

My earliest recollection of the cinema must have been when I was about four years old, what the first film was or where I was taken to see it I have no idea, I can remember however that at the opening of most of the films I saw started with a page-boy appearing on the screen, saluting the audience and opening some curtains over a small picture which I am sure must have been the trade mark of the production company.

This was the pre 'talkies' era, just prior to the great transformation of the cinema. I heard for a long time my mother and her friends discussing these new talking pictures and which local cinemas were having 'talkie machines' installed and saw many posters advertising this fact on the hoardings. The first all talking film I can remember seeing was 'Atlantic'(1929), a German/British production of the Titanic disaster, it was showing at the 'New Park Cinema' Shepherd's Bush.

This really was the start of my interest in film-going, of course my visits were limited to when my parents or relatives were able or prepared to take me. Most of these visits were to one of the Shepherd's Bush cinemas, the 'New Park' the 'Silver' or 'Pavilion' sometimes the 'Globe' Acton and 'The Commodore' Hammersmith. As soon as I was old enough I of course was allowed to go on my own, this was only when what was called an all 'U' program was on. In those days there were only two British Board of Film Censors categories, 'U' or universal which could be seen by all ages, 'A' which restricted it to adult audiences only although a person under the age of sixteen could see it as long as he was accompanied by an adult. Later a further 'H' category was added to classify horrific films to which no person under sixteen could be admitted.

Although the titles of a lot of the films have now dissolved from my memory in the mists of time there are quite a few that for some reason have left an indelible stamp. 'The King of Jazz' (1930) was one of these, firstly as it was an early two colour Technicolor production and secondly the sequence when Paul Whiteman places an attache case on the table and on opening the lid his orchestra climbs down a miniature ladder. 'Dante's Inferno'(1935) was memorable, although in monochrome the inferno scenes were enhanced by the projectionist showing them through a colour filter to give effect to the fires.



The early thirties saw the start of the luxury cinema, I can remember the magic of these, it seemed like stepping into wonderland, real palaces of comfort and elegance, air conditioned to give cool fresh conditions in the hot weather, many used to display a poster outside stating 'It's Cooler Inside!' and in winter the inviting warmth was a great attraction to the thousands who in those days had never known the comfort of today's centrally heated homes. Programs were mostly the productions of the Hollywood dream factory, usually made up of a feature film, a second feature, a cartoon or short interest film and the latest newsreel.

As competition between the big circuit cinemas grew more intense additional items were added. The weekly serial was introduced as encouragement to return each week so that patrons could see if their heroin or hero was able to escape from the fate they were threatened with the week before just as the picture faded and a title urging them to 'See next week's thrilling instalment' was shown on the screen. Many cinemas had theatre organs installed and included an interlude by a resident organist, another innovation was 'cine variety' with a stage show by popular artists of the day. The introduction of the afternoon matinee and the admission price reduced to sixpence (2½p) was most popular with the housewives as were the tea matinees when a tray of tea could be served to them in their seat during an interval. Usually during these intervals the houselights were slightly dimmed and the 'trailers' advertising the films for the coming week were shown. I was always puzzled as to why these were called 'trailers' when they were always shown during the week preceding the showing of the film until in later years I learned that name related to the trail that they blazed ready for the showing of the feature.

During these wondrous days of the super cinema many families would make it their weekly treat to go to 'the pictures', very often with little regard to what film was showing, the simple thrill of spending an evening in one of these wonderful entertainment emporiums was enough. A box of chocolates or a couple of bags of crisps added to the enjoyment. (Pop-corn had not yet invaded the British cinema!) Even standing in a queue to get in would not deter them, anxiously awaiting a doorman to announce that there were 'two double one and sixes' (7½p) or one single at two shillings (10p). Usually there were display cases along the queuing positions showing 'still' photographs of the film that they were hoping to see and posters announcing forthcoming attractions.



There were magazines that kept filmgoers informed of the activities of the Hollywood film studios and the private lives of the stars, two that I remember were 'Film Weekly' and 'The Picturegoer'. These both usually had a full page portrait of one of the big stars. Articles about the progress of the latest production, lists of the latest film releases, with a synopsis of each film and the cast list. Details of what the stars were wearing, their hair styles, what make-up they used etc.

Many cinemas had what was known as 'tie ups' with local traders where there was a product used or situation depicted in a film that could relate to a trader or a service. I can remember such a 'tie up' by one of the local cinemas with a taxi firm when showing Pygmalion (1938). When Eliza Doolittle declared 'not b\*\*\*\*y likely, I want a Taxi!' Patrons were invited to telephone the cinema and a taxi would be sent to collect them.

There were quite a lot of British made films, some memorable, many best forgotten. Most of the latter were produced mainly for cinemas to conform to the quota act. This act was brought in to help the development of the home film industry, every cinema had to exhibit a percentage of British productions, the main criteria being that it was British, quality was of no consequence. These films soon became known to the exhibitors as 'Quota Quickies', I don't think the majority of these did a great deal to enhance the British film industry. Of course there were the exceptions. A lot of stage successes were transferred to the screen, some of the famous 'Aldwych farces' were very popular, 'Rookery Nook'(1930) and 'Thark'(1932) with the original stage cast of Tom Walls, Ralf Lynn and Robertson Hare are good examples.

A few great landmarks of the country's studios surpassed even the great Hollywood productions. 'Cavalcade'(1932) was one that I clearly remember, many of the Gaumont British films, 'The Thirty Nine Steps'(1935) 'Friday The Thirteenth'(1933) O.H.M.S.(1936) and many of the Jessie Mathews Musicals are worthy of note. A great step forward for the industry was when Alexander Korda with his London Films came on the scene with his spectacular productions. 'The Private Life of Henry VIII'(1933) 'Things To Come'(1935) even made Hollywood sit up and take notice.

By the time I reached school leaving age in 1936 my parents had moved house to Heston, my first job was in a factory, not at all to my liking. In my spare time I managed to worm my way into the projection room of one of the Dominion cinema in nearby Hounslow, this was as near as I could get to my great interest in the film industry. My original ambition was to get into the production side but this was an unfulfilled dream. I spent all the time I could in the projection room of the Dominion, two or three evenings a week plus all day Saturdays. Eventually a vacancy occurred for a rewind boy in the projection room (fifteen shillings a week. 75p) I had quite a job to convince my parents that I should leave my factory job and take this position, finally they weakened and let me have my way. The management's first proviso was that I should decide that my age was sixteen, this was in order that I could be present when 'A' films were being shown. I remember how this was drummed into me, the manager or the chief projectionist would often when passing me would ask me my age, luckily I usually remembered to answer 'sixteen sir, or chief'.

Working full time in a cinema did not curb my enthusiasm for cinema going, in fact it was considerably enhanced by the fact that staff members were able to get a free pass to any of the other local cinemas. This not only opened the door to untold numbers of films but also gave the opportunity to compare the technical quality of the oppositions' equipment and the method of presentation. Of course any flaws or 'boobs' in the projection were noted and reported with relish to the other members of the projection room the next day.

In the days of the six day cinema staff were allowed what was known as an early night, this meant that they finished work at 5.30 p.m. This enabled me to get home and have my tea, change and get to one of the other cinemas. When Sunday cinemas started a statutory requirement was that any staff who worked on Sunday were required to be given a complete day off during the week. This was wonderful, a whole day meant that I could get visits to two of the other local cinemas and on my early night a third.



By working in the cinema I was able to get both sides of the picture going public of the thirties, as a keen film-goer myself and as a employee of the exhibitors' I was able to see what were the types of film that attracted most attention. Some of the early musicals were always very popular, I think these were launched by the now historical early production 'The Jazz Singer'(1927) started this trend. Warner Brothers were the great pioneers of the film musical, these were mostly of a similar format, 'putting on a show' was nearly always the story usually woven around a chorus girl making it to the top.

By the late thirties the more sophisticated musicals appeared featuring many favourites of that era, Jeanette Macdonald and Nelson Eddy, Irene Dunn, Grace Moore, Bing Crosby, Deanna Durbin to name a few. Any film starring these artists was sure to be an attraction. Other great partnerships were brought to the screen, the great Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire musicals, a dance couple whos' performances have never been equalled let alone surpassed. The child wonder of the age Shirley Temple could pack any cinema that showed her films. All these paved the way for the more lavish block-buster musicals of the later years.

Great comedy acts were also in demand, Laurel and Hardy successfully transfered from the silent era to sound, making many popular films. Chaplin maintained his silence for many years after the coming of talking films, finally breaking his vow of silence by singing in 'Modern Times'(1936) and making his first all talking film 'The Great Dictator' in 1940. Many other comedy actors were constantly appeared playing small comic relief parts in straight films.

There were plenty of wonderful dramatic actresses and actors starring in some excellent productions. Paul Muni in 'Scarface'(1932) 'The Good Earth'(1937) Spencer Tracey in 'Captains Courageous'(1937) Henry Fonda and Jane Darwell in 'The Grapes of Wrath'(1940) John Wayne and Thomas Mitchell in 'Stagecoach'(1939) and of course too many stars to mention in the greatest movie of all time 'Gone With The Wind'(1939).

95-289

The cinema was the popular first date for many young couples in the thirties, a far more comfortable place to spend the evening than just walking the streets or sitting on a park bench. Many a romance blossomed from inviting a girl to 'go to the pictures', also in the next decade it was to become a haven for thousands of servicemen during world war two.

The forties saw the start of the decline of the 'dream factory', cinema attendances began to fall, the production costs of the lavish productions started going sky high. Many cinemas were closed or converted into bowling alleys and supermarkets. Television was restarted at the end of the war and was attracting thousands who liked the idea of sitting in their own armchairs by their own fireside and being entertained.

The old and experienced film makers were pushed into the background as the industry was dominated by the money men who dictated not only who should be the film makers but also what the subject of the films should be. Everything that they put money into had to be commercial, money making was the prime objective, art for the sake of art (Art Gratia Artis) went by the board. If a format hit the jackpot the same formula was repeated again and again. If 'XXX' was a box office hit it was quickly followed by 'XXX II' then 'XXX III' and so on until they had milked it dry.

Many weird and wonderful 'gimmicks' were tried, Vistavision, Metroscope and Cinemascope to mention a few. Most of these gave the impression that you were sitting outside and watching through a letter box. Colour was now standard for all productions, monochrome was relegated to newsreels and the like. There was a number of productions in '3D' but audiences were not keen on wearing the special glasses that were needed to complete the stereoscopic effect.

Now and again a excellent production would rise above the mediocre and attract the patrons back but these were few. Even then there were many people who would rather wait until the film was released to television or was available from the video library and they could see it in the comfort of their own armchair.

1995 G.W.Pleasance.