

SOCIAL CENTRAL – THE CINEMAS

Trawling the internet, I read a travel blog with the heading, *Bulawayo is Boring*. An overnight visitor looking for a tourist experience may well think that. They mightn't have the time to visit the railway museum with Cecil John Rhodes' carriage or drive out to the Matopos. Nor might they see the many other attractions the city boasts. I found growing up in Bulawayo anything but boring.

Rhodesia led the way in introducing television to Southern Africa in 1960, a full sixteen years before it arrived in South Africa. Black and white screens preceded colour TV, which arrived in Zimbabwe as late as 1984.

At school during break time, the kids talked about *The Avengers*, *Rawhide*, *Bonanza*, and *I Love Lucy*. And then there came the unmissable Saturday evening show, *Five O'clock Rock*, with its rock and roll music and dancers. Some used to say the funniest show on TV was *Five O'clock Rock* with the sound turned off. At home, we were not early adopters, and my only TV viewing would be at friends' houses.

Before that, cinema provided our screen time. It's surprising today how, only weeks or a couple of months after their cinema release, many films are available on free-to-air or subscription-based TV services. You can watch films in the comfort of your home, but somehow, it's not the same.

Cinemas offer a more impressive experience with their wide screens and sound turned up so loud, even the deaf can hear. Nowadays, many casually dressed patrons, relaxed in their seats, appear to have made a last-minute decision to visit the cinema because there was nothing much on TV.

But something is still missing when viewing feature films on TV. What happened to the excitement and buzz around films and cinema?

My first recollections of movies in Bulawayo started when there were only two cinemas. The old Princess Cinema, also known as the bug house, specialised in horror movies like *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, *Them!*, *Tarantula*, and *The Fly*. I remember sitting there through Shakespeare's *Henry V* with Laurence Olivier in the lead role. It wasn't strictly a horror movie, but it felt like one for youngsters like me, with the acclaimed film seeming never-ending.

A cut above was Bulawayo's Palace Cinema—social central, you might say — on the corner of Abercorn Street and 11th Avenue. Crowded Saturday mornings were a hive of activity when kids turned up to watch several cartoons and the ubiquitous cowboy film. A wonderful opportunity to swap comics, transfers, stickers, and cigarette cards. The swaps weren't my scene, but the buzz made for a great atmosphere. Regulars sat on the balcony because the kids below often suffered from sticky sweets or bubble gum 'accidentally' dropped from above just at the start of the programme.

Aside from Saturday mornings and weekday afternoons, we all dressed for the cinema. Saturday afternoons provided a showcase for teenage cool. I recall a couple of memorable moments. One classmate turned up at the Palace wearing a Tirol-style fedora with feathers in the brim. Another stood on the stairs leading to the gallery and gave an amateur rendition of an opera piece.

Inside the theatre, we watched the faded, grainy advertisements, with the Kayser stockings advert proving the most popular, when the audience always welcomed it with a loud cheer. Its popularity had nothing to do with the leggy model in the ad. Rather, it signalled the start of the show with the trailers, Movietone News, cartoons, and other short films. The ads returned during the interval before Kayser signalled the start of the main feature.

We all dressed for the night screenings. A visit to the cinema was an anticipated special occasion, an exciting night out. Any young buck worth his salt would buy his date a box of Maltesers and a Coke during the interval.

The cinemas promoted the coming attractions well in advance with huge colourful posters. The epics offered souvenir programmes for collectors and introduced the intermission part-way through the long feature film. It gave you the chance to visit the toilet and buy more refreshments for yourself and your date. And now that the film had teased your interest, it also provided an opportunity to buy a souvenir programme if you hadn't bought one on arrival.

The Palace Cinema showed the best films. That's where we saw *The Ten Commandments*, *Ben-Hur*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, and Elvis's first movie, *Love Me Tender*. Cliff and the Shadows played there for three nights on their one and only visit to Bulawayo in February 1961.

As Bulawayo's cinema scene expanded, several other venues opened. The Skyview Drive-in on the Johannesburg Road, a perfect fit for Bulawayo's climate, added much entertainment for the movie-going set. The Skyview allowed one to choose between viewing the movie or the young couples in the neighbouring cars. A visual equivalent, one might say, of cinemas' famous surround sound.

The Royal (Kine 600) in Grey Street challenged the Palace Cinema for pre-eminence. Several much-anticipated films, including *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, screened there.

Soon after came the Astor Cinema (Rainbow Elite 400), next door to the Royal, and the Monte Carlo basement cinema in Fife Street. And lastly, the Ascot Centre's small flat-floor cinema in its shopping precinct arrived.

We didn't have all the technology and other exciting diversions of today. But boy, we had fun!

Cinemas thrived despite the arrival of television, but Zimbabwe's economic decline, together with a surge in film piracy and streaming services, saw a decline in cinema attendance. Now, both the Palace and Royal cinemas are African churches. Except for the Rainbow Elite 400, all the others have closed. Ah well! You can't stop progress. Today, the Zimbabwe Academy of Music helps fill the gap by screening films on Thursdays and Fridays. Perhaps Bulawayo is a little more boring than it used to be.

Of course, cinemas weren't the only entertainment in the city, but I'll talk about the shopping, restaurants, and nightlife in other chapters.