

CINEMA IN THE TOWN OF BLAENAVEN, GWENT IN 1930^s

My home-town of Blaenavon had a population of approx 10,000 in the 1930^s, and cinema entertainment existed at two cinemas. One of these had quite a spacious auditorium as it served as a theatre and concert venue. This was part of the building known at the Workmen's Institute (or Hall), and really could accommodate large audiences. The Institute was self-sufficient as far as electricity supply went, the engineer maintaining the power and generator equipment also doubling as film projectionist.

Showing of films on Sundays was not permitted ^{in South Wales} until the post-war period, and films were usually shown for the first three days of the week, followed by fresh films for the last three days. The show usually consisted of a feature film plus a 'B' film, a shorter one, a short news reel, and a series of adverts either in 'still' or moving picture form. Only by exceptional demand were films shown for an entire week. There were also Saturday matinees with the usual sort of films that youngsters enjoy, often an endless serial that had countless sequences.

Being a Workmen's (Miners & Steelworkers) Institute it seemed to function basically on a Committee basis. Committee, I assume, was responsible for selecting films from whatever distribution network operated in that capacity — the films were never too 'dated', and I guess this level of showing was several stages behind major cinemas on circuit in larger towns and cities. The duty Committee men acted as stewards rather than as ushers, since there always seemed to be an abundance of children at any performance. Come to think of it, I'm not sure if nearly all films ^{at this cinema} shown had the then "U" Certificate — the selection system

operated by Committee could well have contained a bar to 'A' or 'X' films by virtue of the constitution. I'm only basing this belief on hindsight recollection, and knowing the strict nature of the majority of those serving as Committeemen (almost like chapel elders.)

As a back-up to the committee-men stewards, there was an illuminated notice beneath the screen which read "QUIET PLEASE" and this would be flashed when the film ceased to grip the attention of the younger element, and they became restive and boisterous. Sometimes the film was stopped; house-lights put up; and verbal warnings given by committee men speaking from the stage, no 'mike', loud, powerful, awesome voices threatening almost short or long-term banning to constant offenders.

At some stage in the 30's I believe there must have been a re-upholstery refit because on side areas of the balcony seating there were a number of all-in-one double seats (with no intervening arm-rest), not as wide as a two-seater settee but more a snug fit in the manner of what the Americans call a 'love-seat'.

Almost unparalleled in any cinema I'd visited, there was an extremely strict "No SMOKING" rule in the auditorium — as in theatres, those of the audience who wished to smoke or stretch the legs went out onto the landings during the interval. Seeing the clarity of projection and of viewing in this cinema compared with other cinemas was truly the difference between chalk and cheese. (I have never had official confirmation of the reason for the ban, but I believe that the true reason lay in insurance for the multi-function building.)

As in the case of theatres, it was possible to book seats at the box-office of the cinema, some people seeming to have an almost permanent regular booking. The pre-show, and interval music seemed to be of the light classical, overture or march categories, 'standards' almost. There were limited refreshments during the interval,

but the popular sustenance of the younger cinema goers of that time was peanuts ("monkey-nuts", the popular name) and toffees, shells and wrapping papers all inevitably dropped on the floor under and between the seats.

The other cinema in the town, 'The Coliseum', was privately owned, and seemed to have access to quite a different exhibitor-circuit network, often netting the pictures (films) with greater box-office appeal than those showing at the other cinema. This was quite an anomaly since, being really only a small cinema, it hadn't the capacity to take full advantage of films' popularity. It didn't have space for a balcony — the projection room was like a box protruding out over a slightly sloping auditorium which was reached by two rather narrow stairways since the cinema was constructed on sloping ground, a third exit at the rear of the building emerging on a cul-de-sac. One of these stairways emerged directly within the auditorium, and was a built-over enclosure — about a dozen or so seats had been fixed on the top of this covered stairway, reached by a hooked-on 'ladder' of sorts. This minute 'balcony' (?) area was quaintly called 'The Chicken Run'. I don't know what seating charge related to these seats but cinemagoers seemed to avoid this vantage point (?) like the plague — as far as I can recall it didn't even have handrails around. There were two prices of admission, the front seats which were 'on the flat', and afforded opportunity for cricks in the neck looking up at the screen, and the rear seats of the cinema which were on a slope. As in the larger cinema, booking seat facilities existed, and the manager-owner and a few staff ruled on behaviour with a very firm grip.

The Coliseum, too, followed the practice of showing films for three days then changing for the last three days of the week. I have a vague recollection that in exceptional circumstances, due to pressures of popular demand, some films were occasionally retained

for a second week's showing. This cinema seemed to be able to exhibit the highly popular musical films of the 30^s, and also the early long length cartoon films (Guilliver's Travels is one which is vividly recalled being seen most enjoyably there). The films of Nelson Eddy and Jeannette MacDonald were also shown in this cinema. They are linked with recollections of a family accident at that period, involving my father, a working coal miner who had 'collected' broken thigh bones in an accident underground. After his discharge from hospital he spent considerable time on crutches, and ardently following the renowned singing duo on screen he pressed me, the only other male in the house, to go with him to the Coliseum as his 'minder', to help him up and down the staircases and to try to guide other cinemagoers away from his broken leg, and the crutches. (Dad was a young widower, so had to fall back on me as his companion.) I believe this cinema was the one which scooped the Fred Astaire - Ginger Rogers films, interlinked at this stage of the 30^s with young budding romantic interludes.

A quite different memorable recollection involves one particular film showing at the Coliseum, Blaenavon, as I shall relate. As my boyhood friends and I were growing up, our reasoning faculties were developing, and observations of life were sharpening. At this stage we gradually became aware that, unlike the livestock which frequented nearby hills, and the town's streets, too — the horses, the sheep, plus a few cattle — on the American, and English films, but mostly the 'cowboy' films, all the hundreds of horses and thousands of cattle were simply SUPERBLY CLEAN, masterfully trained (or else constantly constipated) because unlike our streets and hills, their ranches, cow-towns, the vast prairies had not one speck of animal dropping to be seen.

This was enormously puzzling to those of us who were sent out with bucket and shovel to scoop 'it' up to be put on the garden rather than go to waste.

Without too much deep consideration as to reasons for the 'whys and wherefores', we decided to keep a close, private 'screen-watch' to detect any normal animal 'activity'.

Without fail, all the American period films and 'cowboys' were without blemish; there wasn't a trace of anything visible. The 'break-through' (to use a pun) came during the showing of a Ruritanian romantic-type British film where the hero was a composer/pianist based at a very large inn with an enormous inner courtyard, and huge outer doors opening to show an idyllic lane snaking across an enchanting rural countryside.

The hero seemed to have an ongoing love interest with the inn-keeper's daughter — or possibly a serving maid — and there was great drama developing in scenes where he was proposing to go out to the great world outside to seek his fame and fortune.

Ultimately, somehow or other, he had hoisted his piano onto the back of a horse-drawn cart, seemingly single-handed because there wasn't much help visible anywhere (we hadn't thought of tight budgets).

With many a tear (on her part), blown kisses and waves (on his part) he set off, driving the horse and cart across the courtyard and out through the great gateway heading for and then it happened! The horse behaved as normal horses do — and even as 'it' was falling to the ground, I was leaping to my feet, and, thrusting my outstretched hand towards the screen, I heard myself yelling aloud — "HOSS SHIT!" I had won our private screen-watch contest. There was pandemonium, noises of all descriptions, much ribald laughter, and some very abject young lads being led out of the cinema by the owner/manager himself. Courteously, he never, not once, referred to the happening as long as I knew him.

(And the Hollywood horses and cattle are still as immaculate as ever.)

Our group had begun to latch on to problems of 'continuity', and incongruity now, and shortly after the horse sequence we saw a film at the Coliseum of a series of music-hall acts screened and assembled in a sequence containing no compèring as such, simply a series of acts. One of the acts was a tenor dressed as a Legionnaire in a setting suggesting a lonely desert fort. He was on duty on a walkway inside the castellated walls of the fort, the height of his head enabling him to look out through the battlements whilst the rest of him was protected by the stonework. As he strode up and down, manfully going through verse and chorus of his song, he stopped to deliver the final lines of the song when a single rifle shot dramatically rang out — the tenor, mortally wounded and ready to fall to the ground, clapped one hand over his heart (where no shot could have reached.) We stuffed our handkerchieves in our mouths this time to avoid creating another disturbance, and being ejected, banned even.

Incidentally, because Blaenavon is largely enclosed in a steep-sided valley, hilly streets are more the norm than otherwise flat and level streets. The Coliseum, being higher up the hill side than the other cinema, was known also as 'THE TOP HALL', whilst the Workmen's Institute nearer to the valley floor was known as 'THE BOTTOM HALL'.

One coincidental cinema 'spin-off' happened whilst I was serving with the Fleet Air Arm during 1943. A group of us were detached to set up a base radio station on a French aerodrome at La Senia just outside Oran, Algeria. The village had a very small cinema where we paid the occasional visit whilst we were off-watch.

One evening, the film being shown, with French spoken dialogue dubbed on, I remembered as having seen as a 'B' film in one of my home-town cinemas, a film involving the unmasking of an escapologist, so say escaping alive from a locked iron chest lowered into the sea from the end of a pier. Quite a strange experience to see it in two languages in quite different circumstances.

My memory can't decide which of our two local cinemas showed a whole series of films during the 30's featuring The Three Stooges. These films have been relatively late arrivals to our tv screens so far as I know.

Our nearest small town, about four miles away, was the town of Brynmawr which had two cinemas, a small one with the grotty nickname, The Heapit (attendant spraying quite frequently) and the Market Hall. Occasional visits were paid there to 'catch' a particular film but timings of late night buses were critical, and often meant a 4 mile walk home after the show.

In the more immediate post-war years I grew to know the pianist who accompanied the earlier generation of silent films shown at the Market Hall. From time to time he visited a hill-top pub popular at that time. In one part of the main room, slightly separated from the 'sporting corner' where darts and cards were played, was an upright piano, played occasionally by the landlady or her daughter, but most significantly by a very quiet, older gentleman whose name I never knew.

These were nights when a singer, good or indifferent, could be assured of an appreciative welcome, and when a 'sing-along' was a rousing feature of an evening's entertainment. I was in constant wonderment and admiration of this gentleman's repertoire, and of his piano-playing technique, too. Seldom, if ever, did sheet music appear

on the piano's music stand yet the pianist's accompaniment of whatever song was chosen, in whatever key, by whatever singer, was always discreet and impeccably supportive.

Pressed to talk about his exceptional skill at the keyboard — with the help of a congratulatory drink or two — he told me that he had played piano in the Market Hall Cinema, Brynmawr, in the days of silent films, and had had to build up and extend his repertoire of music to suit the moods, the action, the drama of the visual-only screenplay. He really was quite a unique musician, with great empathy and gift of interpretation.

One further brief point regarding our town cinemas — there was normally only one film showing per evening (no continuous performances) but the Coliseum catered for the viewing needs on Saturday nights by having two performances, the last screening beginning at around 8pm. This suited me admirably as I had just begun working at our local post office which didn't close in those days until eight o'clock at night. Booking a seat on the phone, a quick but careful balancing of my day's business, and a dash up hill to the escape of that late night (?) film show. Wonderful end to the working week!

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Whilst most of my cinema-going in the 20^s and 30^s was confined to the two home town cinemas, occasional visits were made to cinemas in Brynmawr (4 miles away), Pontypool (6 miles away) and Newport (15 miles away). These visits had to be arranged to fit in with bus or train transport.

My earliest recollection of a cinema visit was as a very small child, possibly around 3 years old, with both my parents to a cinema in Newport, The Olympia I believe, to see that very early Al Jolson film where he sang "Climb upon my knee, Sonny Boy." Of the film itself I have no recollection but was tremendously affected by the numerous people in tears as the packed house came out into the street, a very emotional experience, obviously.

Of course, film makers were not slow in realising their ability to generate a whole range of emotions, gradually including some degree of fear. In that category I would place the famous duo, 'FRANKENSTEIN' (with Boris Karloff) and 'DRACULA' (with Bela Lugosi). I think I had seen the one but not the other film in my home town and, staying for a matter of weeks in Bristol when I was 16 years of age and receiving Post Office training, I was curiously excited to see one Bristol cinema showing both films in sequence in the same performance. Although I was surprised to see a number of St. John's ambulancemen stationed around the auditorium, I don't think their professional services were seriously needed. Perhaps by this period in film screening, cinema goers were gradually becoming more blasé ——— and going into and coming out of a cinema in daylight undoubtedly strengthened one's courage, and offset the fears.

At Blaenavon my home lay on a hillside about 1 mile from the town, in quite an isolated spot even though we lived at the side of the Blaenavon/Brynmawr road. Additionally, the street lights were few and far between so walking home, very often alone, from the town could be rather scary for a youngster. In the surrounding darkness

could be heard the 'coughing' of sheep, or strange sounds made by roaming ponies, feeding or wheezing. These animals freely roamed the open hillside, and were the cause of many a nervous and edgy walk home. On one very faint occasion, a previously unseen horse raised its head above a low garden hedge — I could pick out this moving shape in the starlit night, and immediately burst into a sprinting escape. Even as I shot a passing glance as I drew level with the horse — and knew it for what it was — I could not stop sprinting until I reached home, and safety.

Generally the effect of certain groups of films, 'gangsters' or 'cowboys' came to mind, was to strengthen the sense of fair play that children seem to have. We revamped our basic 'hide and seek' games into 'cops and robbers' (with sound effects, plus toy guns) and, with wide open hillsides sensationally dotted with small hills and ravines left by earlier surface coal mining, we gloried in 'cowboys and indians'.

On the other side of the town there was an extensive beech wood together with a few limestone quarries containing several caves — our film-inspired games here involved explorers we had seen, plus the odd opportunity to try the Tarzan cry (but without the ropes to emulate his air borne stunts.)

These groups of films certainly had strong influence on the group games we played — sporting heroes were invariably found closer to home.

Appropriately perhaps at the end of these random recollections I should mention that going to the pictures always included the National Anthem, playing, and standing response. Only the very bold (and disrespectful) made their way to the exits when the Anthem was being played.

Cinema going in small communities like ours had a strong social element yet I recall my paternal Grandmother, a very sociable type, telling me she had never been 'to the pictures'.