

London's *Alternative Magazine*

# LAM

London's **FREE**  
Guide to  
Entertainments,  
Travel and Jobs

*25 Oct 83 No 272*

**RIO**

## THE INDEPENDENT CINEMAS

Do they have a future?

*Plus  
London's  
Australasian  
Weekly*

# DECLINE OF THE INDEPENDENTS

SHEILA JOHNSTON examines London's independent cinemas and asks: are they a dying breed?

**T**HIS week sees a sad landmark for independent cinema as the lights go out at the **ELECTRIC**, Britain's oldest custom-built movie-house which first opened its doors to the public in 1911.

Since then, its career has mirrored the rise and fall of the film industry itself, acquiring delusions of grandeur when it was rebaptised the **Imperial** in 1919 and rising to a high point in the mid-forties. Thereafter, its fortunes declined, but a clause in the lease preventing it from being relet as a bingo hall saved it from going the way of most small cinemas in the 1950s.

By the time it was taken over by a group of film enthusiasts in 1970, programmer David Thompson recalls, "it was a complete flea-pit — a dossier's paradise. We started out just with late night shows, which were a great success — these were the heady days of the late 60s..." The **Electric** went from strength to strength, expanding its screenings and attracting a loyal band of admirers to the Portobello Road for its imaginative programmes.

But then in the late 1970s, audiences dwindled again, until this summer's disastrous takings decided backer Richard Davies to sell out, preempting a last-minute attempt by the staff to relaunch the **Electric** as a co-operative. What went wrong?

One reason was the kind of long hot summer that all cinemas dread. Another was the **Electric's** excessively high running costs: at £20,000 a year, its rent is about three times as high as the **Brixton RITZY** or the **SCREEN ON THE GREEN**.

Dramatic increases in the minimum guarantees demanded by distributors have made it much more expensive to hire a film for one-day repertory screenings like the **Electric's** than for a whole week. This, said Thompson,

was why the cinema had to discontinue its late-night shows. Some major distributors refuse to rent out a film for a single day at all. Others, by insisting that it be paired only with products from their own lists, effectively block the kind of creative double-bill on which repertory programming traditionally depends.

Then there are all the obvious reasons. The massive growth in the home video market, the imminent prospect of cable and pay-TV, the voracious appetite of television generally for new pro-

grammes, sister cinema to the **LUMIERE** and the **CAMDEN PLAZA**, opened her doors in September with the successful 'Danton', and the **Electric** itself has been bought up by Romaine Hart (who runs the **Screens on the Green** and the **Hill**) and will reopen soon as a first- or second-run cinema.

The advantage of this is that it will release new 'products' onto the market. One of the **Electric's** problems, according to David Thompson, was copycat programming by the **EVERYMAN**, the **SCALA** and even the **NATIONAL FILM THEATRE** with its 'in-reper-

'**Octopussies**' of the arthouses: 'Heat and Dust', which sat in the **Curzon** for eight months, 'Yol', 'The Draughtman's Contract'...

Anyway the most pessimistic view holds that cinema itself will be dead in a few years' time, killed off by video and television. Only buildings which, like the **Electric**, are under a preservation order will survive along with the great picture palaces.

Of course, the crisis is not confined to the independents; commercial cinemas have for a long time been facing it too. In the early 1970s, many of these were carved up into 'multiples' to stave off this threat. The theory was to create more outlets for a wider variety of films. But the scheme backfired. The larger auditoria were often given over to the aforesaid blockbusters, the **ABC** (or **Odeon**) 3 was as likely as not to be offering nothing more experimental than a skinflick.

A 'night out' at one of these shabby and tasteless conversions, manned by chronically underpaid and apathetic staff, can be a uniquely depressing experience. Instead of providing, as was intended, a cosy, intimate environment for viewing films, they are often just plain cramped, with inadequate leg-room and an image so small that people rightly wonder why they didn't stay at home with their videos.

Mike Shorter used to work for such a multiple: the **CINECENTA**, whose auditoria boasted just 150 seats each. "People would come in," he remembers, "and gasp in horror at the size of the room and the screen." Now he is assistant manager of the **Chelsea Cinema** which, even at 715 seats, is only the balcony of the former 2,502-seater **Gaumont Palace**. The ground floor area and sleek 1930s Art Deco facade now belong, by a fitting twist of fate, to the neighbouring **Habitat** store. But the **Chelsea**, re-



This week the lights go out at the **Electric**, London's oldest custom-built movie house

ducts. Channel Four has recently screened seasons of **Bunuel** and **Fassbinder** in direct competition with arthouse cinemas. Even **ITV** is getting in on the act, with its Friday night 'Continental' featuring major works by **Herzog**, **Polanski** and **Schlöndorff**. The **Electric** has not been the only victim of these developments. The **PARIS PULLMAN** in South Kensington closed down when the lease expired this spring, and the **GATE Camden Town**, went dark last year.

Not that all the news is gloomy. The **CHELSEA King's**

tority' seasons. There is, he points out, only a limited supply of films in distribution and this is being chipped away all the time by television.

The disadvantage is that the once unique **Electric** will turn into just another artfilm showcase of which there are, after all, quite a number already. Loud complaints were heard from critics over the summer about the way a couple of blockbusters were occupying commercial cinemas for months on end, causing a backlog of new films without an outlet. Yet the same could be said of the



decorated in muted shades of beige, still gives a pleasing impression of spaciousness, and for an extra 50p on top of the admission price of £3, you can snuggle into a luxurious Pullman seat.

The independent cinemas know that they can never aspire to the pizzazz of the grand old picture palaces. But every single manager or programmer I spoke to was acutely aware of the need to pay careful attention to decor and facilities. Most disdain popcorn, coke and hotdogs, in favour of 'real' coffee and orange juice and wholefood such as carrot cake. Many have no smoking areas or indeed, like the Chelsea, ban smoking in the auditorium altogether. Some sell specialist magazines or movie memorabilia. Everyone appeared to have plans to improve their venue in some way, even if, in most cases, lack of funds doesn't allow them to put these into practice.

"So many cinemas seem to despise their audience," agrees Pat Foster of the Brixton RITZY. "Ideally, the screen should be big, the sound should be clear, the picture quality should be sharp, the seats should be comfortable. You should create a perfect venue for seeing a film in the way that films ought to be seen.

"We don't show commercials, except for things of community interest, like local shops or restaurants. We draw the line at ten minutes of gin and Bensons and Hedges. We even limit the number of film trailers we show, although we know they're good for business.

"Going to the cinema should be a social occasion. That's why the ancillary facilities should be improved too. We hope to have a licensed bar and a proper cafe area when we can get the space."

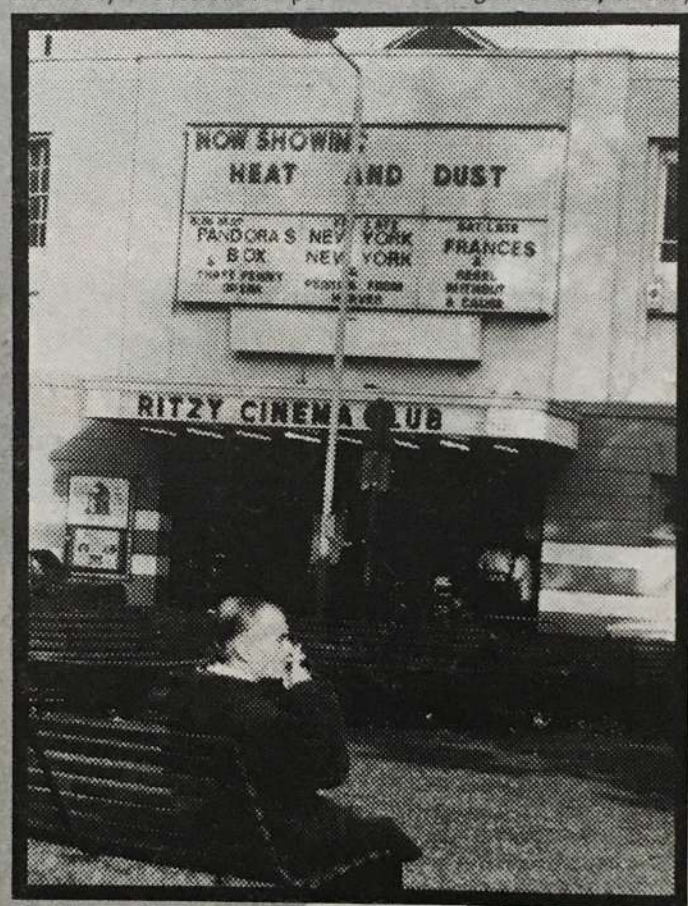
Designed by the same architect as the Electric, who endowed it with the same distinctive 'barrel-shaped' auditorium, the 75-year-old Ritzy was an empty shell when Foster acquired it on a short lease from Lambeth Council, and had to be completely revamped.

Since reopening in 1978, the cinema has on several occa-

sions gone on the skids, notably during the critical summer of 1981, when the Brixton riots drove punters away and the Time Out strike deprived independent cinemas of a major source of free publicity. At the beginning of this year, the Ritzy still had debts of £30,000.

"Ten months ago we should have closed," recalls Foster. "We were waiting for solicitors' letters and all the major distributors had put us on five day credit."

Now, as the result of extremely conservative pro-



The Brixton Ritzy has just pulled out of a severe cash crisis

gramming, the cinema seems on the verge of breaking even and, with their lease renewed for a further 15 years, Foster and programmers Penny Ashbrook and Claire Binns view the future with guarded optimism. The main independent cinema in South London, it has excellent rail, tube and bus connections that assure it a vast potential catchment area: "all the people," in fact, "who won't travel north of the river".

Unlike the Ritzy, the RIO Cinema in Dalston is helped out by several grants (from Hackney Council, the Greater

London Council and the Greater London Arts Association). It is even more firmly committed to attracting people from the Hackney community.

Because the Rio also enjoys the dubious distinction of being the only cinema in the whole borough (apart from the dilapidated Ace), it feels it should screen films of a range that is even more eclectic, not to say eccentric, than the Ritzy. Asked about the Rio's most successful screenings, programmer Ramsay Cameron's answer sums it up: "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" and "Battle of Algiers".

By now, many of the independent cinemas seem to have recognised that, if they

INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS could scarcely seem more different from the refurbished fleapits of Lambeth and Ladbroke Grove. Or the Rio, formerly a music hall, built in 1905. Or the Scala which, as the paintings of apes loping up the stairway recall, was a in a previous incarnation.

But the story is the same here too, creating new audiences where these no longer exist. Some feel that, with its arty image and posh Mall location just behind Admiralty Arch, the ICA is not well-placed to fulfil this function. There has been criticism of The Other Cinema's application to open a GLC-funded venue in Central London for similar reasons. However, ICA staff point out in reply that young black audiences were lured into Nash House by the New York street culture movie 'Wild Style' (which has since played for a week at the Brixton Ace).

"Over the next three to five years, life is going to be pretty difficult for all independent cinemas, including us," opines ICA cinema programmer Archie Tait. "But I would say that if they can keep going until one of the big commercial circuits - the Odeons or the ABCs - collapses, they should be worth a considerable amount.

"Partly because the industry will always need cinemas to showcase new films - which will eventually make their true profits later through video and television sales. But partly also because I think that cinemas will come to be recognised as necessary for the community and will be used in that way, mixing films with other kinds of events serving local needs.

"The Scala, for instance, implanted itself on the London film scene by putting together music programmes that are not only interesting for film buffs. They are catering for people who go mainly to clubs and rock concerts. If you could find one reason why the Electric finally failed it might be that. It has always played to an audience of cineastes and nowadays there are very few of those on the ground."

are to survive, they will not only need to win back those viewers lost during the years of the film industry's decline, but must also actively tout for new audiences. Earlier this year, the Screen on the Hill revived the honourable tradition of the kids' Saturday matinee, with some success.

On the face of it, the elegant Nash colonnades of the

