CARTOONS, probably because we needed the laughter to ease off tension.

I have included a notelet with my recollections - this show the Workmen's Hall (the Bottom Hall) referred to in my narrative. The auditorium was up on the first floor, accessed by staircases inside the two outer archways of the three you can see on the picture. The centre archway led into a central corridor leading to a number of reading rooms, an excellent library, both lending and reference, billiards and snooker rooms, and several committee rooms at the rear of the building.

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Unlike many workmen's institutes, in a hopeless situation without the funding from the now closed collieries, this building has been 'adopted' by the Torfaen Borough Council which has undertaken considerable refurbishment, and the hall hasn't yet been reopened for public use. I don't know if film showing is likely to be included in the programme since the population of the town has severely declined since the collieries closed.

I trust my contribution will be of assistance to your project.

All best wished to you, both

Lewis Howells

PS.

To save you working it out, I'm now 72 - "Eight to Eighteen" in the 30s to 1940. LH