The History of The Cinema Usherette: 300 word summary

This project combines 2 exhibitions, a catalogue, public talks, and an open access web-based archive, presenting a unique insight into the role of the cinema usherette in (primarily) British cinemas during the 1920s-1960s. It addresses a significant oversight within the vast canon of literature in the fields of cinema histories, audience studies, and women’s historiographies. Ms Balogh’s research, gained from a period spanning over 20 years, has been collated from oral history interviews with former usherettes, photographs (official and personal), cinema archives in Europe, the U.S. and Australia, and related epiphenomena. Positioning her work within the frameworks of feminism, visual culture and exhibition practice, Ms Balogh utilises a diverse range of sources from which to present the many historical narratives of the cinema usherette, explaining why she has become such a popular cultural icon, how the audience and the cinema organisation perceived her, whilst also providing a tantalising vision of her own relationship with the audience. Designed by Ms Balogh, this project has brought this previously unknown history to the public and academic arenas. Ms Balogh curated the exhibitions, shown at widely populated venues, and a programme of public talks and presentations by Ms Balogh, supported and enhanced the exhibitions” content, generating further public engagement and knowledge. An international audience has been reached through a web-based archive (cited as a top ten cinema related history resource), which provides a visual and textual resource of the history of the cinema usherette. Ms Balogh’s research has been used for T.V. programmes, fiction authors, academic writers, as well as informing three AHRC projects:

*Remembering 1960s British Cinema-going,*
(http://www.ucl.ac.uk/cinemamemories)

*The Major, Minor Cinema: Highlands & Islands Film Guild 1946-71,* (http://hifilmguild.gla.ac.uk/)

*The Projection Project.* (https://projectionproject.warwick.ac.uk/)
Welcome

The cinema usherette played a significant role in the pleasure of going to the pictures, particularly from the 1920s-1950s, where she provided both a feminine glamour and a commanding presence to the resplendent picture palaces that emerged from the 1920s. This website celebrates the cinema usherette, through the collection of recorded memories, personal and official photographs and related information.

Follow us on Twitter @cinemausherette

The small (but important) print

Recent Posts

- May 2017 – New publication
- September 2016 – San Jose
- August 2016 – Margaret Herrick library, Los Angeles
- August 2016 – Journal Publication
- San Jose and San Francisco

Recent Comments

Further reading

Links open in a new window

In the beginning
- The 1920s
- The 1930s
- The 1940s
- The 1950s

Links to other great websites

- The Cinema Museum
- The Cinema Theatre Association
- The Cinema and Theatre Historical Society of Australia Inc
- The Early Cinema in Scotland Project
- London’s Silent Cinemas
- Picturegoing
- Women’s Film and Television Network
Stars in the Aisles

The History of the Usherette

Eva Balogh
This exhibition is a glimpse into the world of the cinema usherette. It is drawn from research undertaken by Eva Balogh from the last twenty years. It is hoped that this selection illustrates how very important the usherette was to both the pleasure of going to the pictures and, the enterprise of the cinema, whilst also providing some understanding as to why she has become such a popular cultural icon.

This project began in the 1990s when Eva Balogh discovered there was very little written about the usherette and their place in cinema history. She interviewed several former usherettes who had worked at cinemas in Portsmouth, U.K. These interviews revealed fascinating facts about how the usherette contributed to the cinema organization and, how pivotal they were to both the industry and the audience’s film-going experience.

The cinema workforce, particularly during the 1920s to 1950s was made up of both men and women and whilst there were references to be found about the role of the male manager on the cinema circuit, there was little to be found on the female workforce. She had, quite simply, been overlooked in most cinema historiography. Eva is now bringing together research from many sources and geographical locations (including the U.K. Australia and the U.S.A.) to create a unique archive (www.cinemausherettes.com) and, through exhibitions, academic publications and public talks; her work is finally shining the spotlight on these Stars in the Aisles.
IN THE EARLY DAYS, there were no purpose-built cinemas. Films were screened on an ad hoc basis, at fairgrounds, music halls, theatres or in public halls known as ‘penny gaffs’ (named after their entrance price). It was a cheap distraction, and customers packed into cramped, unventilated auditoriums. Staff would often have to spray perfume in order to mask the smell that inevitably arose from such conditions. It was not until the 1910s that an increasing number of larger cinemas began to appear in cities. The Cinematograph Act of 1909 had demanded managers pay greater attention to public safety: a separate projection room, fire exits and staff in charge of visitors’ safety. It was in this period that we begin to see a growing cinema workforce, which included the usherette.

The 1920s and 1930s saw the usherette become an established feature of every cinema. Wanted ads appeared in local papers and women across the country joined the ranks. The job was an appealing alternative to the long hours and drudgery of shop work and domestic service (the other primary employments for working class women at that time). Youngsters learning the ropes started as ‘chocolate girls’, selling confectionery and cigarettes from a tray. As they became more experienced they could be promoted to ‘ice-cream girl’, usherette and, eventually, cashier.

In many ways the usherette was expected to become a part of the picture palace’s dream world. Dressed in a stylish uniform and wearing a pleasant smile, she stood at the threshold between the real world and the movies. Betty Weston, who worked at the Rex on Fratton Road and the Tivoli on Copnor Road, recalled how stylish and attractive her uniform was: “green with reverses and a kick pleat on each knee, a cuff done in orange, with the gold braid on the cuff”. A little green hat with orange round it, like a pillbox. And, gold at the Tivoli…. We had a wide sort of gold braid...”
Aisles started the Usherettes working during the war faced extra challenges. As bombs fell nightly on major cities, there was always the chance one would hit a cinema. Molly Rowe, usherette at the Regent on London Road, recalled the air-raid sirens wailing during films. On hearing the siren, a lot of people would leave. “But there were always the one or two that used to stay.” Molly spoke of hearing “the guns going, shooting at the planes as they were passing over the coast.” But unless a bomb literally landed on the cinema, it would remain open. It must have taken some bravery to stand your ground under such conditions.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the 1950s proved a difficult decade for cinema. Hollywood was struggling with declining attendances and anti-trust legislation, which forced the major studios to sell off their theatre chains. In Britain, cinema attendance more than halved between 1950 and 1960. Major companies like Rank and ABC began closing establishments that failed to make a profit. Efforts were made to maintain the usherette’s iconic status. For example, a national competition sought out “Miss Cinema of Great Britain.” In 1956, Portsmouth lady Sylvia Abraham won the competition. Her prizes included a ‘Miss Cinema sash’, a week’s holiday in Morecambe, a £20 watch and a kiss from film star Zachary Scott.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the age of the picture palace reach its nadir. Cinema closures that had been so prevalent in the 1950s continued well into the 1960s. Some were converted into alternative entertainment venues such as bingo halls and nightclubs. By the1970s, many of the old picture palaces were being split up into multi-screen cinemas, which, though smaller in capacity, could make money from multiple screenings. Those that survived were often in a major state of disrepair. As Christopher Fowler puts it in his recent book, Film Freak, cinemas were slowly turning “from cathedrals into crypts.”

The 1940s was the golden age of cinema. Throughout the decade, annual attendances were well over one billion. During World War II, cinemas offered a brief respite from the horrors of the Blitz, a chance to watch newsreels of events unfolding in Europe, and a place to meet and socialise with friends.

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1. Florence Wall (c.1940s). Florence was an usherette at The Ambassador, Cosham. The Carlton, Cosham and The Plaza, Bradford Junction, Portsmouth, 1943-1949 approximately.

2. Staff at The Regent/Gaumont London Road, North End, Portsmouth, (1933) Molly Rowe is in the centre of the image dressed in white denoting she was an ice-cream girl. Molly worked at The Regent/Gaumont and The Odeon, London Road, North End, Portsmouth, 1933-1978 as a chocolate girl, and usherette, a cashier and a secretary. Staff at The Regent/Gaumont. (c.1940s) Molly Rowe, front row, far right.

3. Staff at The Regent/Gaumont (c.1940s) Molly Rowe, third left, front row.

4. The Regent/Gaumont. (c.1940s) Molly Rowe, front row, far right.

5. Florence Wall and friends on the rooftop of The Plaza/Gaumont Bradford Junction, Portsmouth (c.1940s) Florence is far left.

6. Molly Rowe as cashier at The Regent/Gaumont (c.1940s)

7. Florence Wall and friends on the rooftop of The Plaza/Gaumont Bradford Junction, Portsmouth (c.1940s) Florence is far left of the group.

8. Florence Wall and friends on the rooftop of The Plaza/Gaumont Bradford Junction, Portsmouth (c.1940s) Florence is far right, back row of the group.

9. Vera Ayres wearing the uniform of The Ambassador cinema Cosham, Portsmouth (1942). Vera worked at The Ambassador as an usherette, 1940-1942.

10. Vera Ayres with friend (1942)

11. Florence Wall and friends on the rooftop of The Plaza/Gaumont Bradford Junction, Portsmouth (c.1940s) Florence is in the centre of the group.

12. Staff photo (unknown) (c.1940s)
Images 1-12 were obtained from the personal collections of Florence Wall, Molly Rowe and Vera Ayres when Eva interviewed them. Permission was granted to allow them to be published. They are now part of Eva’s personal research.


These images come from a collection of material held at the Cinema Theatre Association’s archive (www.cinema-theatre.org.uk). Unfortunately the majority of the collection is undated and no information is provided as to the location or name of the cinema. The material is affectionately known as The Maurice Cheepin file.

Maurice Cheepin managed a number of London’s largest cinemas such as the Gaumont State Kilburn, the Trocadero Elephant and Castle and the Troxy Stepney. He spent most of his time at the Troxy Stepney and most of the images come from that cinema.

He was a real Showman in the tradition of the travelling fairground that needed to undertake stunts and attractions to encourage attendances at the show. All cinema managers were expected to do this sort of thing, as well as managing the cinema. Maurice Cheepin is regarded as one of the most creative and all staff were expected to engage with this, including the usherette.
This is an ongoing research project. If you would like to contribute to it, I would be delighted to hear from you. Please contact me at eva.balogh@port.ac.uk, Telephone 07897 203972

Eva Balogh was born in Portsmouth, Hampshire, U.K. where she still lives with Lily, a cat for all seasons. She is currently a senior Lecturer in Visual Culture at the School of Art and Design, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, U.K. website: www.cinemausherettes.com

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Exhibition photographs Leicester 2016