

Letters to the Editor

Sitting Pretty

Dear Sir, It was fun to see F for Freddie – or rather F for Fox – the organ console ready for take off in your last issue and there was much of interest in Iain Mackintosh's pair of rather breathless 'in Splendour' articles. I did, however, bridle and snort more than once over his review of David Atwell's *Cathedrals of the Movies*. In such a short review why quote Maxwell Fry? He is as relevant as P. Morton Shand or Fred Bentham to mention but two others then out of sympathy with that kind of architecture (and I didn't approve of the Frank Matcham school either!). I now know better.

What puzzles me still is all the drooling over 'a Garden of Dreams': the atmospheric or 'outside-in' cinema as the architect Julian Leathart neatly dubbed them at the time. Mercifully they constituted but a tiny proportion of the cinemas over here. The Americans had a greater kidability, perhaps. What I suppose got up my snout was the use of all that colour lighting to produce a few unconvincing sky effects. What I wanted, and said so in 4000 words in *The Builder* of Sept 2nd 1932, can be summed up as multi-atmosphere not atmospherics. And I wanted this for theatre auditoria as well – hence the anti-Matcham.

One must be careful over the talented Komisarjevsky also. He decorated the Bernstein theatres and only the Granada Tooting presents a real coup de théâtre. Another splendid one-off in this context was the New Victoria by Wamsley Lewis. Conserved it certainly is; but only as a shadow. Alas for the long vanished long seaweed fittings, for example. The real equivalent of Frank Matcham in that world of the super cinema was George Coles. I got quite sentimental the other day when I saw the practice's plate in Craven Street just off the Strand where it always was, fifty years ago. Then there was Harry Weedon and all those Odeons – the genuine Oscar Deutsch ones, not the taken-over Gaumonts and the like of the greater Rank circuit.

It is the Odeons which answer in part Iain's question as to why cinema stages with fly towers persisted in the thirties. The Odeons seldom had anything much of a stage 'in their brief'; nor did they often have the still de rigueur cinema organ. After 1933, when the Odeon circuit took off, it had just become possible to rely wholly on reproduced sound for a show – even to covering the intervals with gramophone records played on the non-sync. In the early years of the talkies not only was a system liable to a breakdown – impossible to remedy quickly in those pre-modular days – but the sound it produced was a monotonous throaty boom.

There was another reason, which I suspect might explain why something completely logical in the silent twenties persisted

right up to the Gaumont State Kilburn of 1937, and that was 'sons', in this case Mick Hyams of Hyams and Gale (H. & G. Cinemas). He enjoyed designing stages and putting shows thereon. Another example was Dave Abrahams and the Regal Edmon-ton. There was an element of indulgent Father and his son's toy train set in the practice. These, mainly Jewish, exhibitor families may have had an eye to business first, of course, but they were *involved* in their cinemas. Or at any rate those who I had any kind of contact with, certainly were. Each cinema you built was something you enjoyed, showed off to your rivals and were proud of. Because you liked it, the public would like it and you personally made money. Often today, the man at the top has no connection with an enterprise except budget and balance sheet.

The Davis Croydon (1928) exemplifies this approach. The last and largest to be built by Israel Davis, they kept it in the family long after they had sold the rest of the circuit to Gaumont British. Disciplining myself not to go on to describe its technical equipment, it is time to get around to the real point of this letter! 'These old cinemas' were not just 'yesterday's technological junk' now to be viewed smugly by we 'live theatre enthusiasts'. They kept the idea of going out for a collective entertainment experience alive and expanded it. They were *theatres* and were referred to as such by the exhibitors who ran them.

You went in and bought your tickets, there and then at the pay box, because you felt in the mood and not because some weeks earlier you had been privileged to buy a pair at the box office. Everyone went in at the same door, shared the same foyers, cafes or restaurants. And there were plenty of staff around, with the house manager well in evidence. Anything less like today's impersonal internment for screening in a robotic cell cannot be imagined. Nor was that technology divisive: unlike disco or gig, it was something for all the family – whatever their age. Let us be thankful to David Atwell, and others, who record as many in as much detail, those pleasure domes – stately or otherwise – before this substantial pageant fades to leave not a rack behind.

As to the Atwell omission of Mackintosh's 'own local pre-talkie cinema' I would humbly beg to point out that David obviously puts first things first; because the local of my own boyhood – the Coliseum Harlesden of 1911 – is not only recorded in his book but there is an excellent photograph, apparently taken from the same balcony seat in which I used to sit!

Fred Bentham

From Mr. L. E. Read.

Dear Sirs,

Iain Mackintosh's review of David Atwells 'Cathedrals of the Movies' (CUE No. 10) smacks of the toffee nosed, 'WE of the theatre . . .' attitude which is not uncommon in certain quarters of the profession. As a 4th generation member of a theatrical family, who is only too willing to testify to the pleasures and delights of the experience of first class theatre, I feel exactly the same about first class cinema.

To dismiss as 'pretty second rate stuff', the many hundreds of (then) A.B.C., Odeon, Granada, and Gaumont cinemas plus the smaller circuit shows, is totally unjustified. During the 1930's whilst on tour with my parents, I visited many such buildings throughout the country, and many were the delights and pleasures of seeing each new interior and its luxurious furnishings. I frequently compared the very comfortable seating available at even the smallest cinemas, with the very hard seating at so many theatres in those days. I still haven't forgotten, when I took my girl friend to the Coliseum in 1949 to see a performance of 'Annie get your Gun', how uncomfortable the dress circle seating was.

Maxwell Fry's view of cinemas as 'those really dreadful by-blows of un-awakened commerce that failed to achieve a total form of any consequence but merely added to the corruption of the High Street' is a load of codswallop!!! I don't doubt that there were people like him saying the same sort of things about the Globe and the Swan in Shakespeare's day.

I have, in fact, thoroughly enjoyed reading Mr. Mackintosh's report on the theatres he has visited during his recent trip to the States. I have, I am sorry to say, only attended one performance in an American theatre, and that was at the Barrymore on Broadway. I notice when discussing the cinemas in America he comments on the 3000 and 4000 seaters being a problem when putting on a show. I see his point, but for the medium for which they were first constructed they were perfectly suitable. Not only were the audiences there to fill them in the '30s and '40s but the size of the screen ensured that even from the back row of the circle you could quite clearly follow the action. He says 'we live theatre enthusiasts may ponder smugly that while a good Victorian theatre may serve a modern actor as superbly as a Stradivarius serves a violinist, etc etc' yes, of course, since the theatre is virtually unchanged since Victorian times for the presentation of most plays, whereas the cinema was a completely new form of audio and visual presentation for entertainment. Even if the cast are all over 6ft, they loose impact and presence from the rear of a 3000 or 4000 seater. The reasons for the contraction of the cinema industry after World War II are many and varied, but the important part it has played in both entertaining and educating the public in the past 60 or more years is reason enough that some of the buildings mentioned in David Atwell's book should be, and indeed are, preserved as monuments to the finest form of mass entertainment the world has so far known.

Yours sincerely,

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P.S. May I just add how much I look forward to each issue of CUE, worth every penny!!! I enjoy the enthusiasm of Francis Reid when he visits a theatre on his travels, just how I feel on the all too rare occasional visits I make to a theatre. By the way, I have a photo I took of the HOLOPHANE board I used to operate back in the 1940's and was wondering if Fred Bentham might like a copy, no charge, of course.