

Interview with respondent 0726

Date: 9/12/2014

Location: Duke of York's Cinema, Brighton

Interviewer: Emma Pett

Interviewer: Thanks very much for agreeing to do this and give up your time. So, I suppose probably for the context of the interview, it would be helpful if you just began by explaining where you lived in the 60s and whether that changed throughout the decade.

Respondent: Ok, well I was born and brought up in Brighton. I was 16 in 1960, and still living at home ...

Interviewer: OK, great, so when you were at home, living in Brighton, can you remember which cinemas you went to?

Respondent: Yes, there were three in particular, the Regent, the ABC Savoy and the Gaiety. The Regent was built in 1921 I think, and was once considered one of Britain's finest cinemas. I loved the grandeur of it, it had a stunning façade in Queens Road with another entrance in North Street, a vast classical interior, nearly 3000 seats, grand foyers and galleries and had a built in restaurant with its own orchestra! It was pretty special, I think. The equally impressive Regent Dance Hall was upstairs, another amazing bygone place.

Interviewer: It sounds very palatial, did it feel exciting going there, was there a sense of luxury or ...

Respondent: Yes, exciting, I loved the building, also another really big cinema was the Savoy, about 2500 seats, built with restaurants and cafes, two entrances, on the seafront and East Street and a basement garage. It wasn't pretty but I spent many happy hours there watching films or in the Hideout café, a coffee bar I went to with friends or with a date.

Interviewer: Did you go to the cinema often in the early 60s, then, with your friends, or on a date, was it a regular thing ...

Respondent: In the early sixties I'd say I went once or twice a week, but by the end of the decade when I was working it was probably more like once a month or sometimes may be even less, I can't remember when I stopped going. Oh, another one I went to a lot in the early 60s was the Gaiety, one of the less central cinemas built in the late 30s but it was still pretty big, about 1300 seats, it was closer to where I lived and had an imposing sort of curved frontage and a distinctive art deco style pay-booth. There was a handsome curved staircase which led up to another spacious area and then more stairs to the circle door. In my imagination I suppose the plush carpets, sofas and framed prints of Hollywood stars made it feel more like a film set, it was very glamorous, I thought. I grew up going to the Gaiety, but as the decade progressed I suppose I tended to visit it less often, then it

became a porn club, I think, and was finally demolished to build a new road.

Interviewer: Yes, a lot of cinemas had closed by the end of the decade, that's one of the interesting things about the sixties ... and yet at the beginning of the decade it was still much more like the 50, people went to the cinema more regularly ...

Respondent: Yes, back in the day a cinema visit, or going to the pictures as my parents called it, was a full afternoon or evening experience. And if you couldn't get in to see your first choice, then around the corner there was something else showing. A typical programme would include a B film, or second feature, often poor but sometimes not bad ... or even a back-list film doing the rounds again, I remember 'Look at Life', a long-running series of short travelogue cum human interest cum all else, with relentlessly cheery commentaries, they were often a gap filler. Sometimes there was a cartoon, nearly always a newsreel, Gaumont British, British Movietone or Pathe. Then there was the Pearl and Dean advertising, trailers for forthcoming films and an intermission. I remember that if 'full supporting programme' appeared on a billboard there may have been a longer than usual main feature with only a Look at Life as support. Or sometimes, instead of the B feature, there was a series of low budget shorts such as the Man of Mystery series or Edgar Lustgarten Presents, which were adapted from famous legal cases, the only one I recall in any detail today featured a man who, if I remember correctly, sued a woman for breach of marital promise, which was rare apparently, and there was fraud or other

dirty work involved. Sorry, this is not a riveting example for your archives, I fear...

Interviewer: No, no need to apologise, it's all interesting stuff, the differences in the programmes are really fascinating ...

Respondent: But yes, you're right, behind the nostalgia was the undeniable truth that in the 60s cinema was in decline. Young people still flocked to see the popular new films but our parents increasingly preferred watching TV, I think. Conversions of cinemas into bingo halls spread, I seem to remember, quite quickly, though some cinemas fought a rearguard action, hosting bingo by day and showing films at night. I think it's interesting to reflect that we all watching those modern swinging London films in cinemas built for the Jazz Age of the 1920s and the Hollywood Golden Age of the 1930s, so no wonder change was on the way, really. Although one small Brighton cinema that seemed doomed in the 1960s, the Duke of York's, survived against the odds and here we are today ... a rare and happy exception!

Interviewer: Yes, it's a great cinema, isn't it? So you can remember the Brighton cinemas from the early 60s very well, can you remember seeing any particular films at those cinemas?

Respondent: Well yes, so many, West Side Story, Far from the Madding Crowd, My Fair Lady. I remember going to see Lawrence of Arabia at the Regent, sitting fairly near the front of the stalls, I can still vividly remember the almost overwhelming visual impact on the wide screen of those slowly scanned

desert landscapes and the long action sequences, all exquisitely shot by the great cinematographer, Freddie Young. Equally vivid, the memory of having developed a sore throat earlier that same day, and after 3 and a half hours 'in the desert' as it were, of eventually emerging into the cool night air with a croaky voice and desperate for a drink! An epic evening in every sense, one of my fondest memories of that cinema ...and there was also the Astoria, I've just remembered, they held Saturday morning cinema for children, which became the ABC Minors.

Interviewer: Oh yes, I've heard about this from other people, did you go ... I suppose you were too old to have gone in the 60s?

Respondent: Oh yeah, I went in the 50s, it was a riot ... also I remember in 1962 going with a friend to see my first Cinerama film, How the West Was Won, in a giant Marquee on Hove's seafront lawns. Film guides have since rated it highly, but apart from the visual impact of such a wide screen, I've got almost no memory of that film and have never seen it since!

Interviewer: What did you make of Circlerama, as an experience?

Respondent: Well I travelled to London as well to see a demonstration of Circlerama at a venue near Piccadilly Circus ...

Interviewer: Really, what was that like?

Interviewer: Well again, it didn't leave much of an impression, I found it boring and soon left.

Interviewer: OK ... so you mentioned that you saw West Side Story twice, did you like musicals?

Respondent: Oh yes there were some great musicals in the 60s, I went to see West Side Story several times, with friends and a girlfriend. Another cinema I remember I went to on date was the ABC Granada in Hove, by the 1960s it was Hove's only remaining cinema, I think ... and it tended to show, in alternate weeks, the same main feature as either Brighton's ABC or the ABC Savoy cinema. I usually went to the Brighton cinemas but can remember several times when exceptionally long queues prompted the decision to make a dash to the nearest bus stop for a 20 minute journey across town to Portland Road in Hove. We usually missed the B films but always seemed lucky enough to get into the Granada for the main feature. So I went there once on a date with a girl who lived over that way. The film we saw was The Train, one of my all-time favourite 60s films starring Burt Lancaster, Jeanne Moreau and Paul Schofield. The date, alas, was a less memorable one off. Ah well ...

Interviewer: Can you remember what the atmosphere was like inside, did people behave well, or

Respondent: I recall often being irritated by people talking in adjacent seats and also eating sweets with noisy wrappers, which was an intermittent low level accompaniment to the movie soundtrack! I was probably part of the problem in that regard! As for smoking, whether one did or not, we were

generally more tolerant of smoky interiors back then than we are now ...
although I can't actually recall my attitude to smoking back in those days.

Interviewer: No, it was so normal it's hard to remember ... so thinking more about the films you enjoyed, you've mentioned Lawrence of Arabia, did you enjoy epic adventure stories?

Respondent: Yes, I enjoyed lots of types of film, I mean Ben Hur was made in 1959 but was still big in the 60s, when I first saw it, I think. For sheer breathtaking spectacle and story, I think it's probably the Epic of all Epics! I also liked El Cid with its strong cast and exciting visual impact ... but I also liked lots of other films, there were lots of good literary adaptations in the 60s, A Man for All Seasons was wonderful, an intelligent film... it enthralled me from start to finish and had an amazing cast. Another excellent film was A High wind in Jamaica about children caught up in a piracy adventure, do you know it?

Interviewer: No, I'm not familiar, no...

Respondent: it had echoes of Lord of the Flies, very intelligent and well-acted. Another good adaptation was The Chalk Garden with Hayley Mills and Deborah Kerr, a great movie based on the Enid Bagnell play, and she was local ...some of the location filming happened in Brighton, it's one of my all-time favourites.

Interviewer: Did you like seeing somewhere familiar on the big screen?

Respondent: Yes, yes I did, there was a thrill to that I suppose ...

Interviewer: What about the kitchen sink films, did you watch many of those?

Respondent Yes, I did. They were films that defined the 60s for me, things like Morgan
A Suitable Case for Treatment, Billy Liar with Tom Courtenay and Julie
Christie caught that boring grey northern existence, Billy aspiring to the
swinging 60s scene but lacking the courage ultimately and becoming part
of his prison ... that resonated somehow, the characterisation struck a
chord with me and I have reflected on aspects of this film often throughout
the years. Tony Richardson was a marvellous director, I thought ...

Interviewer: Were you aware of directors much during the 60s, was that something
that drew you to a film?

Respondent: Everyone knew Alfred Hitchcock of course, myself included, and I was
perhaps aware of David Lean in 1960, though it was probably in the later
60s that I started to look out for and appreciate the work of other directors
such as Billy Wilder, John Huston, John Schlesinger, William Wyler. I
expected great things from Peter Collinson following The Italian Job but
was disappointed, really ...

Interviewer: What about the Nouvelle Vague and the European directors, did you like
them, or...

Respondent: I saw some foreign language films with sub-titles in the late 60s but didn't
develop much interest in them until much later, really. I can't actually

remember any examples now from the 60s. The main venues for them in Brighton were The Paris, which I think closed in the mid 60s, and The Continental which slid over to almost all porn movies by the late 60s. But I did see plenty of European films, in English or dubbed, in mainstream cinemas, like Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns starring Clint Eastwood. Also Viva Maria with Brigitte Bardot ... there must've been others ...

Interviewer: You preferred British and American films, though...

Respondent: Yes, probably

Interviewer: Was that because they resonated with you, spoke to your experience?

Respondent: Perhaps. My father, probably like many others, used to say "Trouble with you lads is you all think you're James Bond". Which might in turn have been a comment on Britain's confusion over its status in the world at that time. Also, there were some things, in topical dramas or comedies that chimed with personal experience of work, families, and lifestyle aspirations, if only through shared age group and social circumstances of certain characters ...

Interviewer: Like Billy Liar?

Respondent: Yes. Beyond that, most of what I saw was entertainment, be it high or lowbrow, from historical dramas to rom-coms to James Bond!

Interviewer: Do you think cinema was an important part of your life, looking back...

Respondent: Well, I guess each rising generation sees itself embodying the collective popular agenda of its time and place, but the 60s, with its explosion of youth culture, social change and exciting developments across the arts will always be remembered as a special time to reach one's teens and early 20s, I think. Of course, truth to tell, most of us were followers rather than pace-setters in the swinging 60s. But then again, visits to the cinema probably helped many of us to narrow the gap. Certainly for me it is still a potent memory to recall that sense of anticipation each occasion when the lights went down for the start of the latest must-see feature, sitting somewhere within a mainly peer group audience in one of Brighton's largest temples of dreams, dramas and delusions. So for a couple of hours or so on a Friday evening we all felt a little closer to the swinging sixties scene. Then it was back home on the bus, elated, and with a bit more swagger in our step, perhaps ...

Interviewer: OK, I'm aware you don't have much time, that's a good note to leave it on, thank you very much.

Respondent: Thanks, it's been a pleasure.

End of Interview

