

Going to the Gaumont

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***Going to the Gaumont:
Programming and Audience Response at the Gaumont Cinema, Sheffield, 1947-1958***

Over the last three decades, a number of studies have been published of programming and attendance at particular cinemas. They were made possible through the survival of records kept by the cinemas' managers and have allowed considerable insight into trends in booking policies and local tastes in particular periods. These cinemas include the Empire, Leicester Square, from 1928-61; the Regent, Portsmouth, from 1931-48; the Majestic, Macclesfield, from 1939-46; and the Odeon, Southampton, from 1972-80 (see the list of Further Reading at the end of this article). In each case the data available have largely been confined to film titles and attendance figures – quantitative rather than qualitative information, from which audience reactions have had to be deduced based largely on speculation.

The present article adds to this series of case studies, but draws on material which is considerably more detailed in its documentation of both box-office data and actual audience response than any that has been published to date. It concerns the Gaumont in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, from 1947 to 1958, at that time the leading first-run cinema in the city, operated and programmed by the Rank Organisation through its subsidiary, Circuits Management Association Ltd. (CMA). Records held by one of the cinema's former managers, the late Paul Archer, and passed on to *Picture House* editor Allen Eyles document in unprecedented detail a significant period of change in the history of British cinema-going, from its postwar peak of attendance to the onset of decline.

This study is based on a complete set of weekly return sheets for the cinema from January 1948 to June 1958 (a total of 548 sheets), though comparative data on the sheets for the previous year's business also provides limited information on the whole of 1947. Thus the collection provides data in varying degrees of detail on exactly 600 weeks of exhibition. The original returns were completed each week by the manager or his deputy and sent to head office, with carbon copies retained by the cinema; it is a set of these carbons that have survived. The sheets record the films showing each week (both the main six-day bookings and separate Sunday-only revivals) along with figures for weekly attendance and daily net takings after the deduction of Entertainments Tax. Also included are the revenues for theatre sales, broken down into confectionery, cigarettes, ices, drinks and nuts, as well as (for the early part of the period) café takings.

Perhaps most significantly, however, the sheets include a space for a brief report on audience reaction, based partly on comments made by patrons. For the last two years of the records this report is subdivided into sections, covering in addition the manager's observations on takings and on the selling campaign, on 'programme make-up' (the composition of double bills and supporting programmes), on the performances of the films' 'principal artistes', and on local factors affecting business, ranging from the weather to rival entertainments. Furthermore, the sheets also record the programmes showing at the three competing first-run cinemas in the city centre, in later years even including some brief comments on their commercial performance.

The comprehensiveness of the information provided by these return sheets makes them arguably the most important primary source material on a single cinema yet brought to light. The manager's summative reports alone make their insight into audience responses to particular films invaluable, while the contextual information on local competition makes the collection a virtual one-stop shop for research on this city and its leading cinemas. Moreover, the period covered by the sheets is an especially significant one, marking as it does the advent of commercial television and the film industry's attempts to counteract the decline of attendances with new screen technologies and alternative distribution and exhibition strategies.

The article begins with some background notes on the Gaumont (formerly Regent) cinema itself and on Sheffield, before examining in detail its booking practices and the patterns of audience response demonstrated by the return sheets. In charting changes in the cinema's fortunes over the eleven-and-a-half years covered by this archival collection (copies of which can be consulted in the CTA Archive at Leytonstone), my aim will be to explore the particular circumstances of this one cinema in this one city, but also to suggest some ways in which we might be able to generalise from it about the state of film exhibition in the UK in the period covered by the records.

The City and the Cinema

As England's fourth largest city, reaching its peak of population in the 1950s with nearly 600,000 inhabitants, Sheffield was well placed to support a thriving cinema trade. Known as Steel City because of the steel manufacturing industry located there, its high level of employment ensured a flourishing leisure sector. However, Sheffield was unusual among major cities in that, for most of the period discussed here, only one of the three large national circuits was represented by a wholly-owned outlet. This was the Gaumont.

The cinema had opened as the Regent, part of the Provincial Cinematograph Theatres group, on Boxing Day 1927, seating 2,300 patrons (1,450 in the stalls, 850 in the balcony). It was absorbed into the Gaumont circuit in 1929 but did not acquire its new name until July 1946. Along with the rest of the Gaumont and Odeon chains the theatre came under the control of J. Arthur Rank's Circuits Management Association (CMA) at the end of June 1948 (the return sheets bear the CMA masthead from the week ending 9 October of that year).

The Gaumont was located on Barkers Pool, just up from the Town Hall. Directly across the road was the Cinema House, seating 800. Around the corner on Cambridge Street was the Hippodrome, which with 2,760 seats had the largest capacity of any cinema in the city. A short walk away on Union Street, the Sheffield Picture Palace (which I shall refer to as the Palace) seated 1,000. All these three were first-run cinemas and from 1948 all were independently owned and operated by local companies. The Hippodrome had been operated by ABC until July 1948 when it was taken over by The Tivoli (Sheffield) Ltd; thereafter it regularly took the ABC circuit release programme while the Cinema House, owned by Sheffield and District Cinematograph Theatres, most often played the Odeon programme. This continued until July 1956, when a new Odeon opened on Flat Street, the first new UK cinema to be built after the war. Programming at the Palace, owned by Sheffield Picture Palace Ltd, was more haphazard, but from 1954 it regularly played the 'Fox circuit' programme of CinemaScope releases.

The Gaumont, of course, typically played the Gaumont circuit release programme, though not necessarily in the order listed in the appendix of Allen Eyles' book *Gaumont British Cinemas*. The programming for the main part of the week (Monday-Saturday) was controlled by head office, but the Sunday shows were chosen by the cinema manager. For most of the period covered by the return sheets this was R.G. Mason, replaced in May 1953 by Roy Raistrick, who remained in post until retiring in 1971. Mason and Raistrick were successively responsible for completing the weekly return forms, though occasionally they were signed by a deputy or stand-in, G. Moore. Managers seem to have been encouraged to express themselves robustly on these sheets, and as we will see they were frequently critical of circuit booking policy and the make-up of particular programmes.

Besides these first-run showcases, there were 44 other cinemas in the city and its suburbs at the start of the period covered by the record sheets, of which seven were to close by June 1958. By 1976 there were only seven cinemas left, including three late newcomers, which were also not to last.

None of the cinemas operating during this period is still open as such at time of writing in 2017, the Gaumont having closed in 1985 and the building subsequently being demolished.

Booking Policy

In common with most first-run cinemas in this period, especially those controlled by the Rank group, films booked into the Gaumont typically played in fixed six-day engagements. In the whole period covered by the return sheets, from January 1947 to June 1958, only twelve films were retained for longer than a week and only one for longer than a fortnight (see Table 1). The majority of two-week runs occurred in holiday periods, notably at Christmas and Easter, when top attractions were programmed. Word-of-mouth often accounted for improvement or decline in attendance across the week, which for programme purposes started on Monday. Saturday was typically the strongest day, so long as the films' reputations held up. Seven-day bookings were introduced in January 1958 but these still remained exceptional.

The purpose of this strictly-observed policy was of course to encourage regular weekly attendance, as well as to avoid an inevitable drop-off in the second week. With a very large cinema such as the Gaumont, the bulk of a film's potential local audience could be accommodated within a restricted run. Even so, managers on a number of occasions pointed out in their comments on the weekly returns that certain very popular films could safely have run another week and regretted that there was no flexibility to allow this. However, the competing independent cinemas in Sheffield often played successful films for two, three or even more weeks, especially towards the end of this period with the advent of CinemaScope and the increasing shortage of commercially viable product.

The affiliation of the major national circuits with particular distributors placed another kind of restriction on the choice of programmes available to the Gaumont. The two Rank circuits naturally played Rank productions and other pictures released by the company's distribution arm, General Film Distributors (GFD), renamed J. Arthur Rank Film Distributors (JARFID) in 1955 (for the sake of this study I have regarded them as being essentially one and the same). These included the films made by Rank's American partner, Universal-International, which Rank distributed in the UK. Other major distributors affiliated to the Gaumont and Odeon circuits were Columbia, Paramount, RKO Radio, Twentieth Century-Fox and United Artists.

In the overwhelming majority of cases, programmes at the Gaumont consisted of a double feature. Only exceptionally attractive, or exceptionally long, films played in single bills, and even so were accompanied by a supporting programme of shorts, including the Gaumont-British newsreel. In a small number of cases, the titles of short supporting films are indicated in the returns and I have treated these as features (they include six episodes of Rank's short series *This Modern Age*). Audiences generally demanded the value for money offered by double bills, and an ideal programme would offer contrast in the combination of films, rather than sameness: 'light' and 'heavy', action and comedy, British and American, and so forth. It was the attractiveness of this programme 'make-up' on which managers were invited to comment in the weekly return sheets.

It is not entirely clear from these sheets how the views of patrons were collected. Most often the reports refer to the comments of audience members as if overheard or reported casually (doubtless regular patrons would be happy to chat to staff whom they knew), but reference is made in several instances to 'interviews.' This would suggest that a sample of opinions was directly solicited in the manner of what are now referred to as 'focus groups', though again the particular mechanics of this are not specified. However the views were invited and gathered, managers were usually quite definite in their appraisal of audience response and about whether or not a given film or programme went over well. They often pointed to the figures for attendances or receipts as proof of success or

failure, and tried to specify the reasons why. In later years managers were also asked to comment on the benefits or otherwise from publicity campaigns, whether local (for which the cinema staff would have been directly responsible) or national, and to assess their effectiveness.

Statistical Trends

For the purposes of analysis, I have grouped weekly attendance figures at the Gaumont into seven ranking categories of my own devising (see Tables 2-8). Weeks in which more than 40,000 tickets were sold I have termed 'Outstanding', and those selling between 30,001 and 40,000 tickets I have called 'Excellent'. Both these categories account for relatively few weeks out of the total of 600: six and 34, respectively. Subsequent bands are narrower in range because the weeks concerned are more numerous. Thus, weeks selling between 25,001 and 30,000 tickets I have called 'Very Good' (84 weeks); between 20,001 and 25,000 tickets, 'Good' (221 weeks); between 15,001 and 20,000 tickets, 'Fair' (159 weeks); and between 10,001 and 15,000 tickets, 'Poor' (78 weeks). Weeks in the lowest-ranking category, selling up to 10,000 tickets, are also relatively few in number (18) and I have termed these 'Very Poor'.

An alternative method of breakdown would have been to group films by the total number of tickets sold for each programme rather than by the week. But this would have been misleading, as the top-ranking films would all be those which ran for two weeks or more. As previously noted, there were only twelve of these between January 1947 and June 1958. It is preferable instead to note weekly attendance figures, as these are more directly comparable and each week of extended runs can be compared not only with each other but also with regular weekly bookings. It should also be noted that only receipts, not attendance figures, are broken down on the return sheets by day, so they do not allow us to make exact comparisons for attendance on particular days of the week or separate out attendances for the main six-day bookings and the Sunday-only revivals, though the provision of figures for daily takings does allow for rough comparisons. Nevertheless, we can gain insight into the relative popularity of particular programmes and fluctuations in patterns of weekly attendance over the period.

One pattern is immediately apparent as a general trend (see Table 9 and the accompanying graph): the peaking of annual attendance in 1947 and 1948, followed by gradual decline and then a significant drop-off in admissions from 1955 onwards. Until then, the weekly figures in most bands are relatively stable, varying only slightly from one year to the next. But from 1955, the numbers of Very Good and Good weeks drop sharply, to the extent that in the first half of 1958 only a single week creeps into the Good band (and then only just), with none Very Good or better; whereas the numbers of weeks in the Fair and Poor bands concomitantly increase. In 1955 also, some weeks rank as Very Poor for the first time and the number of these also increases in the last two years. The contrast with 1947-48, in which a total of 19 weeks rank as Outstanding or Excellent and only six as Fair or Poor, is stark indeed. For most of the period, the bulk of weekly programmes drew Good or Fair audiences, according to my categorisation. But by the second half of the decade, Poor had become the new norm and any results better than Fair were reached only rarely. This in microcosm is the picture of postwar decline.

Besides attendances, tabulating the figures for the composition of programmes themselves reveals some interesting patterns. A total of 1,121 named films are listed in the returns, including 586 first features and 535 second features (the disparity is due to weeks in which a single feature was supported by unidentified shorts). Tables 10 and 11 compile statistics for these films for their countries of origin and their distributors, respectively. As might be expected, American and British productions predominate: in this period the Gaumont showed a total of 745 American features (including seven co-productions with European countries and one with the UK) and 358 British films

(also including seven co-productions, as well as five films from Commonwealth countries, which counted as British for Quota purposes). The American pictures were divided about evenly between first and second features, whereas with the British and Commonwealth titles first features accounted for a substantial majority (218). All other countries accounted for only 17 films, most of which were shown at the Gaumont in English-dubbed versions. The bulk of these (14) were second features, including a small number of subtitled releases.

In terms of popularity, main features in weekly programmes categorised as Outstanding and Excellent were about evenly divided (19 British and 21 American, though the latter includes two weeks of one American film) whereas those in the Very Good band were divided in the ratio of 32 British (including one co-production) to 52 American. In the Poor and Very Poor categories, American films outnumber British by 58 to 37 (also including co-productions and again including two weeks of an American release), plus three European pictures. But bearing in mind the overall numbers of films from each source, I conclude that there was no general preference for either British or American films.

In ranking order, the American major companies whose films appeared at the Gaumont were Twentieth Century-Fox (118 titles), Columbia (114), Paramount (95), United Artists (92) and RKO Radio (77, of which seven were Walt Disney productions before that company went independent in 1954). As already noted, all of these renters were affiliated with the Rank circuits, unlike the remaining American major studios, MGM and Warner Bros., which accounted for only 13 and ten titles respectively. I have identified 25 films as coming from the largest American 'minor', Republic, though in fact some of these were released in the UK through local sub-distributors such as British Lion and Pathé. Conversely, the American-owned companies were responsible for releasing a number of British-produced films. (In this period of 'runaway' productions, I have counted films produced in British studios by American-owned companies as British.)

However, Rank's own distribution arm was by far the most prolific supplier of product. The Gaumont showed 198 British productions released by Rank, three-quarters of which were first features. But through Rank's part-ownership of Universal-International, it also provided 159 American pictures. Thus, Rank's in-house or sub-licensed product accounted for a total of 357 titles, nearly one-third of all the features shown at the cinema in this period. Of the other major British companies, British Lion was the best represented with 43 films, followed by Independent Film Distributors (IFD) with 20, while Associated British-Pathé (owned by rival theatre-owning giant, the Associated British Picture Corporation) provided 16. Although a scattering of first features (mainly British) were supplied by independent distributors, a much larger number of B pictures came from smaller companies, most notably Exclusive (the distribution arm of Hammer Film Productions), which provided the Gaumont with no fewer than 30 titles, all but three of them second features. The remainder of the films shown at the cinema were released by small or other non-affiliated companies.

Sunday-only programmes perhaps deserve more extended coverage than space allows, and as previously explained separate admission figures are not available for them. But Table 12 provides a statistical breakdown of net box-office receipts – i.e. ticket sales after deduction of Entertainments Tax – for all Sundays in the period covered by the returns, including those which formed part of seven-day bookings in 1958. Variations in the rate of E.T. and increases in admission prices over the period make it difficult to be exact about relative success and failure by comparison with the attendance figures available for weekday programmes. However, the highest-earning Sunday shows cluster in the first half of the period, from 1947-53 (see Table 13).

Most Gaumont Sunday programmes offered only a single feature until November 1956, when double bills became the norm. Of the 680 named films in the 598 Sunday shows covered by the

returns (two Sundays fell on Christmas Day, when the cinema was closed) the overwhelming majority were American in origin: 514 first features and 57 second features (571 in total), with only 84 British first features and 23 second features (107 in total; all figures include co-productions). The majority of the British titles were comedies or war films, with only two British pictures appearing in the 40 top grossers. Judging by the trend in Sunday programmes towards action films – principally crime, war, Westerns and adventure – it would seem that managers catered specifically on that day for male patrons, for whom work might have restricted cinema attendance during the week.

The highest single figure for weekly attendance in the entire period is perhaps the most surprising statistic of all: 47,741 admissions to the first week of the American faux sex education film *The Birth of a Baby* (1948), produced and distributed independently. The film was already ten years old by the time it reached Sheffield and because it had not been passed by the British Board of Film Censors its exhibition would have had to be approved by Sheffield City Council. Unfortunately the manager's remarks in the earlier return sheets are mainly confined to comments on sales figures so we lack any comment on the audience's response to the film, although on its first Wednesday a record day's take of £556 was noted. However, takings were evidently enough to merit a second week, when the film drew a further 21,944 admissions. And with that we must turn to the more detailed discussion of audience reaction from other films' return sheets.

Popularity and Prestige

A good film for a cinema is of course a film that makes money. The Gaumont managers' reports therefore made direct correlations between the box-office returns of a film, the pleasure and satisfaction it gave an audience, and the quality of the film itself. An *artistically* good film may or may not also be successful in commercial terms, but by these definitions a successful film cannot be bad. If a film entertains a sizeable audience, then it is good.

The description 'wonderful entertainment' was applied to *Jolson Sings Again* (1950), *Samson and Delilah* (1951) and *Cinderella* (1951), all among the best-attended films of the period. Of the Cecil B. DeMille biblical epic, the first of the decade's outside blockbusters, it was noted: 'This type of film is the answer to better business. Many Patrons who have not been to this theatre for months have returned.' Similar praise was heaped on Alastair Sim as *Scrooge* (1951): 'Received as first class entertainment. It is very satisfying to have such Box Office takings, and it only goes to prove that if we had more good pictures, we could take more money than we have been doing.' Of the Twentieth Century-Fox British production *The Mudlark* (1951) R.G. Mason observed: 'It is a long time since I have heard so many good reports about a film. More of this calibre would ensure better business.'

Most of the Universal-International melodramas directed by Douglas Sirk that played the Gaumont drew high praise, notably *Magnificent Obsession* (1955): 'A great film...The finest picture for years....Every artiste an Academy award potential...these are some of the comments passed by our Patrons on this offering. There is no doubt whatsoever, that this film has everything that is required for box office appeal. Not one adverse comment has been passed.' A British weepie, Ealing's *The Divided Heart* (1955), also made a favourable impression: 'A more moving film I have never seen, nor the evidence of such extensive emotional upheaval as has been seen this week. The general comment, "The greatest picture ever" "The best picture I have seen in years" "A really great picture" "Yvonne Mitchell is marvellous" "Should not be missed by anyone".'

British films perceived to be well above the average were received with particular enthusiasm, many comments suggesting a degree of pride in the achievement of the national cinema. This was the case with, for example, *The Clouded Yellow* (1951) – 'It is a long time since we have had such praise from all classes of patrons for a British Film' – and *Turn the Key Softly* (1953), described as 'the best British

film for some considerable time.’ In its single-week booking Ealing’s *The Cruel Sea* (1953) achieved record six-day, seven-day and Saturday takes, beating the previous theatre record-holder *The Seventh Veil* (1945) for earnings. Mason reported: ‘unanimous opinion – a marvellous film. This film would have easily run another week and done well over average business and would have greatly helped the Prestige of British Films.’

When the Gaumont’s parent company turned out a prestige picture, it was seemingly guaranteed respectful treatment. Of Rank’s official documentary on the Coronation, *A Queen Is Crowned* (1953), which also ran simultaneously at the neighbouring Cinema House, it was noted: ‘Nothing but the highest praise has been showered on this production. “Magnificent” “Truly a wonderful experience” “The finest film ever seen” to quote one or two observations passed.’ The Anglo-Italian production of *Romeo and Juliet* (1954) was received as ‘A REALLY SUPERB FILM, EXCELLENTLY PERFORMED, FILMED AND PRESENTED’ (capitals in original); but there were ‘slight differences of opinion on the suitability of Laurence Harvey as Romeo. Whilst we have not done the box-office I had thought we would, we have the satisfaction of knowing that the film is being appreciated, and that future runs may do well.’

Though it was not a major hit at the Gaumont, Roy Raistrick wrote of ‘the most favourable impression created’ by *Genevieve* (1953) and quoted more patrons’ comments: ‘The best British comedy ever seen’, ‘A really great film’, ‘The best film for a long time.’ The CMA house magazine, *The Circle* (no. 45, 1953, pp. 14-15), described Raistrick’s campaign for the film, following abortive attempts to mount a vintage car rally and to obtain copies of Sheffield road maps as giveaways. Instead, ‘He persuaded a local baker to present a special “Genevieve” cake which was topped by a model of the old car. After being on display in an illuminated case at the theatre, the cake was borne in triumph by the only available veteran car in the area, an 1898 Daimler, to the annual gala in aid of the Old Folks Fund. Since the car drove through centre of Sheffield carrying a notice giving full theatre credits, and since the gala was organised by the Sheffield Telegraph and the Sheffield Star in the week before playdate, Mr. Raistrick was assured of extensive and valuable editorial coverage at the most effective time. He estimates that some 15,000 people must have seen the cake auctioned at the gala.’

The following year *Doctor in the House* (1954) drew comparisons with *Genevieve* and, according to the manager’s report, ‘received the majority vote as the better of the two.’ It was described as the ‘finest British comedy film seen for years.’ The first *Doctor* sequel, *Doctor at Sea* (1955), went to the rival Cinema House though it subsequently played second run at the Gaumont as support to *Rock around the Clock* (1956), helping to attract an older audience as well as the teenagers. But the third in the series, *Doctor at Large* (1957), ran at the Gaumont for two weeks at Easter, giving the cinema its best Monday figures for six years: ‘Audience reaction to this programme has been 100% approval. All have thoroughly enjoyed themselves, a perfect holiday show. The takings, without any doubt, show the universal appeal of our excellent British comedy films.’

Among many pictures described as meeting with the ‘100% approval’ of all patrons (a favourite expression of Roy Raistrick’s) were the British *Albert, R.N.* (1953), *Hell below Zero* (1954), *Touch and Go* (1955), *The Long Arm* (1956) and *Fire down Below* (1957), and the American *Stalag 17* (1953), *Rear Window* (1954), *Vera Cruz* (1955) and *The Man from Laramie* (1955). On occasion, however, the managers noted a disjunction between their own estimation of a film’s quality and the audience’s reaction, or between the reactions of different sections of the audience. Thus, according to Raistrick, *The Good Die Young* (1954) ‘met with the approval of the more discerning of our Patrons, appreciative of first class acting ability. Unfortunately, the aforementioned did not prove the majority. The majority verdict being that the film was too morbid.’ Similarly, while *The Big Knife*

(1956) was seen by the manager as a 'terrific film thoroughly enjoyed by most', there was 'a large percentage of our audiences that have not appreciated the film in any way.'

Programme Make-up

A good programme offered variety and contrast, with an attractive balance of entertainment to satisfy the widest possible tastes. Rank-Universal's coupling of *East of Sumatra* and *Take Me to Town* (1953) was seen as a 'thoroughly well balanced and enjoyable programme meeting with the approval and satisfaction of all our Patrons.' Another hit from the same source was scored by the combo of World War II biopic *To Hell and Back* and boxing drama *The Square Jungle* (1955). The former attracted comments from patrons like 'Terrific', 'Excellent' and 'The greatest war film seen for years.' Roy Raistrick summarised its companion as 'A terrific sporting support, again one of the best films of it's kind' (sic). Overall, he concluded, 'Every Patron has been thoroughly delighted with the whole programme, not one adverse comment has been heard.' More often, however, one film on a bill impressed more favourably than the other. Another war picture, *Beachhead* (1954), drew 'Special praise for colour treatment and photography, majority comment has been that this film has definite 3-D tendencies.' But its sci-fi support *Riders to the Stars* divided opinion, 'finding approval with certain of our patrons, but not a winner for all types.'

Sometimes the standard double-bill booking pattern was varied. For example, the British comedy *Made in Heaven* (1953) was supported by a Russian circus film, *The Big Top*, and a live stage show. The latter went down particularly well, enhancing 'the general good business and also goodwill for the theatre.' Sharing the bill with *The Desert Song* and *The System* (1953) and attracting more favourable comment than the main feature was a commercial for Gillette razors, which was preferred 'against the longer advert film with stories.'

There were many occasions when a strong supporting film compensated for a weak main feature, and managers were wont to observe that they might have attracted better business if given top billing. This was the case with the double bills of *There Is Another Sun* and *Apache Drums* (1951), *Song of Paris* and *The Dark Page* (1952), and *Somebody Loves Me* and *Caribbean Gold* (1953). In each of these cases the second feature proved a stronger draw than the first. Sometimes the Gaumont's manager was able to persuade head office actually to allow him to reverse the order of billing, as when the nominal support *Iron Man* was promoted over *Chicago Masquerade* (1951). On the basis of the cinema's experience future bookers were advised to do the same with John Ford's *What Price Glory* and its official support, *My Pal Gus* (1953). But the British comedy *Treasure Hunt* (1952) was clearly a lost cause despite having a strong support: 'Everyone agreed (even the complimentaries complained) that *Treasure Hunt* was one of the worst films ever shown in this theatre. I am positive that if we had shown *The Captive City* as requested last that we should have done a little better.' R.G. Mason was in no doubt as to the cause of the cinema's drop-off in business, and pointed to his own success with revival bookings as evidence: 'This type of programme is partly responsible for driving Patrons away from this theatre. If you look, Sunday business has been maintained by careful choosing of programmes.'

While balance and contrast were desirable, some pairings simply appeared ill-assorted. Patrons of *The Pickwick Papers* (1953) asked why a western, *Suspected*, was showing with a Dickens adaptation. The comic fantasy *It Grows on Trees* (1952) was dismissed as 'too ridiculous' and its bedfellow *Son of Ali Baba* was seen as 'Suitable for Children only, not adult audiences.' Patrons of the Ealing comedy *The Love Lottery* (1954) considered that it 'should never have been made.' Its travelogue support, *Royal New Zealand Journey*, was 'Appreciated by the fervent patriots' but others were more discriminating: 'Some have expressed their disappointment with the film, bearing in mind the terrific job done on the Coronation film.'

As a first-run theatre, the Gaumont almost variably played new releases, though occasionally a reissue was used as a supporting film. In such weeks the cinema often experienced a drop-off in business, as it was likely that many patrons would have seen the re-released feature before and would want to avoid seeing it again. Only rarely did managers report that a reissue received a warm welcome back and in some instances proved an effective counter-balance to a weak main feature.

This was certainly the case with *The Chiltern Hundreds* (first released in 1949), which saved the day for *Little Big Shot* (1952), and *The Glass Mountain* (likewise from 1949), which came to the rescue of *Her Favourite Husband* (1951). Preston Sturges' comedy vehicle for Betty Grable, *The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend* (1950), was seen as 'silly' but its 13-year-old support, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, was 'received by all types as an outstanding film in spite of many having seen it before. Many patrons pass the opinion that it was a great pity that films could not be made like that today.'

More often however reissues, even of celebrated classics, were seen as off-putting. Prospective patrons were described as looking at the front-of-house stills for a 1952 double bill of *This Woman Is Dangerous* and *The Fallen Idol* (the latter first released in 1948) and walking away 'when they knew it was a re-issue.' The same year, Ealing's new release *Mandy* was not helped by sharing a bill with the studio's three-year-old *Passport to Pimlico*; commented Mason, 'I am convinced we would have done better business if the second feature had not been a re-issue. Many Patrons are asking why we are showing old films.'

In 1957, as business became tighter and hits fewer, the Gaumont even played a pair of reissue double bills: *From Here to Eternity* with *The Cockleshell Heroes* (originally released in 1953 and 1955, respectively), and *The Baby and the Battleship* and *Private's Progress*, both first seen in Sheffield just the previous year at the Hippodome. The former programme did poorly but the latter pair did better than expected by virtue of playing part of the Christmas holiday week. Even so, attendances were half those of the equivalent week the year before.

Some programmes were simply too long or unsuited to local tastes. The coupling of *Here Come the Huggetts* and *13 Lead Soldiers* (1949) cost the cinema 'at least' £300 in lost takings because of the combined running time. A remarkable 1954 pairing of English-language films by Vittorio de Sica and Luis Buñuel might have done better in a small art house than at the Gaumont. *Indiscretion (Stazione termini)* did not receive 'one favourable comment', again being seen as 'too slow', and while *Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* was 'enjoyed by our younger audience, it has far from met with the approval of our older patrons.'

Little could be done when two co-features were both received badly. Among such 'poor programmes' were *The Adventurers* with *The Admiral Was a Lady* (1951), of which it was said that 'Even the rain would not fetch the public in'; *The Happy Time* with *Brave Warrior* (1952), which prompted Mason to remark that he could not 'understand why we have to book such a programme for Sheffield when there are so many films open for this town'; and *Meet Mr. Lucifer* with *The Golden Blade* (1954), of which it was simply reported: 'Nothing complimentary has been said about this programme.' Many patrons walked out of *Kangaroo* (1952), while those who stayed for its British support *Brandy for the Parson* 'said they could not understand what this film was about. This type of programme is responsible for the decrease in Cinema Attendances.'

Strong films were often seen to be let down by a poor domestically-produced support. Ealing's comedy *Whisky Galore!* (1949) was described as 'A Good British Film, but the entire programme was spoilt by the 2nd feature', *My Dog Shep*. While the Coronation documentary *A Queen Is Crowned* was rapturously received, including *No Escape* on the same programme was seen as tantamount to

treason. British B features such as these seemed to attract a particular amount of opprobrium. The following comments are a small but representative sample:

A Piece of Cake (1949): 'This is the type of film that gives British Films a bad name.'

Old Mother Riley, Headmistress (1950): 'The 2nd feature was considered by many Patrons as an insult to their intelligence.'

The Rossiter Case (1951): 'Not one single Patron has passed a good remark about this very bad picture.'

The Dark Light (1951): 'Received as UTTER RUBBISH. A great pity that we have to show such pictures as "The Dark Light". They do untold harm and not any amount of publicity will undo this harm.'

Mother Riley Meets the Vampire (1952): 'General opinion an insult to people's intelligence. There is no doubt this film had a very bad effect on the Box Office this week. This type of film is responsible for getting British Films a bad name.'

Distant Trumpet (1952): 'This type of film does untold harm to the British Film Industry – general opinion – "a real stinker".'

Potter of the Yard (1953): 'I am sure that we could have taken a little more money if the supporting film had been better, as it is an insult to people's intelligence to show such rubbish. It is sincerely hoped that you do not book anymore of these films.'

Hot Ice (1953): 'Many patrons remarked that they were disgusted that we showed such a film, and I am sure that this has had an adverse effect on the Box Office. This type of Film gives British Films a Bad Name.'

Johnny Lionheart (1954): 'This is the most atrocious film ever seen. All our Patrons have passed very strong criticism on this effort, not one person had anything good to say about it.'

Tons of Trouble (1956): "'A terrible film" has been the comment from all Patrons, even the children.'

The Strange Awakening (1958): 'The audience laughed with derision.'

Genres and Stars

The films enjoyed by Sheffield audiences were not necessarily those most celebrated by critics and historians. A number of famous classics came in for their share of complaints, while some long-forgotten titles were extravagantly praised. For example, many Gaumont patrons regarded *Shane* (1953) as 'very slow.' Another well-regarded Western, *Man without a Star* (1955), came in for a major drubbing: 'Majority opinion is that this is one of the worst films Kirk Douglas has appeared in, the action is slow, not coming up to expectations.' But among the many routine oaters receiving favourable responses was the lesser-known B feature *City of Bad Men* (1953): 'A good Technicolor Western, with a slight variation on the usual Western theme. Plenty of action, tense situations etc., to meet with approval of our audiences.'

As can be deduced from these examples, slowness of pace was the cardinal sin. It was sometimes seen to mar even otherwise well-received films, such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*: 'This film has by it's [sic] sheer suspense, dramatic portrayals, and beautiful colouring, met with the 100%

approval from our Patrons. We have had the occasional comment that it is a little slow, but the favourable comments have far outweighed the unfavourable.' Action and a fast pace were demanded of Westerns, war, crime and adventure films. A double bill of Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* and Don Siegel's *Baby Face Nelson* (1957) drew the observation: 'THIS WAS A PROGRAMME THEY REALLY ENJOYED, it had plenty of meat in it...that's how they like it in Sheffield.'

Novelty was enjoyed within certain limits. Thus, the Ealing African adventure *Where No Vultures Fly* (1952) was 'greatly enjoyed by all patrons – many stated what an entire change this was from the usual type.' The new science-fiction cycle proved popular, with *Destination Moon* (1950) attracting 'Many patrons who have not been for sometime' and *This Island Earth* (1955) being seen as 'one of the best of it's type.' But some films merely baffled the audience. *Deadline at Dawn* (1951) was considered to go over the head of the average viewer, while an Anglo-Italian co-production, *The Stranger's Hand* (1954), provoked 'complete bewilderment from all our Patrons. This has proved to be a "problem" picture, not one Patron appears to be able to understand the story.'

On the other hand, familiarity could breed contempt. Very few weeks in the 1950s passed without at least one Western at one of the first-run cinemas in Sheffield. It was noted of *Kansas Raiders* (1951) that already 'the public are beginning to get tired of western films.' The submarine war picture *Above Us the Waves* (1955) was enjoyed as a 'great British film achievement, not overdone, the suspense maintained throughout magnificently.' But shortly afterwards Ealing's *The Ship That Died of Shame* (1955), while regarded as an 'excellent British film', was 'unfortunately the last of a series of sea films at this Theatre which have had the effect of over-satisfying a most ardent sea film enthusiast.' Similar observations were made following runs of pirate and aviation films, which also outstayed their welcome as audiences wearied of repetition.

Managers often remarked on how the appeal of certain films was not helped by their misleading or off-putting titles. Although it did well, *The Snake Pit* (1949), a melodrama set in an asylum, was mistakenly thought by many patrons to be a 'horrific film'; and the racial drama *Lost Boundaries* (1950) 'kept people away, as they were under the impression this was a documentary.' *Dreamboat* (1952), a deliberately archaic title for a comedy about a former silent-movie star, was assumed to be a genuine 'old film.' The title of *Wait 'til the Sun Shines, Nellie* (1952) also put off many who might have enjoyed its small-town Americana.

Due to the affiliation of the Rank circuits with particular Hollywood and British studios, certain performers made regular appearances in the programmes shown at the Gaumont. The performances and appeal of particular actors often received comment, and the rising or falling popularity of stars can be traced over the period covered by the returns. Bud Abbott and Lou Costello, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, Jeff Chandler, Alan Ladd, Victor Mature and Jean Simmons were all very popular at the Gaumont; Sterling Hayden, Mickey Rooney and Richard Todd were not.

Some veteran stars retained their appeal well into middle age, such as James Cagney in *Man of a Thousand Faces* (1957): 'Rather pleasing, the older type of patron was well in evidence.' On the other hand, Betty Hutton was felt to be past her best in *Somebody Loves Me* (1953), and the star of *The Monte Carlo Story* (1957) was brutally dismissed: 'Dietrich is out.' The last big-screen vehicle of a long-popular comedy team, *Dance with Me, Henry* (1956), earned a similarly curt dismissal: 'Abbott & Costello are past it.' Roy Raistrick remarked of *Female on the Beach* (1955): 'Many patrons are of the opinion that Joan Crawford is the best choice for female lead.' But the unusually villainous part played by her male co-star drew the comment: 'Chandler's performance good, but not quite what was expected.'

Screen newcomers warmly welcomed included Marilyn Monroe. It was noted of *Niagara* (1953) that 'Miss Monroe appears to be as popular with the ladies as with the males.' Diana Dors was another matter, however. Although the manager felt that she 'gave a good performance in her role, a difficult one', in *The Long Haul* (1957), the audience thought otherwise: 'She appears to be poison here. As two lady patrons said in the Circle.... "Isn't she disgusting"!.'

Comic Norman Wisdom's debut feature *Trouble in Store* (1954) was received as 'the funniest British comedy, except "Genevieve", ever seen.' Not all Wisdom's subsequent films met with similar enthusiasm: Raistrick noted that, while *Man of the Moment* (1955) had 'been thoroughly enjoyed by all our stalls patrons' it did not have 'much appeal to the Circle', indicating the lowbrow nature of its comedy. Nevertheless, another Wisdom vehicle, *Up in the World*, played for a fortnight at Christmas 1956-57; and while neither week was outstanding, attendance at the second was, unusually, higher than the first and the two combined gave the cinema one of its highest total admission figures in this period.

Another home-grown comedy star, Frankie Howerd ('A very popular artiste in this area'), made a pleasing debut in *The Runaway Bus* (1954). But with its follow-up, *Jumping for Joy* (1956), the honeymoon was over: 'This film does not in any way enhance the reputation of Frankie Howerd. In the opinion of all our Patrons, this is the most colossal piece of ham ever offered to them. Not one favourable comment.' A further Howerd vehicle, *A Touch of the Sun* (1956), played as a supporting feature and was found to be 'not up to standard', its star 'plain amateurish.'

Benny Hill's big-screen break, *Who Done It?* (1956), was a mixed bag: it 'provided laughs for some of our Patrons, ardent Benny Hill fans. For the others, comment has been varied, from "a complete waste of time" to "not a bad effort, but could have been much better".' Raistrick offered his own view: 'Benny Hill not, to my mind, a Cinema comedian.'

Audience Types

The distinction between patrons who frequented the stalls and those who sat in the circle was but one example of different types of audience noted in the managers' reports. Further examples of this upstairs-downstairs taste regime included the crime film *Tight Spot* (1955), 'the Stalls patrons thoroughly enjoying the film, the Circle patrons being in no way impressed.' The gorilla adventure *Mighty Joe Young* (1950) was enjoyed 'by most of the public as good entertainment' but had no 'drawing power for better class patrons.'

Audiences were segmented in other ways, too. Among the films described as having no appeal to the 'younger generation' were *A Double Life* (1948) and *The Magic Box* (1952). Male patrons were said to have enjoyed *All the King's Men* (1950) and *Night and the City* (1950) more than women. But the romantic melodrama *Lucy Gallant* (1955) pleased across the board: 'This film has been thoroughly enjoyed by all our Patrons, even the male sex have expressed satisfaction.'

Of the double bill of *Child in the House* and *Passport to Treason* (1956) it was observed: 'A different type of audience has been noted this week. Purely family groups. It will be noted that the takings have increased slightly Monday, Tuesday & Wednesday. This has followed the pattern I had thought would never occur.' While the response indicated that the programme was received as 'good family entertainment' Roy Raistrick felt it to be 'on the heavy side. Both films having a definite morbid theme.'

The films most directly aimed at family audiences were of course those produced by the Walt Disney company. They often did well at the Gaumont, but usually only at holiday times as they would

otherwise tend to alienate adult patronage. Even Disney's classic cartoon features were by no means guaranteed a large audience. *Cinderella* and *Lady and the Tramp* (1956) were both enormously successful. The manager's report on the latter stated: 'Once again Disney "hits the jackpot" in no uncertain manner. Unanimous verdict from all patrons -- excellent fare, could not be better.' But the part-animated *Song of the South* had achieved the lowest attendance figure of 1947, and while *Peter Pan* (1953) was 'thoroughly enjoyed by children' it proved 'very disappointing to adult audiences.'

When the live-action period adventure *Johnny Tremain* (1958) was paired with a revival of the 1942 animated feature *Bambi* the programme failed due to mistimed scheduling. It was booked for the week following the Christmas break, just as children were going back to school. While the Monday, a holiday, did well, once school resumed the following day 'the bottom fell out of the business.' Ten years earlier, double-billed with a reissue of the 1944 Danny Kaye vehicle *Up in Arms*, *Bambi* had scored a major hit at the Gaumont.

This tends to underline R.G. Mason's comment on another part-animated picture, *So Dear to My Heart* (1950), coupled with a revival of the already widely-seen 1944 Eddie Cantor musical *Show Business* to little success: 'Walt Disney films are not strong enough by themselves and must have a strong support.' This was borne out by the fate of two Western adventures starring Fess Parker. According to Roy Raistrick, *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier* (1956) 'proved a unique attraction to the family audiences. A children's delight, but hardly in the adult entertainment category.' The Civil War story *The Great Locomotive Chase* (1956) was uniformly poorly received. But neither of these films was helped by their respective non-Disney supporting features: *Tons of Trouble*, a British slapstick comedy with Richard Hearne as Mr. Pastry, and *Mam'zelle Pigalle*, a subtitled romp with Brigitte Bardot.

As the 1950s wore on and audiences began to shrink, teenagers and young adults became increasingly important to the cinema economy. Relatively few films shown at the Gaumont were aimed specifically at this audience segment, perhaps because they risked alienating older regular customers. The 1956 double bill of *Rock around the Clock* and a revival of *Doctor at Sea* mainly attracted the teenage crowd and the different seating areas again reflected an imbalance: 'Although our stalls has been full each evening, the circle has suffered letting our takings down badly... We do think we have lost quite an amount of money this week through patrons wanting to see the 2nd feature again, but not wanting to see the (main) feature.'

Subsequent pop musicals experienced decidedly mixed fortunes. *Don't Knock the Rock* (1957) attracted 5,000 more ticket sales than *Rock around the Clock* and was favourably received. However, a British equivalent, *6.5 Special* (1958), attracted the single lowest admission figure of the entire period covered by the return sheets. Raistrick reported: 'Didn't appeal to the 6.5. age group; older people didn't care for it either, to use Sheffield's own word for the worst, and they used it often, "Rubbish"!'.

The very next week, however, Hammer's X-rated *Dracula* (1958) achieved the highest ticket sales for the first half of the year by appealing to an exclusively adult (or at least over-16) audience, with very satisfactory results: 'we missed the family trade naturally. By this we mean the children, their parents were here in force.' The manager described (with evident pride in his own publicity efforts) the 're-action of a typical thrill-seeking audience. They had a wonderful time, even those who fainted! Lost one to the hospital Thursday.'

Dracula was supported by a subtitled French film, *There's Always a Price Tag (Retour de Manivelle)*. By this point – chronologically the last weekly programme featured in the Gaumont returns – foreign-language films were becoming increasingly common as supports. As well as meeting the

demand for product at a time when Hollywood-produced B features were becoming scarcer, foreign films also attracted different types of ticket-buyers. They included the kind of patron who could also be satisfied by offbeat English-language films, such as Jean Renoir's Anglo-Indian co-production *The River* (1952) or a double bill of MGM pictures rejected by the ABC circuit bookers, *The Seventh Sin* and *Lust for Life* (1957), of which it was noted: 'It has been observed that two distinct types have been in attendance, the high brow, and the middle course.' Something similar occurred when Jacques-Yves Cousteau's undersea documentary *The Silent World* (*Le monde du silence*), co-directed by Louis Malle, played top of the bill, with an American western, *Man from Del Rio* (1957), in support: 'It has been noted that a completely different type of clientele have arrived to see the Silent World... Two entirely separate tastes have been catered for. Western fans delighted with Del Rio, the more discerning delighted with Silent World.'

While the Cousteau film had an English commentary track, foreign films with subtitles potentially faced resistance. Yet there is no indication in the Gaumont returns that this was the case, except in the case of *I Had Seven Daughters* (*J'avai sept filles*, 1955): 'the subtitles being on the centre of the screen tends to distract attention from the film.' Otherwise, foreign-language films seem to have been accepted or not on their particular merits. *Race for Life* (*Si tous les gars du monde...*, 1956) was 'exceptionally well received' by its patrons. By contrast, *Short Head* (*Courte tête*) and *An Eye for an Eye* (*Oeil pour oeil*) – respectively playing in support to the Rank productions *Seven Thunders* (1957) and *The Gypsy and the Gentleman* (1958) – were as badly received as their main features. The former was said to fall short of the 'standard expected from this type of film', while the latter 'didn't mean a thing to them and was certainly no Wages of Fear.' H.G. Clouzot's 1953 film *The Wages of Fear* (*Le salaire de la peur*) was selected by Raistrick as a one-day booking in 1958 and achieved one of the highest Sunday takes of the year.

An unfortunate clash prevented another 1958 programme from being fully exploited. *St. Louis Blues* starred Nat 'King' Cole and a predominantly black cast of mainly musical performers, such as Eartha Kitt, Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald and Mahalia Jackson, in the story of African-American songwriter W.C. Handy. The nostalgic subject again put off younger patrons, though Raistrick felt 'it brought some of the middle age back.' However, the same week the Cinema House was playing *Satchmo the Great*, a biopic of jazzman Louis Armstrong, featuring an appearance by the real Handy. Two films appealing to the same set of musical tastes must have split the available audience, and moreover the June weather was the warmest the city had enjoyed all year. Nevertheless, the manager was pleased to note that 'there is a very large coloured population here, I reckon we more or less shared them – good job they are here!'

Local and Seasonal Factors

Local factors affecting the Gaumont's business came into three main categories: the weather, competition from rival entertainments and events (including opposition cinemas), and matters of particular regional or topical interest related to the cinema programme. There were also seasonal factors related to the time of year and just occasionally other factors too. The box-office failure of a programme comprising *Between Midnight and Dawn* and *Harriet Craig* (1951), for example, was attributed to 'Flu and shortage of money.'

Sunny spells, heavy rain and snowfall were all equally bad for box office and could on occasion detract from the peak holiday periods when patronage ought to have been strong. Bad weather was seen as the cause of disappointing business done by *Cage of Gold* (1950), *Broken Arrow* (1950), *When Worlds Collide* (1951), *Affair in Trinidad* (1952) and *The Man Who Watched Trains Go By* (1953). Two double bills of MGM films were each harmed by contrasting conditions. Takings for *The Vintage* and *Diane* (1957) surged in stormy weather and slumped with a heat wave. In the case of

Man on Fire coupled with a reissue of *Bhowani Junction* (1958), the Gaumont was hit by 'heavy snow and blizzards' more seriously than any of its competitors: 'The Odeon seemed to beat the weather, and what weather... Weather, with a capital W... WORSE than any for Seventeen years, so they say in the papers. They should know.'

Comments on business done by the Gaumont's first-run rivals are scant in the return sheets until one-word summaries of the opposition became the norm in 1956. But it was noted that the neighbouring Cinema House enjoyed record low and high takings in 1950 with *Give Us This Day* and *Treasure Island*, respectively; the latter (Walt Disney's first fully live-action feature) ran for three weeks, breaking house records in the first two. The Cinema House's 1951 reissue of Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights*, *A Town like Alice* (1956), *An Affair to Remember* (1957) and *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1958) were all said to have done 'excellent' or 'very good' business.

In the absence of more detailed information, length of run can be taken as prima facie evidence of box-office strength. Chaplin's melancholic *Limelight* played at the Cinema House for four weeks in 1953, as did both *The Girl Can't Help It* and *War and Peace* in 1957. At the Hippodrome, no film in the period seems to have run longer than the three weeks enjoyed by Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* in 1949; but the single-week bookings of *The Conqueror* (1956) and *Jailhouse Rock* (1958) were both rated 'excellent' by the Gaumont's manager. Films reported to have done 'very good' business at the Hippodrome were *Rebel without a Cause* and *Private's Progress* in 1956, and *Guys and Dolls*, *Giant* and *High Society* in 1957.

At the Palace, runs of two or three weeks were extremely common. In 1948, *I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now* and *Road to Rio* played for four weeks each, while the following year *Johnny Belinda* was booked for two separate two-week runs. But extended runs really became the norm at the Palace from 1954, when it secured the local contract for Twentieth Century-Fox's CinemaScope releases, beginning with an eight-week engagement of the first CinemaScope picture, *The Robe*. Almost all the subsequent Fox releases played for a minimum of two weeks, sometimes three or four, and in several cases five: *Three Coins in the Fountain* (1954), *The King and I* (1956), *Island in the Sun* (1957) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1958). Other Palace films noted as having done 'very good' business were *The Man Who Never Was*, *Carousel* (both 1956) and *Sea Wife* (1957).

The opening on 16 July 1956 of the Odeon in Flat Street (a ten-minute walk from the Gaumont) with the Rank production *Reach for the Sky* had an immediate impact on the Gaumont's VistaVision double bill of *The Birds and the Bees* and *The Leather Saint* (1956): the newcomer, Roy Raistrick observed, 'has had a terrific effect on our box-office this week.' Further comments on the Odeon are scant but it is safe to assume that it not only drew business away but secured many plum releases that the older house might otherwise have played. In the week when the Gaumont was stuck with Rank's dud *Seven Thunders*, for example, Raistrick noted with chagrin: 'It does appear unfortunate that we should be playing one of our own products, against the strong opposition' of *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* (1957) at the Odeon. In view of the overall decline of business at the Gaumont in these later years, it may well be that the new competing cinema was as much responsible for this as television.

As well as rival cinemas, competition from other types of entertainment also figured in the local scene. Concerts, football matches, evangelical meetings and commercial promotions were all noted as drawing patrons away from the Gaumont. Sometimes events outside the city figured as competition: business for *Streets of Laredo* and *Two Blondes and a Redhead* (1949) was impaired because 'Thousands of people are going to Blackpool to see the illuminations.' In some cases events worked in the cinema's favour. The afore-mentioned double bill of *Paths of Glory* and *Baby Face Nelson* was aided when a football match between Sheffield Wednesday and Hull was cancelled at

short notice, after Hull supporters had travelled to the city. Looking around for something to do, they found the Gaumont.

Local factors relevant to a particular film could also be a positive attraction. An obvious case was the American film *Steel Town* (1952), which though 'rather technical and lacking any real action', had a subject that resonated in Steel City. The authors of the novels on which *The Sea Shall Not Have Them* (1955) and *Desert Sands* (1955) were based – respectively, John Harris and John Robb – were Sheffield-born and this in itself was credited with drawing some patronage to the films.

The worst week for business in any given year was typically the one immediately before Christmas; the best, just after and into the New Year. Whatever the attractions on offer, business dropped noticeably in the run-up to the festive period because people were busy with Christmas shopping and other preparations, and were saving their money for the holiday. The Paramount co-features *The Turning Point* and *The Savage* (1952) could each have played successfully as first features in a normal week, but coupled at this time of year they were thrown away. The same applied to Columbia's *Beyond Mombasa* and *Miami Exposé* (1956), summarised as 'a perfectly balanced programme. It leaves nothing to be desired, by even the fastidious filmgoer.' But poor business reflected 'the general pre-Christmas attitude to spending on other than essentials.'

The Christmas and New Year holiday weeks themselves were another matter. Several of the few two-week bookings at the Gaumont were scheduled for this post-Christmas peak, examples being David Lean's *Great Expectations* (1947) and *Oliver Twist* (1949), Charles Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux* (1948 – a flop in the States but a runaway hit in Sheffield) and *Up in the World*. Single-week hits in the same turn-of-year period included *The Mudlark*, *Scrooge*, *Where No Vultures Fly*, *Made in Heaven* (1953), *Road to Bali* (1953), *Trouble in Store* and *Magnificent Obsession*.

Family programmes were clustered around other holiday periods too, but in a reversal of the pre-Christmas pattern, the week or two following tended to see a drop in business as money was short. In the 1940s and 1950s Sheffield still maintained a regular holiday week in August, when industrial workers would be free to enjoy a break from the factories and steel mills. Although many people would travel to the seaside in this week, others remaining in the city helped to increase patronage for the Gaumont.

Changing Patterns

Along with other UK cinemas, the Gaumont experienced dramatic changes in business conditions in the 1950s. The boom of the wartime and immediate postwar years gave way to a rapidly worsening slump as attendances dropped and continued to decline for years still to come. There were many reasons for this, but one of them was the advent of television.

The BBC's television service, launched in 1936, had resumed in June 1946 following a wartime hiatus, but was at first confined to London and the South East. Regional TV transmissions began with the opening of the BBC's powerful relay station at Sutton Coldfield, serving the Midlands, on 17 December 1949. This had an optimum range of 50 miles' radius, and while Sheffield was 60 miles from the transmitter it came within the fringe area in which transmissions might sometimes be received by those few members of the public who had television sets. But the arrival of the BBC's third station, at Holme Moss on 12 October 1951, officially brought television to the North.

The film industry's initial reaction to television was one of unremitting hostility, which manifested partly in the form of an attempt to reinvigorate cinema-going with new technological gimmicks and spectacular forms of presentation, such as 3-D, widescreen formats and stereophonic sound.

Although a number of films shown at the Gaumont were notionally available in 3-D versions, it's not clear whether they ever played there in 3-D as the process was not mentioned in the managers' reports. A new wide screen was installed in the first week of November 1953, but the cinema's first film in CinemaScope did not appear until February the following year. This was Twentieth Century-Fox's *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1954), which ran for two weeks. Roy Raistrick noted that it was 'Very well received by all classes of Patrons. All are of the opinion that Cinemascope is a vast improvement over 2D [sic].' However, he also pointed that patrons of the romantic comedy were 'of the opinion that the subject chosen could have been more impressive.'

Other early CinemaScope films playing at the Gaumont that drew favourable comment for both their content and their presentation included Universal's medieval swashbuckler *The Black Shield of Falworth* (1954) and a Walt Disney double bill of the live-action fantasy *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* and the animated featurette *Toot, Whistle, Plunk and Boom* (1955). But United Artists' Western *Sitting Bull* (1955) disappointed, partly because, unlike these other releases, it had only a monaural soundtrack: 'The main comment has been that the sound is not what is expected on CinemaScope films, it has been most noticeable the number of Patrons noticing the absence of Stereophonic sound.'

Besides CinemaScope, the Gaumont also presented films in other widescreen formats, including VistaVision – for example, Paramount's comedy *3 Ring Circus* (1955), starring Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis – and SuperScope, launched by United Artists' Western *Vera Cruz* (1955), of which it was observed: 'We have had many appreciative comments on our efforts to present as large a picture as possible. Not one adverse comment has been heard.'

However, the biggest film of the early widescreen era went to the Palace. As already noted, the eight-week engagement of *The Robe* (beginning the week after the Gaumont's booking of *Millionaire*) was the longest run in any cinema during the period covered by the return sheets, and possibly the longest run of any film in Sheffield to that date. The willingness of the Palace to grant such an extended booking may have been the decisive factor in its securing the film, along with the fact that there was as yet no Odeon in the city to take it (*The Robe* being an Odeon circuit release). Twentieth Century-Fox insisted on extended runs for all its CinemaScope releases and because the Gaumont (like other Rank circuit cinemas) was committed to regular weekly programme changes it lost the Fox franchise to an independent.

Although the Gaumont was able to draw on its share of regular, loyal customers it nevertheless had to put effort into the promotion of films in order to capture the occasional filmgoer, particularly in the 1950s when competition for patronage became stronger and numbers began to fall across the board. This is where the great rival television actually came to the rescue of the cinema exhibitor, as it provided an opportunity for publicity and promotion, even on the supposedly advertising-free BBC. Commercial television came to Sheffield in the first week of November 1956, when ITV began broadcasting from its new relay station at Emley Moor, not far outside the city.

The first mentions of television in the Gaumont return sheets had appeared earlier the same year. Among the films noted as benefitting from television exposure, whether through interviews with the stars, coverage of the premiere or televised extracts (so long as they were well chosen), were *Up in the World*, *Doctor at Large*, and the double bills of *A Hill in Korea* with *Raising a Riot* (1956) and *Checkpoint* with *Christine* (*Zwei blaue Augen*, 1957). Raistrick's comments on Rank's Dirk Bogarde vehicle *The Spanish Gardener* (1957) stressed the importance of promotional tie-ins like serialised versions of the story in women's magazines, as well as extracts from the film on both television and radio.

One aspect of television's influence that did not always work in the cinema's favour was story material for films derived from TV programmes. This type of adaptation to the big screen became increasingly common, and according to the Gaumont's manager caused audiences to feel they had seen new films already by having previously viewed the source programme. This was the case, for example, with both *Portrait of Alison* (1956) and *After the Ball* (1957), the latter of which earned for the Gaumont one of its lowest attendance figures on record.

In January 1958, the Gaumont, which had already been double-billing Sunday features to increase their appeal, began regularly playing seven-day bookings. The cinema's first seven-day programme comprised *The Tarnished Angels* (in black-and-white CinemaScope) and *Damn Citizen* (1958), which 'came within a few pounds of breaking [the] Sunday record.' The extra day for the main programme was a further bulwark against declining admissions.

But the Gaumont's longest run in the period covered by the returns was for United Artists' release of the all-star *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1958), presented for four weeks in another new widescreen process, Cinestage (although it had also been shot in a Todd-AO version, 70mm prints were not yet available in the UK). The film was exhibited on an exclusive 'roadshow' basis, with two separate performances daily (rather than the more usual continuous performances, by which each film in a double bill might be shown up to three times), bookable seats and increased prices. The extended engagement encouraged some patrons to make more than one visit, and the third week (coinciding with Easter) actually improved slightly on the first. But by the fourth week attendance had drifted badly and only the high prices saved the day.

While the raised prices guaranteed a hefty return, having only two shows daily limited turnover; Raistrick pointed out that, while takings were very good, 'at normal prices we would have taken more at Easter.' Nevertheless, *Around the World in Eighty Days* achieved the highest overall attendance for any programme from 1955 to the first half of 1958, with only the two-week holiday runs of *Doctor at Large* and *Up in the World* coming close to its total. To the extent that we can generalise from a single example, it would seem that the roadshow presentation of blockbusters in extended runs at advanced prices was one way of compensating for smaller audiences; thus this film was a harbinger of things to come over the next two decades.

Sample Reports

The following notes on two double bills from 1956 are quoted here more-or-less in full to give an idea of just how detailed Roy Raistrick's reports could be in summing up the quality of a particular programme and the way it had been promoted and received.

Foreign Intrigue and The Killing:

'Of all Patrons interviewed, none have had a bad word for this programme. All are agreed that they are two of the best film [sic] seen for many a long day. Special praise for colour (Eastman) of first feature, and sound. The takings reflect well the drawing power of Mitchum, and the strength of programme. It has to be remembered, however, that the city is now on holiday, and the first half of the week, the weather was with us. This programme has had an excellent build up, the supporting feature, playing, I believe, pre-release, is on its own merits, and these are excellent. The best support for some considerable time. Programme make-up perfect. Accent on suspense held throughout both films. Cloak and dagger, and gangster theme excellent meat for this situation. Mitchum excellent, the new Swedish Stars very good indeed. Supporting artistes put over an excellent performances. In the support Sterling Hayden very good, the supporting players outstanding. Annual "Telegraph and Star" Gala, local Fetes and Holiday at Home events.'

Port Afrique and *The Houston Story*:

'The Patrons seeing this programme have expressed satisfaction, the main feature being especially well liked. From interviews, the main comment being that the main feature was a little slow. The takings for this film are not up to my expectations, this may be due to the excellent weather conditions, and counter attraction referred to below. This programme has, with respect to the feature, received good publicity, serialised version appearing in periodicals, the support however, not given build up. The programme make-up is good, the support giving adequate balance. It may be thought that two thriller types do not mix, but in this case, I think good balance has been achieved. The feature film, *Pier Angeli* gives an excellent performance, Hayter good, Phil Carey good, Dennis Price wasted. The supporting film, very good performances registered by all artistes. The annual Parkhead Cricket Week took place this week, this being a [charity] affair, and capacity crowds each evening. County Cricket entertained the Australian touring team, Wed. Thurs. and Friday.'

Further Reading

Allen Eyles, *Gaumont British Cinemas* (Burgess Hill: CTA/BFI, 1996)

Clifford Shaw, *Sheffield Cinemas* (Stroud: Tempus, 2001)

Peter Tuffrey, *South Yorkshire's Cinemas & Theatres* (Stroud: Amberley, 2011)

Richard Ward, *In Memory of Sheffield's Cinemas* (Sheffield: Sheffield City Libraries, 1988)

Previous studies of programming and attendance at particular cinemas:

Sian Barber, 'Beyond Sex, Bond and *Star Wars*: Exhibition Data from the Southampton Odeon, 1972-1980', *Post Script – Essays in Film and the Humanities*, vol. 30, no. 3, Summer 2011, pp. 77-90

Allen Eyles, 'Hits and Misses at the Empire', *Picture House*, no. 13, Summer 1989, pp. 25-47

Sue Harper, 'A Lower Middle-Class Taste-Community in the 1930s: admissions figures at the Regent Cinema, Portsmouth, UK', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2004, pp. 565-87

Sue Harper, 'Fragmentation and Crisis: 1940s admissions figures at the Regent Cinema, Portsmouth, UK', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2006, pp. 361-94

Julian Poole, 'British Cinema Attendance in Wartime: audience preference at the Majestic, Macclesfield, 1939-1946', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1987, pp. 15-

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