

Remembering the ABC Cinema



David Sweetsur

LOCAL PEOPLE LOCAL LIVES

A Media Action Group for Mental Health Project

I have always loved the cinema. Even as a child, when we used to go to the ABC in Hanley and the old Odeon in Piccadilly, I was captivated by the events on the silver screen. From “Raiders of the Lost Ark” to “E.T.” to “Rocky”, if there was a film on that I'd seen advertised, I just had to go to either of my favourite Stoke-on-Trent cinemas to see it.

I first went to the ABC cinema when I was about eight years old. I loved watching films on TV, so going to the cinema was exciting and fascinating, a magical place full of drama, action, romance, war, thrills and spills.

The very first film I can remember seeing at the ABC was George Lucas' “Star Wars”. As the film was so popular, we had to queue all the way around the corner to the car park at the rear. I remember doing this on a number of occasions. Now and again a film would have such pre-show hype that everyone wanted to see it as soon as it came out. Every child would drag their parents out to see the film, and seeing “Star Wars” left me with a store of truly unforgettable images. The special effects in the film really blew me away. At that time, the late 1970s, audiences hadn't seen anything like it, and my imagination went wild at the sight of the “Death Star” and the other space ships. From then on I knew I would always love films and the cinema.

And then there were all the rituals of cinema-going. The buying of the ticket. The running up the stairs to make sure you got a good seat. The buying of ice-cream and popcorn from the usherette at the interval. So it wasn't just the film, but the place itself that was so special. Like the old Odeon on Piccadilly, the ABC was predominantly red. Red chairs. Red carpets. Red curtains. I remember the colour-scheme and scale of the cinema imbued the whole place with a sense of grandeur. All this helped to make going to the cinema a very special experience.



Indeed, to me, another important factor about going out to the cinema was that it was a communal event. As a child it was a family occasion, full of magic and dreams. Later it would be a place to visit with friends. A visit to the cinema was always an important social event, a place where we could meet and interact.

I remember being saddened by the news of the closure of the ABC cinema. Its last day of screening, in December 2000, marked the end of City centre cinema in Stoke-on-Trent and for me, the end of an era. All that would remain would be my fond childhood memories.



These days, although I am somewhat older, I still love films and must have a personal collection at home on video and DVD of around 1000 movies. I suppose I am what you might call something of a film buff. You can imagine, then, my absolute joy when I was told that I was going to be involved in the actual making of a film - a short piece for the “Ward Stories 2” collection which was eventually shown at the Forum Theatre in the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery along with six other films.

A local video production company was contracted to make the film for us, but there was lots of preparation which had to be completed before production could start. Ideas about the content were discussed at length and put onto a story-board, and local community artists enabled us to explore our creative sides by getting us to make some props for the film. Finally, filming was able to start and we were able to visit the director and actor “on location”.

The film took as its subject a mannequin walking through a maze, the maze itself symbolising an arduous and haphazard, yet ultimately hopeful journey. At times symbolic, at others harrowingly realistic, we called our short 'The Search' - a portrait of what it is like to experience a period of long-term mental ill-health.

As part of his journey, although he encounters various hazards such as prejudice and stigma, the mannequin figure gradually becomes more human in appearance as he reaches the end of his ordeal. The final message is one of optimism, the voice-over stating simply, 'I found hope. I found the future.'

One of my tasks was to write the voice-over for some of the film. This came about because, having completed a degree in English at Wolverhampton University I went on to have a book of my poetry published, and it was through people reading my work that I was invited to perform this particular task for our project.

My involvement with the project came about because I am a member of the “Pathways” group, based at the Bennett Centre in Shelton, which was chosen by Stoke-on-Trent City Council to make a film about the members' experiences. I wasn't the only one to make a contribution to the making of it. Indeed, all of the members of the group made valuable contributions with their ideas and creativity.



The “Pathways” group was put together for people who have experienced long-term mental ill health. I myself have a diagnosis of schizophrenia, which for many, is a scary word which can conjure up images of violence or an inability to function at any level. So, it was great for us all to be involved in a project which could dispel some of those myths about the illness. In fact, our very active participation in the making of the film goes a long way in itself towards challenging some of the misconceptions. Mental illness has a human face and people are always much more than just their diagnosis.

The whole experience has made me look with fresh eyes at the films I now watch when I go to the cinema and on DVD at home. I feel I've gained valuable insights into the whole process of film-making and what goes on behind the scenes before the end result is produced. All in all, it's enriched my knowledge and enjoyment of one of my great passions, and I'm looking forward to being involved again in making a film when the opportunity arises.

David Sweetsur Biography

David Sweetsur is 38 and was born in Stoke-on-Trent where he has lived in Burslem for most of his life. He obtained a degree in English at Wolverhampton University and undertook postgraduate study at Staffordshire University as well as working for over a year at the Britannia Building Society head offices in Leek in the Staffordshire Moorlands.

David works voluntarily for the Media Action Group for Mental Health, where he challenges the still enduring stereotypes and prejudices that surround mental ill health. He also writes his own blog, in which he focuses on a wide range of topics from the cinema to recent developments in understanding his own diagnosis of schizophrenia, and contributes regularly to the *Mental Health Occupational Therapy* journal. His book of poetry, *The Bad, The Ugly, and The Good*, was published in 2004.



LOCAL PEOPLE LOCAL LIVES

Local People, Local Lives is an exciting new project devised by the Media Action Group for Mental Health to challenge stereotypical myths about people who live with mental ill health. Project volunteers, all local people, will utilise stories from their own lives, which will be presented in a variety of entertaining and informative media. Inaccurate public perceptions will be challenged through the telling of real stories of people who live with a diagnosis of mental ill health.

For more information, contact John Gibson on **01782 285800** or email **john@magmh.org.uk**