

# Pictures at the Palace

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Having alighted and left our chauffeur with the Volvo to make his peace with the police; my companion and I made our way to the familiar Nash portico, ascended a few steps and entered it for the first time. With a quick glance around he, Richard Greenough the former head of television design for Lord Grade, murmured to me 'Granada Tooting'. Mind you he had not even got the architect right, for the decoration we saw was by Frank Verity in 1903 whereas that was by Theodore Komisarjevsky in 1931. But the glitter and sparkle were there and I knew exactly what he meant. By now our chauffeur, architect Roderick Ham, had joined us and we three set out to climb the grand staircase.

In my youth I was not unfamiliar with the climbing of grand staircases but age has taken its toll, I was out of practice and there was a lot of this one stretching out ahead. Arriving at the top or piano nobile level we turned right drawn by the buzz of animated conversation in the large foyer with crystal chandeliers and all, where the others awaited admission to the show. When the time came there were no girls to usher us to our places or to try to sell us ice creams; but the man on the door, HRH the Duke of Edinburgh, did shake hands with each of us. The picture show which followed came up, in every way, to expectation. But the palace itself, the Buckingham one half-way between the Victoria Palace Theatre and Hyde Park Corner, was surprisingly low-brow in its decorative style inside. And this the reader will gather was what fascinated me. So at last I had proof that those 'picture palaces' of my younger days really were palaces! They were palaces for everyone. We all could go in by the grand entrance, across the richly paved and carpeted floors to take the seat our purse would permit.

One did not have to be in funds to do this regularly once or twice a week, admission was but a fraction of that charged for the greater part of the class-ridden theatres. It was a resort to welcoming winter warmth or air-conditioned comfort in the heat of summer. And they did not, as they came to do after the two monopoly groups took over, switch off the conditioning in order to stimulate ice cream sales. I have always suspected that the smaller family circuits, which preceded these monopolies, did what they did not only to attract the paying customers but to show off to the others, most of whom would be known to them personally. Rather like the dukes and princes did with their opera houses on the continent of Europe.

There is a lot of discussion today on where have the cinema audiences gone, and television and videos are rightly given as the reason for the vast fall in attendances; but some of us have been appalled on our rare visits at what the cinemas themselves are

like. Five years ago I was so affected by such a visit that I let off steam in one of my 'editorials' under the title "The Fall of the House of Ushers"\* and I cannot do better than use some of it now. "The walls and ceiling are covered in a nondescript mid-brown — a sort of non-colour.

Overhead a sparse sprinkling of down-lighters dribble puddles on a carpet of the same non-hue." What I described then did not have its origin in the death throes of some local cinema but in something virtually new — the quadrupling of the once proud Plaza Regent Street in the heart of London's West End. "It is not just the lack of colour and of any decor, it is the total lack of proportion or scale in any of the spaces that jars. Walls and ceilings come where they come; what they do to those into which they cannon appears to have been left to chance. The result is an architectural slum and it is brand new!"

"Gone now are the platoons of uniformed staff. Ushing is reduced to tearing the ticket in half. And they don't even bring the ice

cream into the auditorium! Addicts have to go out into the 'foyer' and get it in the interval. This interval is completely de trop anyway. Since performances are quite separate and it comes after a twenty-five minute compote of shorts and adverts. It is inconceivable that anyone should want to go to the toilet. Some do, however, presumably to give themselves something interesting to do. The rest of the audience are musicked while they gaze bleakly at two splodges of light (from a couple of Patt.23 spots) on the screen — there being no screen tabs — or at the metal brackets which fix the seats to the bare floor."

The Plaza of 1926 which this mess replaces was designed for Paramount by Frank Verity and was one of those picture palaces to which the term 'palace' could truthfully be applied. It was an exact term, and as we saw at the start of this article Verity was not unfamiliar with the 'real' thing. What is it that makes a palace? Is it necessary for a monarch or a duke to reside there? Is Blenheim Palace really one,

Picture 1.

