

THE ATHENAEUM FILM THEATRE

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While the Athenaeum building lay in ruins after the bombing raids in 1941 the Council of the Plymouth Institution discussed the erection of a new building and how to raise sufficient revenue to maintain it. Letting rooms to other Societies and the Theatre for plays and films was considered as means of obtaining income.

When the Building Committee examined the design for the new building prepared by Messrs. Walls and Pearn, they considered the possibility of adding a projection box for inflammable 35 mm. film on the roof at the rear of the theatre balcony. It was, however, calculated that the beam from the cine-projector kept above the heads of the balcony audience would have to be depressed about 16 degrees from the horizontal. This it was thought would cause the picture to be so seriously distorted as to make good presentation impossible and the idea was abandoned. Instead a small projection box was incorporated in the design which would be suitable for 16 mm. non-inflammable films and slides.

The new Athenaeum building was opened in 1961 incorporating a compact theatre at its centre as described in Vol. I of the Proceedings of the Plymouth Athenaeum. Later reconsideration of the establishment of a film theatre in the Athenaeum was found to depend on four factors:- 1. obtaining grants from the British Film Institute and from the Plymouth City Corporation to cover the cost of alterations and equipment, 2. the formation of a group of local people responsible for running the film theatre, 3. a guarantee to the local group against losses on running costs and 4. the agreement of the Athenaeum Society to all the arrangements. Negotiations to achieve the desired ends were tedious and protracted, necessitating a vast amount of correspondence, numerous telephone calls and meetings held in London and locally with representatives of a number of organisations.

It was not until April 1970 that the City approved a contribution of £4,500 towards setting up a film theatre and a guarantee of £500 a year for an initial period of three years against running costs. Several expensive alterations to the plans had to be made before the approval of the Local Authorities was obtained. Separate toilet facilities for the projectionist were required and this meant the addition of two small rooms to the building on the roof. A further obligation was a second escape route from the projection box. This entailed duplicating the escape route already planned on the East side by providing an exit door at the West end of the new building with communicating cat ladder to a new lobby built at the North-West corner of the theatre balcony. Calculations then showed that two additional 3½ inch solid steel columns would be required to correct the reaction to the additional load on the beam over the offices by the main entrance. As a protection against fire the columns were to be covered with vermiculite gypsum plaster on expanded metal lathing, increasing their external diameter to 6 inches, thus causing undesirable obstructions. The building costs were now (September 1970) estimated to have increased to £6,280, thus leaving only £2,720 of the £9,000 grant to cover the cost of projectors, screen and other equipment. The Athenaeum giving details of their estimate for the building now asked

the B.F.I. for their costs of supplying and installing the equipment so as to arrive at the total cost involved. The Athenaeum prepared a formal agreement for consideration by the B.F.I. and in September 1970 the Architect was authorised to prepare documents and obtain competitive tenders for the work. Due to the delays the earlier estimate of Messrs. John Garrett was increased to £7,156. This estimate was accepted by the Athenaeum Council and work commenced on July 12th, 1971.

The building operations created several difficulties, especially the great pits dug through the rubble of the earlier building to receive the concrete foundations for the steel columns. Rain penetrated the upper foyer and threatened to bring the ceiling down; this occurred because strips of the asphalt covering had been removed from the roof to allow the new walls to be laid directly on the concrete roof slab. Another leak in the asphalt roof over the East stairs took two years to locate and seal, but eventually all was completed.

The new projection rooms were equipped with two 35mm. Auto G. B. Kalee projectors with auto arcs, twenty or twenty-four frames per second, fitted for showing nitrate film with masks and lenses to suit all formats from the standard 4 x 3 through 'wide screen' to 'cinemascope'; one 16mm. Horseman projector with auto arc, sixteen and twenty-four frames per second and a Premier inspection and motorised re-wire bench. The screen was a Smith-Harkness with automatic masking for all formats, mounted on trolleys for moving to the front of the theatre stage. When not in use this screen is hoisted up to 13 feet above floor level against the rear wall of the stage. The sound is provided through a Vita-vox loud speaker. Complete control is provided from the Projection Room by automatic change-over screen masking and automatic dimmer control of the house lights.

To isolate the Projection Rooms from the theatre in case of fire, steel shutters were fitted to the projection portholes. The shutters are controlled from inside the Projection Room by a fusible link or a hand lever and they can be shut in an emergency from a pull handle at the back of the theatre balcony. The total cost of creating the new Film Theatre, building and equipment, amounted to £18,000 of which the building contract amounted to £7,376.41.

The Film Theatre opened on December 6th, 1971 with "The Raging Moon" as its principal film, the distinguished guests on the very successful first night included Mr. Bryan Forbes the director, Nanette Newman and Malcolm McDowell the principal stars of the film, the Lord Mayor, Alderman Mrs. Dorothy Innes, and the Regional Controller of the B.F.I., Mr. J. Huntley.

OUTSIDE AND INSIDE

Below: the Projection Room was constructed on the roof above the Upper Foyer. On the front wall can be seen the ATHENAEUM sign.

Opposite and next page: Inside the Projection Room.



