

Roath
Cardiff

10 February 1995

Dear Annette Kuhn and Valentina Bold

In regard to your request for going to the cinema in the 1930's, perhaps I can be of assistance.

I was born in London in 1931 and remember going to see 'suitable' films from a very early age - certainly before the 1939/45 war. My mother used to take me to see all the Shirley Temple films, and the Hollywood musicals of their day. Any other kind did not interest me anyway.

I remember seeing 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs' round about 1938, and 'The Wizard of Oz' in 1939, together with 'Robin Hood' (with Errol Flynn).

To go to 'the pictures' (nobody said 'cinema') was something to be looked forward to every week. You usually queued outside, kept in some kind of order by a very Ruritanian-looking commissionaire. Bunches of people moved forward, little by little and, in the event of a very popular film, you had to stand along both sides once inside, until a seat became available. There were many occasions when I did not see my mother throughout the programme.

In addition to the main 'feature film', there was a 'B-picture', lasting about one hour to one hour and a half. There were the newsreels, either Gaumont-British News or Pathe Pictorial. There were 'Coming Attractions' which showed extracts from the following week's films and sometimes a cartoon or a 'March of Time'. Today, these are valuable documentaries of political events of the 1930's, but I remember finding them unutterably boring.

An usherette carrying a torch tore your tickets in half on entering, and showed you to your seats (if there were any). There were intervals, when the main lights were switched on, and you could buy ice-cream, chocolates etc. There was a great deal of smoking, which was permitted, and clouds of smoke were swirling up into the air all the time. You could bring in any kind of food or drink of your own, and there was a famous story of a woman who always sat at the end of the row, so she could warm kippers on an adjoining radiator!

The 'grand' cinemas had an organist who used to appear magically from some subterranean 'kingdom' smiling and waving, and the words of the popular songs of the day were flashed onto the screen, so everyone could join in and sing, if they felt like it. The organist's photograph was usually placed very prominently outside the cinema as an added 'attraction'.

However, audiences were very orderly and - in addition to the commissionaire outside the building - there was always a manager on hand, in case of any difficulty. He wore a dinner-jacket and black tie throughout the day and the threat of 'I'll call the Manager' was usually enough to strike fear into anybody's heart as he had the power to throw out any unruly persons.

One of my memories is standing outside in a queue in bad weather and watching enviously those going straight into the 3/6s or 3/9s, as they were grand enough to pay to go upstairs in the circle and not have to wait outside. Usually, these were young men who were keen on impressing their girl-friends that they could afford to walk straight in!

Virtually everybody went to the cinema in those days, one exception being my own father, who preferred what he called real-live actors. Opinions of the various films seen were topics when meeting friends or relatives and many fashions were set by the film-stars of their time.

I remember an aunt of mine sewing lace collars onto every dress she had, as she had seen Ginger Rogers wear a lace-collared dress in a film, and Hedy Lamarr wore a hat with a scarf attached, which was swept under the chin and over the shoulder - this too, caught on.

From time to time, I read of today's 'deprived children' and think: Well, that describes me in the 1930's. We had no hot water or bathroom, and no-one had a telephone. The only person who owned a car was our doctor. Clothes were often cut-down or made from remnants, and my first summer holiday was at the age of 18, after I had left school.

All things are relative - everybody we knew lived in this fashion, so we did not feel different from our neighbours, relatives and friends. To this day, I do not feel deprived - for we had all these wonderful films FIRST. And we had the 'Just William' books and Enid Blyton and the weekly comics. Yes, these are still around for today's children, but I always think that they were made for US, and written for US! Those of us who were around and are old enough to remember going to the cinema in the 1930's.

Y ours sincerely

M. Schneiderman

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