

Pondering in the Playhouse

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As I sat in the newly refurbished Playhouse down on the Embankment yesterday two thoughts struck me. First I had been right in thinking that of all the theatres in the West End the Playhouse was the only one I had never been in, either backstage or out-front. Second that I had been wrong, when glancing through CUE No. 50, not to stop and read the Iain Mackintosh article* instead of saying to myself I can guess what he is on about! I have now read it and this article is an admixture of the stimuli received in remedying these two omissions. Deciding to keep my thoughts to the demiparadise of this other Eden and not cross the silver sea in which it is set to the envious less happier lands; it occurred to me what a true servant of its time the Edwardian theatre was. Design recognised the fact that all men were born unequal and unless they had a talent for making money, no matter how, they stayed that way: in order of precedence; stalls, dress circle, upper circle, pit and gallery. Even in the last two cheap unreserved areas for which you had to queue on the day, there was a distinction between those who could afford an extra sixpence for "early door". Men and women in their time certainly had their exits and their entrances in many parts, as they rose in financial status and descended from gallery full of strange oaths to stalls and round belly with good capon lined. It is a fact that shows began at 8.30 pm to allow this area to dine and even so the arrival of latecomers was notorious. As bad as hats at the matinee of which more anon.

Being in a mischievous mood I have to say that I am not sure that Iain Mackintosh is right when he attributes the changes in cinema theatre design to changes in social conventions between the wars. Certainly there had to be a change in geometry of the auditorium "to emphasise sightlines to the screen" but the fact that in purpose built super cinemas we all went in through the same door was not quite as democratic as it might appear at first sight. Cinema going in my experience was for a long time looked down upon as a second class occupation, in much the same way as the reading of 'bloods' (Sexton Blake and that ilk) was not real book reading to be done proudly in the open for all to see. Live theatre was quite a different matter. In that respect cinema was regarded by 'the educated' as something for the masses, rather like television was at one time. After all there are still those who can be heard to boast that they never look at it and would certainly not dream of buying a TV set.



The Playhouse Theatre circa 1913

I know what Iain means when he claims that the audience was demoted from an active to a passive role in cinema going. But first there were the silent twenties and I am sure that the musicians in the pit got something of a response from a good house as distinct from a thin. Reginald Foort has remarked on the ordeal of playing to a more or less empty house in early afternoon. Then again the superbly humorous organ accompaniment by Quentin Maclean to Buster Keaton or Harold Lloyd both gave and got something in audience response. It is monstrous what pedestrian accompaniments have been dubbed on most silents since. Again not all members of the audience were passive. There were those who insisted on reading out the captions for the benefit of an aged gran' alongside. These dear old souls may have been slow readers or not at all unlikely, had never learned to read. Then there were those pairs who went for the darker or remoter areas of the large auditorium we, I mean they, were by no means passive at all. Leaving aside the select few more pricey pre-release houses in the West End we have to see the rest of the cinemas, no matter how super or palatial, in terms of the neighbourhoods in which they were built. They covered a larger range than the music halls they ultimately, with the arrival of the talkies, replaced; but unlike most theatres only had to serve their particular suburb.

A cinema opened in 1923, Frank Verity's 3000 seater for Israel Davis the Shepherds Bush Pavilion, was a good example of the

kind of thing. In the mid-twenties when we as a family frequented it; mother would take her two boys in the afternoon to the 1/2d's. These were the rows behind the cross-gangway of the balcony; while right at the very back (afternoons only) were the 8d's. In the evening when father took mother and the two sons out for something really special he wanted to see, like Douglas Fairbanks in the *Thief of Baghdad*, we went in the rows in front of the cross-gangway at 2/4d. The very front rows of the balcony were 3/6d's. There was live prologue to the *Thief* on the stage with dancing girls and appropriate scenery with, although pre-Rank, a Rank sized gong centre stage. All this with a second feature and newsreel into the bargain. All 3000 of us went in by the front door and foyer and the price structure was duplicated downstairs but with the cheap seats at the front.

Now for a strange thought: in the left hand side wall at balcony level was a line of curtain with dummy equivalent along the opposite wall. This would sometimes be gently wound open *after* the house lights had been dimmed, for a group of special persons in the box, said to include the Duke and Duchess of York on occasion, to see *the* film unheralded & unsung. In Mayfair itself the Curzon (not the present building) did not open until 1934. Mind you the manager was the Marquis de Casa Maury and clad in white tie and tails of immense length the switchboard operator, for the grand opening night only, was Frederick Bentham. The Curzon opened with and relied on Conti-

* *How the Committees and Consultants Hijacked Theatre Architecture in the '60s etc.* CUE No. 50.