



Screen Dreams

Memories of cinema-going in South East London 1920s – 1960s

During the autumn of 2004, the BFI in association with Age Exchange Reminiscence Centre in Blackheath put on an exhibition celebrating the heydays of cinema-going and concentrating on the cinema-going memories of people in the local area of South East London.

All the text was compiled from personal memories of working or going to the local cinemas including tales of romance and the adventures of Saturday Morning Picture shows. People also donated personal diaries, photos and memorabilia for the displays.

During the exhibition, we held a visitors poll to find out who and what were the favourite film stars and films of the period. Here are some of the most mentioned names and titles:

Favourite Actors

Dirk Bogarde, James Mason, John Mills, Cary Grant, Fred Astaire, Kenneth More, Stewart Grainger, Laurence Olivier, Alistair Sim.

Favourite Actresses

Bette Davis, Margaret Lockwood, Celia Johnson, Doris Day, Judy Garland, Patricia Roc, Ingrid Bergman, Phyllis Calvert, Audrey Hepburn, Katharine Hepburn, Margaret Rutherford.

Favourite Films

Gone with the Wind, *Brief Encounter*, *Reach for the Sky*, *African Queen*, *Casablanca*, *Genevieve*, *This Happy Breed*, *The Quiet Man*, *The Wicked Lady*, *The Wizard of Oz*.

Memories

"We'd watch the ceiling lights waiting for the magic moment when they'd start to dim. They'd dim slightly and they'd play a chart pop song really loudly (such as 'Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep' by 'Middle of the Road'). Everyone would clap, sing and cheer along as loudly as they could, then at the end of the song the lights would be dimmed down to only the emergency exits and the whole auditorium would cheer and scream at the top of their voices as the first film began.

Saturday Morning Film Club was a wonderful shared experience that we would talk about at school during the next week. We'd experience fun,

excitement, live vicariously through the characters on the big screen and come out hot and sweaty with orange lips and tongues from our Kia-Ora orange juices!" - Linda Robinson

"But cinemas were palaces. It was a place that took us out of our ordinary world, because you worked 47 hours a week. Some people worked in shops - they worked 54 hours a week. None of this 40 hours and skip off quick. And so your cinema at the end of this week was out of this world. It was a dream. You dreamed - you lived the picture. It took you out of your job." - Ronald Townsend

"The best of it was, no matter what time you went in, you could go in at anytime and sit and watch the film round. So, when I went to see *Genevieve*, it was so good I sat through and saw it twice. I did the same with *Titchfield Thunderbolt*." - Charles North

"The news was one of the main elements of the programme. It was a bit later than the newspapers, of course, but it was the only way to see - visually - what was going on." - Betty Fudge group interview

"You couldn't see everything - I mean, I was averaging about four times a week, about 200/190 times a year - not so much in the summer, of course, just didn't go as much in the summer. And sometimes you had to miss things because too many good things had come on in the same week and then they were lost forever. There were no runs. Some of the cinemas had a change of programme in the week and some showed them for a whole week. And then it was gone." - Norman Olden, still a regular filmgoer who has seen some 13,000 films

"And I loved cartoons, of course. Actually, at the Dominion in Tottenham Court Road, I once found myself on my behind in the aisle because I was laughing so uproariously at Laurel and Hardy that I completely fell out of my seat!" - Norman Olden

"Queuing was quite a common thing, wasn't it? You didn't think about it. You just did it and of course, often you'd get buskers out on the street and you'd forget how long you'd been queuing." - Lil Murrel

"You used to have two main films, the organist, newsreel, possibly a cartoon and a stage show - all the top bands - Jack Hill, Roy Fox. They all had a stage. Every week there was a band and all this for sixpence. You used to get there at half past six and queue outside for the tickets and there'd be the old buskers coming round with their nose flute and playing the spoons." - Vic Welch

"When they built the Lewisham Gaumont it was so exotic inside - art deco. Orange seats, silk curtains, statues at the corner of the stage, big organ. If you paid a bit more for your seats you could go in the front entrance. We used to go in the cheap seats at the back usually. ... The only way to go in at the front was to pay nine pence or above. Nine pence, a shilling or one-and-six. That was a lot of money. You couldn't afford one-and-six that often." - Bobbie and Ronald Townsend

"You got the cheapest seats when you had to pay yourself but when you got your boyfriend ..." - Betty Fudge

"In all honesty, we very rarely had any troubles or problems with them and they were a disciplined lot in that at Deptford I don't ever remember having to have the police available at the end to see them out. And when you visualise there were five or six hundred kids going out onto quite busy roads, they used to go out under our control, with the staff, and depending on how quiet or how well behaved they'd been during the show that was the block that got let out first. The Manager always controlled it from the stage. But the kids were perfectly amenable to this, they accepted it, they were disciplined and they would file out quite reasonable. They had high spirits, of course, but no more ..." - Gordon Sweeney, cinema manager

"We used to have some fun up the back, very quietly. I remember we had a film on, I think it was a circus film, and the other usherette and I were standing together talking and watching the film and they were doing cartwheels, you know. And I said to the other usherette, "He isn't the only one that can do cartwheels. So can I." So she said, "Go on, then, let's see you do it." So I looked around and I just hitched my skirt up a bit tight, did a cartwheel right along the back of where we stood. And in walks the manageress, doesn't she? [laughs] She just laughed. She said "I hope you don't do that every night, Lillian." - Lillian Skene, usherette

"In them days all they sold and in the summer only - ice cream. The girl stood in the interval with a tray, between the two films. Of course, you could never buy ice cream in the shop in the winter in the 1930s. It was a summer treat, Eldorado's or Walls, there was no other ice cream. Nowadays I go to the Filmworks at Greenwich and they come in there with great big tubs of popcorn -to me, when I go to the cinema I don't want any distraction -I just want to see the film. Nowadays they make as much money on the sweets and snacks and peanuts as they make on the admission charge. It's a completely different ball game." - Vic Welch

"I always used to dance all the way home like Fred Astaire [laughs]. I tap danced up the road, or tried to." - Ronald Townsend

How can I be involved?

The BFI is now spreading this initiative UK-wide and are interested in memories of cinema-going from across the country. We are particularly interested in the period 1920s-1960s and would welcome your input. The questions below might just spark a few memories for you:

The Cinemas

- Where did you mainly go to the cinema?
- What was it called? Did it have a local nickname?
- What was it like?
- Do you remember how much it cost to get in? and how much it cost to buy sweets or drinks?
- What are your earliest film-going memories?

- During what period did you go to the cinema most? In what decade? And what age were you?
- When did you go to the cinema? And how often?
- Who did you go with?
- Do you remember queuing? Were there street entertainers working the queues?
- Did you go to Saturday morning pictures? What was that like?
- Describe a typical programme that you enjoyed
- How did you feel when you went to the cinema?
- What did going to the cinema mean to you?
- Where else did you go for entertainment? Did you go to the dance hall or the football?
- Did you ever go 'up town' to the cinema?
- Do you still go to the cinema? How is it different?

The Stars and The Films

- What type of film did you most enjoy? What about now?
- Do you enjoy seeing films again? Is the experience or your feelings about them different now to when you saw them first?
- Did/do you have favourite film stars? What was special about them?
- Did you buy magazines about film stars? If so, which ones?
- Did you ever keep a scrapbook? Did you collect photos or autographs?
- Were you interested in the personal lives and romances of the stars?
- What do you think about 'celebrity' now?
- Did you talk about the films or the stars with your family or friends?
- Did you ever want to model yourself on a star or character?
- Did you ever go to a premiere or see a star in person?
- What do you think of the films of today? How do they compare?

If you want to share something about your cinema-going experiences, please email screendreams@bfi.org.uk or send them to:

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