

A personal history of



by John Garbutt



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you *will* love

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A PITCH, A SYNOPSIS, THE FEATURE PRESENTATION, AN INTERVAL AND THEN THE SEQUEL... (OR 'A PERSONAL HISTORY WITH OCCASIONAL DIVERSIONS!')

The first-ever film society was founded in London in 1925, during the silent era, by a remarkable group of visionaries that included H.G.Wells, George Bernard Shaw and John Maynard Keynes.

Follow that! Well, many did, including (in 1936), the Ipswich Film Society. And this nation's passion for cinema meant that by the 1980s, there were more than 650 such societies scattered throughout the British Isles.

Bury St Edmunds lagged behind that vanguard, with the Bury St Edmunds Film Society emerging in 1966. As though to make up for lost time, the Society swiftly assembled an eclectic programme for its first season, including Kozintsev's *Hamlet* (1964) Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957), *La Belle*

et la Bête (1946), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), Godard's *Breathless* (1960), *Otto e Mezzo* (1963), *Les Enfants du Paradis* (1945), *Viridiana* (1961), *Alphaville* (1965), *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955), *Man of Aran* (1934), *L'Éclisse* (1962), *Culloden* (1964), *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), *The Trial* (1962), and *The Kitchen* (1961). Shorts included Chaplin's *The Pawnshop* (1916), and *Incident at Owl Creek* (1962), from the story by Ambrose Bierce. The rich international flavour set a precedent because, of the 18 titles, 11 were foreign language films.

How to account for this sudden burst of breathless activity on the film scene? Of course, this was in a time without the Cineworld multiplex, and with one functioning cinema in Hatter Street, now after transformation, the Abbeygate Picturehouse. Back then, it screened popular programmes dictated by commercial interests or cinema chains. So film-lovers wanting anything else had to travel to Cambridge or Norwich or London to find cinemas acknowledging film as an art form.

CULLODEN (1964)



IVAN THE TERRIBLE (1944)



MAKING A PITCH

So how much did the Bury St Edmunds Film Society cost as a start-up? Precisely £25, though that sum meant more then than it does today. The Vice-Principal of the West Suffolk College procured this amount from some mysterious source, possibly the secretive 'hospitality fund'. Was this an act of kindness or charity? It was probably to encourage a new member of staff (the present writer) who had the audacity to make a pitch, and ask.

The inspiration came from student days and the experience of seeing a film classic screened by a student-run Film Society in a large hall crammed with students. The film was Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* and the sponsor was the History Association. At the West Suffolk College there was a small hall with a projection booth; there were 16mm projectors, there was

a friendly technician to act as projectionist, and there were students and members of staff willing to serve on a committee. Everything came together.

WATCH THIS SCREEN

The first screen that the Film Society owned was inherited from a local school, along with stage curtains. The screen served its purpose, even after the Film Society moved out of College premises and shuffled into a variety of venues, the most convenient of which was the Art Gallery, now known as Smith's Row. Theatrical performances had taken place there, once upon a time, so the Film Society moved as much of its equipment as possible into the Gallery store-room, with the generous co-operation of the curator, who was equally generous in making only a nominal charge. At its best, the Film



BREATHLESS (1960)



KING KONG (1933)

Society presented 21 films in a single season.

The Bury St Edmunds Film Society also contributed a series of films to the annual BSE Festival and arranged a few shows for other organisations such as Amnesty. One untypical screening in the 1970s, for *Green Deserts*, stands out in the memory: on a warm summer's evening, the equipment was set up in the middle of a field near Rougham for a screening of *King Kong* (1933) at midnight, to an audience of adults and children sitting on the grass.

The second screen that the Film Society came to own had an unusual history; it was advertised by a London teaching hospital as 'free to anyone willing to collect'. A Cinemascope screen free of charge! This was not to be missed, though the Film Society did make a £10 donation. This cumbersome 16' x 9' screen on wooden rollers travelled on a roof-rack in a nerve-racking 70-mile journey, till it

found a home, backstage, in our next venue, the Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds. And the extremely able technical staff at the Theatre would hoist the screen near the front of the stage whenever it was needed.

THE PRACTICAL PROJECTIONIST; HOW WE CONQUERED THE CHANGEOVER

We found that the Art Gallery suffered from poor acoustics, and committee members sometimes said that it was preferable to screen foreign language as against English-speaking films there, because at least one could read the subtitles. But the Theatre Royal has no such limitations. The Theatre manager even allowed the Film Society to store a fold-away projection booth, custom-built to fit into a box in the Upper Circle, close to where it was needed. From this vantage-point the Film Society projectors could throw an image 35ft away onto a big screen. With the services of a projectionist

who also worked for the East Anglian Film Archive, the Film Society, now in a National Trust property that was a privilege to use as a venue, had facilities beginning to approach the quality of a cinema with an ambience that no cinema could equal.

Those who have seen *The Last Picture Show* (1971) directed by Peter Bogdanovich will recall a certain nostalgia for the old cinema and its forgotten practices. A cinema with a built-in projection booth and projectors permanently fixed and focused on the screen has advantages over an auditorium with non-professional mobile equipment needing to be carried in and set up for a single show. So why do we do it? Is there a certain madness among film enthusiasts, a kind of obsessive-compulsive disorder, a derangement?

Certainly some kind of obsession lay behind our experiments to find a perfect method for changing from one reel to another. Imagine two

projectors are standing side by side, one with the first reel of a film, the other with the second. The first reel is running, the image is on the screen, and two white spots are about to appear in the corner of the picture (often unnoticed by the audience). The second white spot, if it is there, is the cue to start the second projector, already focused and ready to start (after the blank white leader).

If the timing is perfect, the changeover will be seamless. If not, there will be a clunk, a gap, a judder, a view of a blank white end leader, and an annoying disturbance to the smooth flow of the film. Our first solution, using our own custom-built projection booth, was to fit sliding doors on 'Swish' tracks over two of the three small windows. These windows were styled on those seen in traditional cinemas or films about cinemas. The first and third windows were for projecting, the middle one for viewing. With practice and good timing, the first sliding door

could be slid shut exactly on cue and the second projector immediately switched on. A refinement was to have the second projector already running and to flick open its sliding door at the right moment.

But this method relied on human judgement twice over. Our second device reduced the scope for error by half. It consisted of an array of three three-way domestic light switches so wired up that with the left-hand switch on and the right-hand switch off, the middle switch would instantly cut out the left and switch on the right, and vice versa.

Later we discovered that professional changeover devices could be bought for £40–£50. Ours cost £1 and was still working in 2003 when DVDs arrived and changed everything.

INTERVAL

Normally we don't interrupt a film by introducing an interval, except when the caption INTERMISSION suddenly appears on screen and it seems impolite to ignore it. But when screening films at the Theatre Royal we always observed theatrical custom and understood the need to generate income for the Theatre from



THE SEVENTH SEAL (1957)

refreshments, including the bar. This meant previewing each film to find an appropriate break. This is the same as the choice we had to make in the recent showing of *JFK* (1991) that also, when originally shown in the cinema, ran without an intermission. The afternoon preview was an opportunity to note down the cues for changing over from one reel to another on our twin 16mm projectors, and to check for any problems and test the sound system. The Theatre staff also liked to know

the approximate time of the interval and the Box Office could answer ticket-holders who asked, 'When is the show likely to end?' After the preview the equipment was left ready to start with a single switch, and all our worries would be over – in theory.

Unless of course the unforeseeable happened: a projector lamp burning out in the middle of a film. And then someone had to know how to remove a hot lamp and insert a spare, in the minimum of time, using a torch, with the audience waiting – because the lifetime of any lamp, including a 'long-life' domestic lamp, is unpredictable, and in a theatre a kind of theatrical tension occurs, naturally, with the projectionist suddenly in the centre of it all.

Does this sound like a true experience? Just to keep projectionists on their toes: the same will happen eventually to the lamp of every DVD projector.

The Film Society designed and printed its free programmes for individual shows, as always, while the Theatre staff obligingly produced each season's publicity leaflet, titled 'The Film Society at the Theatre Royal'. Under favourable conditions, and with a favourable contract, the Film Society took the opportunity to include such films as *The Magic Flute* (1975) directed by Ingmar Bergman, *Don Giovanni* (1979) director Joseph Losey, shown twice, and *Carmen* (1984) director Francesco Rosi, shown three times. Otherwise the best box-office return was for Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* (1989), with a full house. The highest-ever Film Society membership of 152 was achieved at the Theatre in 1988-89. The number of shows per season decreased as fewer dates became available. But it was the two-year closure of the Theatre for refurbishment that brought these ideal arrangements to an abrupt end.



HAMLET (1964)



ALPHAVILLE (1965)

THE SEQUEL

When the Theatre Royal reopened after refurbishment in 2007, the Film Society found the new contract unfavourable, did nothing, and lost momentum. There was a short-lived recovery, during which the Film Society hired the then Hollywood Cinema for 14 shows, gaining 53 members. This period was notable for two double bills and a sell-out for Visconti's *The Leopard* (1963). But overall, expenditure seriously exceeded income. Then the worthy sequel in 2011: an appeal for volunteers attracted five new members, who discovered a new venue, The Hunter Club. A new committee relaunched the Film Society in November of that year, and gave it the revitalised outlook that distinguishes its presentations today. Let the credits roll !

HARD FACTS

How many times in the past has the Film Society considered and reconsidered its mode of

operation? Impossible to say. There has always been a dilemma when choosing between a high initial all-inclusive membership fee, plus income from guest tickets, and a low initial membership fee with pay-per-film show admission, plus income from guest tickets or some kind of 'day membership'. Until 2011, doubts over the former always led to the adoption of the latter.

For example, in 2008 we took advice from two other Film Societies. The facts we gleaned from a head-to-head discussion in Ipswich with the Chairman of Ipswich Film Society illustrate our perennial dilemma, and as they are not confidential, they can be given here.

Over the years, Ipswich Film Society had built up an 80-strong core membership and was in an advantageous position to plan each season, with a guaranteed income of $80 \times \pounds 30 = \pounds 2,400$, in other words, working on a high all-inclusive membership fee, plus income from guest tickets. Expenditure was defined as the all-inclusive hire fee of $\pounds 250$ per booking at the



THE LEOPARD (1963)



HENRY V (1989)



DON GIOVANNI (1979)

then Hollywood Film Theatre, well placed in the town centre. So at least 9 shows were guaranteed. With, say, 20 guests per screening at $\pounds 5$ each, the programme could extend to a dozen or more shows. But a back-of-the-envelope calculation indicated that a more modest tally of say 50 members would not be viable; that was the most optimistic figure we could project for this mode of operation in Bury and it was clear that it would not cover a hire fee at that level.

Meanwhile, correspondence with the Chairman of the 'Film Society of the Year' in Lincolnshire gave a different perspective. At Louth, like Ipswich Film Society, they were hiring a local cinema, but chose to keep the annual membership fee below $\pounds 5$, relying on admission charges for their main income. This was more like our customary mode of operation. And so, insecure and unpredictable though it was, on this occasion we returned to the same system as before.

DON'T FORGET THE FACTOTUM

The Society has a record of all those who have served in office and on the committee; there are some who should never be forgotten and some who, especially from the recent past, have earned our heart-felt gratitude. Though too many to be listed here, in due course their names and roles will be highlighted elsewhere on our website.

The key role in any film society is one that does not come up for election at the AGM, and if it did, no one would apply for it. This role requires more adaptability than that of the Chairman, communication skills as varied as those of the Secretary, and an awareness of the state of funds equal to that of the Treasurer. It is the unacknowledged, underestimated, unrewarded role of factotum.

So what is the job description and what kind of person may fit that role? The job may consist of anything and everything as the need may arise. A PhD in DIY would be useful, as would the ability instantly to design a notice with legible lettering, the ability to find the way to the main fusebox in the dark, the ability to lift tables

and chairs, and to step into the shoes of any of the above-named officers at a minute's notice. Possession of a First Aid Certificate is an advantage, just in case. He or she needs a quick mind and a thick skin. He or she needs an unlimited fund of time, optimism and a sense of humour. Add the possession of a watch keeping perfect time, a mobile, a roll of sticky tape and a felt pen, and there you have it, the indispensable assets for the engine behind the organisation.

Every AGM should either begin or end with a performance of Rossini's witty aria *Largo al factotum* from *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1816), live or, if necessary, on DVD.

REVEALED: SECRETS OF PROGRAMMING A SEASON'S FILMS

Members must sometimes have wondered, as they scanned the list of films in a season's programme, where all these titles came from. How were they selected? Do they fit together in some subtle way, so that all will gradually become clear with each subsequent screening? Or were they simply drawn out of a hat?



THE LAST PICTURE SHOW (1971)

Members have always been asked for recommendations. The elected committee is, after all, tasked with the responsibility of making a meaningful selection of films recommended. Committee members may be assumed to know what they are doing. That is why they have been elected. Indeed, it is assumed that they will bring their own ideas to the table when planning a season's programme. Making a short-list would be a logical step. Discussing options, debating priorities, eliminating titles of doubtful appeal, are naturally part of the selection process. How then does a poor choice sometimes get through?

Looking at the past as well as at the present, one might say that selection is mainly a matter of asking the right questions. Has anyone present actually seen this film? (Caution if only one). If no-one has seen it, are we justified in relying solely on awards, and awards for what? Film industry hype and our own recent experience suggests that a film that has garnered awards cannot be guaranteed to please our audience. Are we relying too much

on the film director's reputation, without finding out whether this film is one of the director's best? Are we too heavily influenced by film critics on TV, critics in the popular press, and critics in periodicals? (Strangely, the opinions of critics in *Sight and Sound*, the magazine of the British Film Institute, may be less relevant to entertainment values than to film study, film history and film theory, inseparable as they are). Are films in any one genre over-represented?

Do great acting and star appeal make up for deficiencies in other departments? If this film is adapted from a literary source, is it merely a travesty of the original? Does the film deal responsibly with any issues raised? For some, these last two questions might lead to deselecting a film with otherwise obvious attractions. Holding a group of films together in a themed series is one way of making sense of a programme, so that their value together will exceed the sum of the parts. But within that series, it is not surprising that sometimes the titles will still appear to have been drawn out of a hat.



BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN (1925)

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Anyone who compiles a list of favourite films will be saying something, perhaps too much, about himself or herself, and the give-away will be even more revealing if it goes on to list favourite actors and film stars. What if one admits to enjoying films by Marx Brothers almost more than anything else? Their knock-about anarchic comedies with quick-fire dialogue in *A Night at the Opera* (1935) and *Duck Soup* (1933), and *Monkey Business* (1931) – this with script by S.J.Perelman – can be relied upon to cheer up a dull winter's day, and if the presence of Grand Dame Margaret Dumont in the first two is sometimes irritating, then someone has to be there to receive Groucho's insults without looking too surprised. To keep them company, how about the straight-faced Buster Keaton and the comic genius of Chaplin especially in *The Gold Rush* (1925), *The Great Dictator* (1940) and *Modern Times* (1936). Then comes an admission from the cinemagoer as escapist who gets carried away by epics with a great historical sweep, films that live in the memory, such as Sergei Bondarchuk's version of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1967, 502 mins), not to be confused with the earlier 1956, 208 minute version by Carlo Ponti and Dino de Laurentiis, even though it has the delectable Audrey Hepburn; and Abel Gance's *Napoleon* (1927, 378 mins), as shown on three screens with live orchestra at the Barbican.

But a list of this filmgoer's favourite actors and film stars could occupy a page or more and it seems only right to top the list of admiration for Helen Mirren, who has received a Bafta Fellowship for a lifetime's achievement (spanning theatre, films and TV), though a personal list would follow with the versatile Meryl Streep and Judi Dench, while among male actors, the odd assortment would include Peter Sellers, Sean Connery, Anthony Hopkins, George Clooney and Robert Redford – in *Out of Africa* (1985) and the 1974 version of *The*



Great Gatsby, not forgetting a tribute to his Sundance Festival.

Two out of many possible footnotes – there could have been a hundred. The first is to record a liking for the much-criticised adaptation of Terence Rattigan's play *The Prince and the Showgirl* (1957), with Laurence Olivier as the Ruritanian Prince and Marilyn Monroe as the chorus girl, Olivier directing; the film has always been dogged by the 3rd assistant director's account of the antipathy between the two stars, as incompatible off-screen as their characters are in the film. It has not been neglected on TV. What is fascinating is the appropriateness of the clash between Olivier's old-school patrician acting style and Monroe's post-war Actor's Studio immersive style, both presented in extraordinary detail, While the audience begins by asking the conventional question, will his iciness ever be defrosted by her indulgent warmth, several more questions arise: does her warmth not provoke his defences; has time given a feminist edge to the critique of the power-wielding patronising male; and are we seeing an unbridgeable gap that seems to forecast dysfunctional relationships in a real-life royal family that the press has feasted upon? A final footnote: many good films can be said to have opened one's eyes. But those who have watched Neil Brand's three-part TV series on film music, paying special tribute to Bernard Herrmann and concluding with the remarkable achievements of electronic music replacing orchestral music on film soundtracks, can also say that their ears too have been opened. **JG**