

AN HISTORY OF RICHMOND FILM SOCIETY

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RICHMOND FILM SOCIETY 1963-1993 (Seasons 0 to 30) – Tom Ruben

A Reminiscence

The first film society in Britain was formed in 1930, and the movement soon spread throughout the land. By the late 1940s many towns had their own film society, and Richmond was no exception: the **Richmond Film Group** met in the **Community Centre** and was run by Walter Lassally, who went on to achieve fame as a noted cinematographer. But this is not the society whose fortieth season is marked by this essay, for it closed in the fifties.

In the early sixties the nearest film society to Richmond was in Kingston, and it had a number of members living in Richmond. A group of these, led by Peter Strachan, suggested that a branch of the society be established in Richmond to show the same films as at Kingston, perhaps a day earlier or a day later. There was clearly a need for something of this sort, but the more the proposal was looked at the more evident it became that it was not viable. Eventually it became clear that any such body in Richmond had to be an independent film society not linked to Kingston. Peter Strachan took the bold decision to start **Richmond Film Society**.

He recruited help from Kingston Film Society's committee, notably its secretary, Barrie Wood, and its treasurer, Douglas MacVicar. A letter in the **Richmond and Twickenham Times** produced an encouraging response, and a committee was formed. Barrie Wood was chairman, Peter Strachan secretary, his wife Jean was membership secretary and Douglas MacVicar treasurer (a post he still holds to this day). Another invaluable member was the films officer, Peter Cargin.

Before embarking on a full season of film shows it was decided to test the waters with a single show, dubbed *the pre-season show*. Thus, it was that on Tuesday 2nd April 1963 at **Richmond Community Centre** in Sheen Road Richmond that Richmond Film Society showed on a borrowed projector its first film, the Russian film ***Ballad of a Soldier***.

This show was a resounding success, and it was decided to go ahead with planning a full season to start in September. The **Community Centre**, sited where Waitrose is today, was approached, and it was found that the only regular dates on which the main hall was available was every third Tuesday; Tuesday has been film show night ever since.

Much activity went on during the summer. A season of nine shows were planned, starting on 24th September 1963 with Ingmar Bergman's *The Face*, preceded by a short by Roman Polanski, *Two Men and a Wardrobe*. The films were selected and booked by Peter Cargin, who also wrote a series of erudite programme notes. These were issued in a series of artistic covers bearing individual screen-printed designs by Peter Strachan, which have now become collectors' items. Also in the summer the present writer was co-opted onto the committee as technical officer and helped in the construction of a screen, and of a projector stand which we are still using today. It is not the purpose of this essay to give a blow-by-blow account of the society's history. It must suffice to pick out some significant incidents of the last thirty years.

We soon lost our chairman when Barrie Wood was appointed secretary of our parent body, the **British Federation of Film Societies**. He was succeeded by Jack Sanderson and then Roy Beckett. In 1971 Roy tragically died suddenly, and the crisis at the top of the committee was resolved when Peter Strachan agreed to step up from secretary to chairman, an office which he held until 1989. In recognition of his long service he was made an honorary life member of the society, as was our first membership secretary Jean Strachan.

[Upon Peter's stand down as RFS chairman in 1989 the role was taken up by Richard Howarth. Who in turn was succeeded by Margaret Sutcliffe in 1992, sadly Margaret died in-post at the end of 2004. Whereupon the present chairman Peter Sheil took over – insert from Peter Sheil 13/11/2018].

Peter Cargin succeeded Peter Strachan as secretary for a number of years, until he too left us to take up a full-time post at the **Federation** as their information officer and editor of their magazine *Film* - a post he holds to this day. He also was made an honorary life member.

The 1964 Christmas show was notable, for we showed our first silent film, Buster Keaton's *The General*. To provide piano accompaniment we hired the services of Arthur Dulay, a veteran musician from the days of silent cinema and the **National Film Theatre's** resident pianist. Although living in Richmond, this was the first time he had ever been asked to perform in his home town.

For our first show in 1970 we selected Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend*, which had achieved some notoriety. At that time our programmes were listed in **Time Out**, and as a result we found our doors besieged by seemingly half the hippy population of London. We didn't dare to turn them away, so despite breaking regulations about taking money at the door we admitted as many as we could, to the great benefit of our finances. People were sitting in the aisles, babies cried during the performance, and a good time was had by all. Fortunately we didn't have a fire inspection during the show!

In the early years, before we acquired our own projectors, we used to borrow one from a variety of educational establishments. It usually fell to Peter Strachan to collect a projector, often from somewhere in the wilds of Surrey, and return it the next morning. At that time, we used only one projector, and endured the consequent breaks in projection to change reels [The society owning its own 16mm projector was under discussion from season 3 through season 4. So from surpluses from previous seasons and with the anticipated surplus from season 5 the society purchased one for £175, in time for the start of season 5 (19/09/1967) – insert from Peter Sheil 13/11/2018].

We did not go without our share of disasters, fortunately mainly minor ones. There was the occasion when it was discovered at the last minute that there was a double booking for the **Community Centre** hall, and we were forced to decamp to the restaurant in the basement. On another occasion we were about to start the showing of *Some Like it Hot* when, on switching on the projector, the lamp blew. This is of course something that is always liable to happen, so we had a spare. What is not so liable to happen did so now, for our one and only spare also failed immediately. Several contingency plans were then set into motion simultaneously, with the result that after some delay the show started on a projector borrowed from **Richmond College of Further Education**. Shortly afterwards a second projector arrived, accompanied by **Kingston Film Society's** projectionist who had been pried away from his fireside.

Then there was the occasion in 1975 when we were due to show *Two Lane Blacktop*. When the projector was being set up we discovered that the second reel, though not the first, belonged to an entirely different film. Clearly we could not show this - but the show must go on - The day was saved when the present writer set out to race to Shepherd's Bush to pick up the print of *MASH* which **BICC Film Society** were due to show the following day. We eventually got going almost an hour late.

On another occasion an enforced last-minute change of programme was avoided only by an incredible coincidence. On the day before the show the film hadn't arrived. Yes, the distributor had sent it out, by Securicor. Securicor eventually located it at their Wandsworth depot and promised to deliver next morning. By lunch time it hadn't turned up - Securicor had dispatched it safely out of reach to the Midlands. The distributor then told us that, yes, he had another print, but unfortunately it was out on loan. As luck would have it, it was at a school in Shepherd's Bush, so after phoning them we were able to borrow that print for the evening.

You may have wondered how we come across the films that make up our programmes. Many of them are spotted at **Viewing Sessions**, the most important of which these days are organised by the **Federation** at the **National Film Theatre** over a spring weekend. These sessions are usually attended in force by committee members. In addition to film shows in three theatres, a series of awards is made to deserving societies and individuals. In 1981 Richmond Film Society won a commendation in the **Film Society of the Year Awards** (as it was joint runner-up in the *Larger Conurbations* category]. In producing this extensive addendum the author has trawled through our archives and has also come across a **Certificate of Special Merit** issued by the BFFS in 1986 but for what?

Two further celebrity visits to mention from our period at the **Community Centre**. In 1975 for the showing of *Number Seventeen*, which was made by Alfred Hitchcock in 1932, we were joined by its star John Stuart. And in 1981 the piano accompaniment to Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* (screened 27/10/1981) was played by the distinguished pianist and organist Florence de Jong. Unfortunately we could not lay on an organ for her, but we were pleased to learn that she had just been given the money for one at the NFT, where she had succeeded Arthur Dulay as Director of Music.

After twenty years we were ejected from our home when the **Community Centre** (on the site of the Richmond Waitrose) closed at the end of 1983. The Community Association was due to move into part of the **Parkshot** site of **Richmond Adult and Community College** at the beginning of 1984, but unfortunately the building was not ready in time, so we lost the second half of the 1983-4 season.

We had planned to move specifically into **Parkshot's Queen Charlotte Hall**, which was provided with a magnificent projection suite largely for our use. The **Queen Charlotte Hall** was still not ready by the following autumn, so we opened the 1984-5 season in the **Studio Theatre**, with the projectors squeezed into the lighting control room, and have stayed there ever since. It would require a doubling of membership to justify a move to the Hall. Our first show at **Parkshot** was *Heat and Dust* from the Merchant-Ivory stable, and we had a visit from its producer **Ishmael Merchant** to introduce the film.

This has been a brief recollection of some events in the history of Richmond Film Society, concentrating mainly on the early years at the **Community Centre**. No mention has been made of many significant topics: short films, 6/7 cups, small meetings, special seasons, PUBs, **Saturday Nights at the Movies**, to name just a few. These must await another occasion.

We conclude with a chronological list of all the 401 feature films shown in the course of our thirty years (errors and omissions excepted) [*now updated (November 2018) to the present and includes the exact screening date – where known – plus some ancillary information such as the sub-seasons*].

Tom Ruben

[This section added by **Peter Sheil** and revised several times in **2018**:

RFS started with the “test” film *Ballad of a Soldier* as mentioned by Tom above. Then for the next 8 seasons programmes were once a month, on the third Tuesday, with the odd extra film.

The term Programme was adopted for each screening evening, a term that persists in its use to today. Originally though it made more sense than it does today (as we now only screen a single feature film) as then each evening was composed of a programme of typically one or two shorts (films of less than 30mins duration) then a coffee break before the main feature. Sadly with the move to **Parkshot** it became impossible for us to show shorts as we had to be out of the premises by 10:30 (plus there was a financial consideration too as their hire cost was only slightly less than that of the main feature, although most were obtained for no charge through worthy organisations such as the National Film Board of Canada and the Goethe Institute). The last season where a short was included with every feature was season 21 (1983). Since then only on rare occasions have we shown/do we show shorts.

In season 2 (1965) a survey of the 127 membership was taken asking them to list their top four films. The top two of the four were subsequently programmed as part of season 3: *The Third Man* and *The Knife in the Water*.

For the first 9 film season membership for all programmes was £1.00 and guest tickets 3s 6d (£0.18). On the success of seasons 1 to 7 the decision was taken to increase the number of programmes offered. So in seasons 8 (1970-71), 9 (1971-72) and 10 (1972-73) supplementary films were offered in addition to the core nine films of the season. On season 8's brochure four extra dates are listed with an entrance fee of 4s (£0.20) per film for the four as yet to be programmed films. Evidence from the programme notes suggest that possibly only two films of the proposed four extra films were actually screened (Tom though does list other films of this vintage on his historic list which are not specified in the programmes, so it is likely that these other dates were used). This led to, in seasons 9 & 10, to a supplementary sub-season being offered, at the season start, in addition to the core nine films; i.e. you could pay for the basic 9 film season at £1.25 and £1.50 respectively or you could pay £2.00 and gain entrance to the respective sub-seasons too. The season 9 sub-season of 4 extra programmes was entitled *Dream Cinema*. The season 10 sub-season of 4 extra programmes was entitled *Eros in the Cinema*.

From season 11 (1973-74), based on the success of the combined 9 film season and their supplements as offered with seasons 8 to 10, the decision was taken to increase the default number of programmes in a season by increasing the screening frequency to one film every other week, on alternate Tuesdays; i.e. a season became a 15 film programme, all covered by one membership fee (again with the odd extra one). Fifteen film seasons is how things continued until season 55 (see below). By season 9 the guest ticket price had risen to £0.25.

The model for the 15 film seasons was first film in the 3rd week in September; AGM at the 5th film mid-November; Christmas party with the 7th film in the 2nd week of December; the last film of the season being at the end of April/start of May.

After the screening the committee always found itself in need of refreshment and invited attendees to join them and discuss the film in a local hostelry. While in the **Richmond Community Centre** it was the **Richmond Arms** (now renamed **The Tap**) then, with the move to **Parkshot**, we alternated between **The Sun** and **The Orange Tree**.

The seasons 9 and 10 model of having sub-seasons within the main season continued with the selection of 4 to 6 films of the 15 film season fitting a common theme. Seasons 11 and 12 probably had themes but this information has been lost (we have no season 11 or season 12 brochures or film notes in the archive). It is very likely though that the season 11 theme was *French Cinema* as there are 4 French films in the season. We do know though that in season 13 we had the sub-season *Landscape into Film*, in season 14 *Growing Up*, in season 15 *American Dream or American Nightmare?*, in season 16 *The Outsider* and in season 17 *Australian Cinema*. After season 17 regular sub-seasons ceased but were not completely forgotten, on jumping to season 23 you will find *Six Decades of British Cinema* (to mark *British Film Year*... but what happened to the film from the 1970s?) and then in season 28 *Cinema Exhibition*.

Distributors tended to only have one 16mm copy of a film as a result of its high cost of manufacture. This meant that with projection by one film society after another across the breadth of the land the prints could get very worn. Film societies would advise each other of these poor quality prints in circulation, which meant that we every now and then substituted, at short notice, a published film in our brochure for another; usually one by the same director if at all possible.

In the early seasons there were extra “small meetings” often held in the **Centre Film Unit** premises in Richmond. These were talks and discussions lead by visiting speakers with extracts for which an entrance fee of 2s6d (£0.125) was charged. These included: **Musicals** 25/01/1965; **National Film Board of Canada Shorts** 04/05/1965; **Animation** 07/01/1969; **Propaganda** 07/03/1969; **Musicals** again 25/11/1969; **The Underground Cinema** 27/01/1970; **A Director's Work** 24/03/1970.

One of the more notable guest speakers was **John Trevelyan** on 05/11/68, the secretary of the **British Board of Film Censors** talking about its and his role. Dovetailed with this was a special extra screening of the BBFC banned film, **The Switchboard Operator**, for which entrance was charged at 5s (£0.25).

The occurrence of non-film events then dropped off with only a few of note (not previously mentioned by Tom) taking place. Namely two distinguished visitor presenters:

(i) On 24th March 1988, to mark our Silver Jubilee – 25 years, **Leslie Halliwell** gave a talk entitled **Adventures of a Film Buyer** (ticket £1:50). In the pre-digital age Leslie produced the film buff's bible **Halliwell's Film Guide** (This 1988 visit to us is referenced on page 241 of '**Halliwell's Horizon**' a biography written by Michael Binder);

(ii) On 23rd March 1991 **John Huntley** gave a talk entitled **Railways and the Cinema** (ticket £4:00). John was a film historian who lived in Kew and presented to us a number of historic archive transport films from the Richmond area. His archive lives on as the **Huntley Film Archives**: <http://www.huntleyarchives.com>

Plus as referenced above by Tom two **Saturday Night at the Movies**. Compilation events put on by the committee recreating an historic cinema experience (the second put on as the first was such a success).

On 6th February 1988 we put on **Saturday Night at the Pictures: A Nostalgic Return to the Golden Days of Pre-War Cinema** to mark RFS's silver jubilee (ticket £3:00). This was put on in the main theatre at **Parkshot**, the **Queen Charlotte Hall** to accommodate the larger audience. This event was joint venture with **The Cinema Organ Society**.

On 30th September 1989 we put on **Saturday Night at the Pictures II: The War Years 1939-1945** (ticket £4:00) also in the **Queen Charlotte Hall**.

The room hire rate in **Parkshot** was discounted for charities, so this was a driver for Richmond Film Society to become a charity, Not a straightforward process. We were successful and became a Registered Charity on 21st January 1987, our charity number is 295898].

The Years From 1993 to 2017 (Seasons 31 to 54) – Peter Sheil 01/09/2021 Revision

Sadly Tom Ruben, the author of the earlier section of this history of RFS, died in 2008 but very kindly and generously left RFS a legacy of £5,000.

During our tenure in **Parkshot** technology advanced. From the early 1990s we knew 16mm was on its way out because as the decade progressed fewer and fewer films were being transferred to this medium, so hindering our film selection. In 1996-1997 an RFS working group extensively looked into the option of going over to 35mm film projection but the equipment proved to be too expensive, probably on reflection a good decision since the arrival of digital media was just around the corner. 16mm film was fully replaced in the

late 1990s by VHS video tape and the then subsequently, post-2006, by DVD. Obviously there were a few seasons of transition when some movies were available on 16mm and some on VHS and similarly, with the later advance, some movies were available on VHS and some on DVD.

In **Parkshot** we were fortunate enough to have a lock-up cabinet in the basement in which we could store our projection equipment, rather than having to take it away after each show. In 2010, some years after we had stopped using them (as we had moved to digital world as outlined above), we sold our 16mm projectors and associated lenses for £300 (not the same projector that we purchased in season five but those of several replacements later). Thus drawing a line under the technological era in which the Society started.

One notable event in this period was the screening of W. G. Griffith's magnificent work **Intolerance**. We screened this silent film on 16th February 1993 with a piano accompaniment from Andrew Youdell of the NFT, the acclaimed film music composer.

For our 40th season we opened the season with a celebratory party on 17th September 2002 and a screening of **It**. Our past Chairman Peter Strachan made a welcome return to cut the cake with the then incumbent Margaret Sutcliffe. A review of this event, written by committee member Pat Hodgson, was published in **Film**, the magazine of the BFFS. A copy can be found as Appendix III to this article.

In that year the Society purchased a high quality screen that was installed for us in the **Studio Theatre** with its own motorised retrieval system. We had an understanding with the college that they could use it under supervision. In 2016 we learnt that the **Studio Theatre** screen, which was removed by **Parkshot** for safe keeping, while their 2014 refurbishment was going on (see later), was damaged beyond repair.

With the change to digital media the projection booth (Tom's lighting control booth) became obsolete and we projected our films from a tower in the middle of the **Studio Theatre** seating area. This was not ideal as it prevented a fan of seats in front of the tower being used (this was done so as not to interfere with the projected image/subtitle reading). Jonathan Earthy, our technical expert, oversaw the Society's purchase both a sound mixer and its own DVD projector because the kit provided by **RACC (Richmond Adult and Community College - Parkshot)** lacked quality. This meant that before each screening we had to configure these (wire them up) to the amplifier, etc. provided by **RACC**.

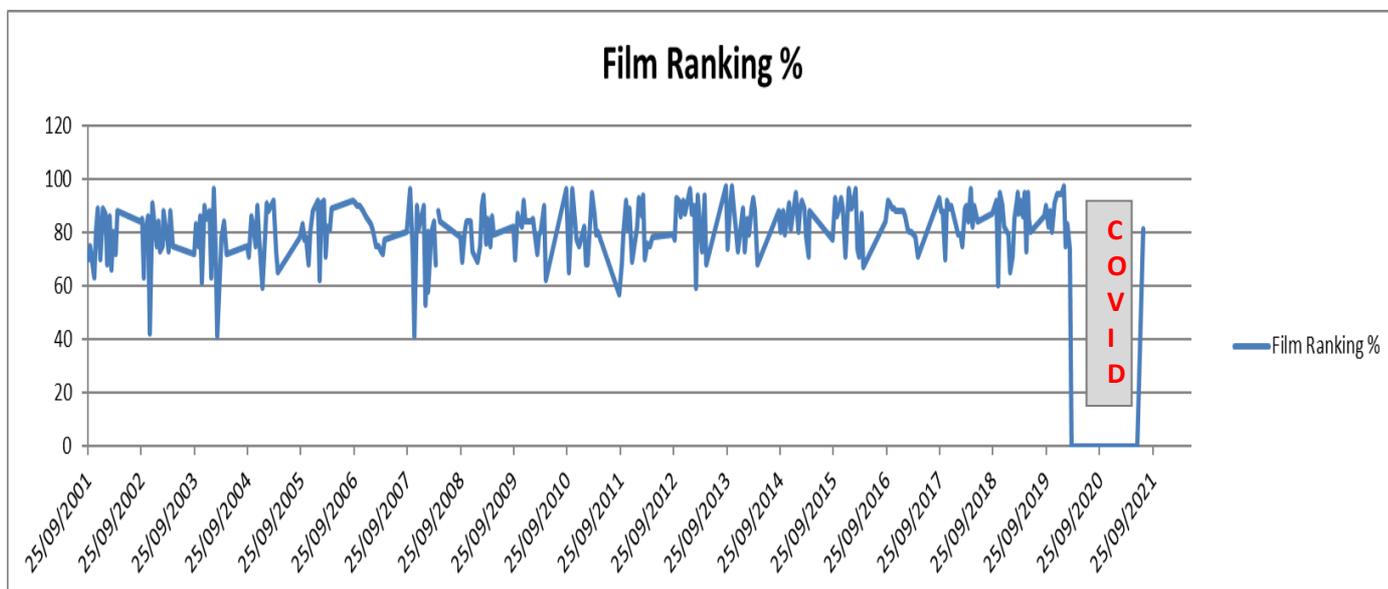
With the advent of DVDs the entire approach to film distribution to film societies changed. No longer did we have to organise the receipt of media and its return (originally for 16mm film it was via Securicor vans for up to five film cans – as mentioned by Tom in the earlier history above; then registered mail for VHS). At the start of the DVD era the industry model was as for VHS with distributors sending out DVDs and us returning them. At this time DVDs were not the common household technology that they are today with few to no commercial operations selling them. Today, with easy internet purchasing of DVDs, the practice is the society buys the DVD through a commercial organisation, as a member of the public, and then separately buys the license to screen the film from the distributor. In this way film distributors no longer have the burden of overseeing the outward dispatch and return of media.

Another technological advance during our **Studio Theatre** days that came with the digital era was the ability to project a pre-film PowerPoint slideshow and play introductory music from Jonathan's laptop, which was also hooked into the equipment tower of the **Studio Theatre**.

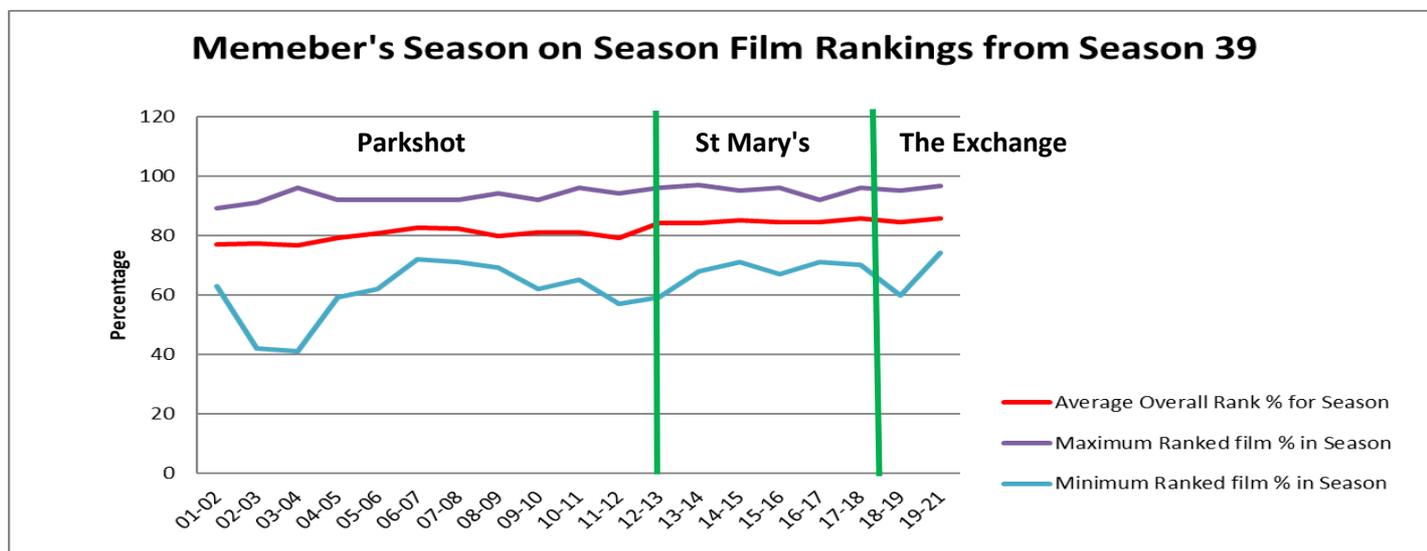
In season 39, at the November 2001 season 38 AGM, members requested we obtain their reactions to our films after each film, rather than as two groups twice yearly (at the end of each half of the season), as had been done for a number years previously. So the present Reaction Slip with the five categories **Excellent, Good, OK, Poor** and **Dreadful** was generated by the author of this report and has been handed out on arrival and collected in after each film, a process which continues to be used to this day. The marks are then (i) collated into rankings of **1, 2, 3, 4** and **5**, (ii) normalised and (iii) finally converted into a percentage liking. These percentage ranking marks along with any member's comments are then transposed into the PowerPoint slide deck that is projected back to the audience pre the next film. Sadly the data from the years of half season historic feedback has been lost but we do have all the results from this change in process in 2001; i.e. for season 39 inclusive onwards. These individual film results have been added to Tom's historic film list.

The graphs below summarise this feedback.

Firstly, a graph showing the ranking of every individual film that we have data for. This shows most films screened have about an 80% liking. In fact, from these 295 films (to August 2021) the average is actually 82%. 55% of films shown by RFS achieve a ranking greater than or equal to the 82% average. Notice the 2020-2021 COVID trough when we were not permitted to screen films due to lockdowns (see the specific section below)



Secondly a graph of the overall season average ranking for all the films in a season and both the individual film in that season that was most liked (Max) and most disliked (Min).



The above graph shows that the overall satisfaction in the films selected by your committee to be screened increased from an average of 79%, while we were in **Parkshot**, to 85% during our time at St Mary's (both G5 and The Exchange).

Our tenure in **Parkshot** became increasingly problematic from season 49 (2011-2012) when the management brought in a finish "by 9:30pm" and "must be out by 10:00pm" rule. This forced us to change our start time from our traditional 8:00pm start to 7:30pm, since many of the films we wanted to include in our seasons were around two hours long. Plus, it imposed on the film selection process an automatic discard of any film longer than two hours. Additionally, it obviously was not convenient for the membership, many of whom found arriving at the earlier time problematic and also meant the committee had to be there around 7:00pm, so as to

wire-up the projector, etc. We also found that **Parkshot** would, at none to very short notice, move our screenings from the booked **Studio Theatre** to rooms which did not have raked seating.

In season 49 (2011-2012) we were very fortunate in having Professor Barry Langford of **Royal Holloway** introduce two films: *Moon* and *Seraphim Falls* respectively. His insights were very well received by the membership.

In late 2011 **Parkshot** announced they were going for a major refurbishment of the site and the **Studio Theatre** and **Queen Charlotte Hall** would be knocked down and redeveloped. So, after some time spent reviewing all the sites available as a possible replacement venue, we were struggling to find somewhere suitable. Then by chance we heard that **St. Mary's University College** in Strawberry Hill wanted to reach out into the community and that they were prepared to offer one of their lecture rooms refitted with state-of-the-art projection facilities.

RFS Treasurer and Chairman (Mike Day & Peter Sheil) met with the then Vice-Chancellor (Philip Esler) and discussed our use of the facility. In the course of the meeting, it transpired that Philip had come from Dundee and wanted to create a community arts centre akin to that offered by DCA (Dundee Contemporary Arts). Coincidentally the Chairman was very familiar with the DCA and this really helped our case. So during the 2012 summer break the University undertook the complete refurbishment of one of their lecture theatres to become the afore-mentioned state-of-the-art projection facility - RFS providing technical input. It was ready, just in time for our 50th season start, in fact the day before our first show! So on 18th September 2012 we moved into **G5**, to screen Richard Ayoade's *Submarine* [**G5** is officially also known as *The Pete Postlethwaite Picture House* – named in honour of an alumnus of the University]. **G5** has an official capacity of 117, a slight increase on the **Studio Theatre** whose capacity was c.100.

Not only in **G5** do we have surround sound but can as in the **Studio Theatre** previously project our pre-film PowerPoint slideshow and play introductory music. Most significantly here we have no time limitation. So we were able to revert back to our 8:00pm start and can show films of any duration we want. Though the seats are raked their padding could be improved, so we have imposed our own limit of 2.5 hours as the longest film we screen. Fortunately, St Mary's is in the borough of Richmond, so we are comfortable in continuing to call ourselves Richmond Film Society although now based in Twickenham rather than the heart of Richmond.

For our 4th film of season 50, 30th October 2012, to mark Halloween, RFS held a joint screening of *Nosferatu* with **St Mary's University College Gothic Film Society**. The venue, **The Waldegrave Drawing Room**, Strawberry Hill House, Strawberry Hill, was packed to the 120 capacity. The film shown was the silent classic directed by F. W. Murnau screened with piano accompaniment from Wendy Hiscocks.

For our 10th film of season 50, 12th February 2013, we teamed-up with the **Rotary Club of Kew Gardens** and presented *Benda Bilili*, in support of Rotary's Worldwide Campaign for Polio Eradication.

Our 50th season finished with an "extra" celebratory 16th film the classic: Bunuel's *The Exterminating Angel*. This was followed by a party at the **Waldegrave Arms** pub, also the venue for our Christmas parties post the move to **St Mary's University** which, from 2014, was the University's new name. The **Waldy** was also where the committee adjourned to post-film screenings in **G5**.

At the end of season 50, May 2013, Jonathan Earthy, who had been our Technical Officer though the transition from VHS to DVD relocated to Hampshire. In gratitude for his many years of service to the society keeping us abreast of projection technology changes, he was awarded Honorary Membership of the Society. Jonathan took over from John Brett who was our 16mm projectionist for more than 10 years, John too had previously been awarded Honorary Membership of the Society.

In 2014 our parent organisation, **The British Federation of Film Societies**, rebranded itself adopting its trading name **Cinema for All**.

Our bank balance has been rather healthy for a number of years, so we have since 2011 approached foreign distributors directly to obtain the odd film that has had little or no commercial release in the UK, films that are more expensive to hire.

To date these films are:

<i>Investigation</i>	2012
<i>Jerusalem-Gangster's Paradise</i>	2012
<i>Bienvenue Chez Les Ch'tis</i>	2013
<i>Shirley - Visions Of Reality</i>	2015

Returning to technology, the next technological evolution has been the advent of Blu-Ray disks (commercially available from c. 2008 to to-date) though they have not taken off as replacements/alternatives for DVDs. RFS has tested them for their image quality in **G5**. We deemed any improvement in projection quality was imperceptible, so did not warrant the supplementary cost of about £6:00-£10:00 per film for this format.

For the last two seasons, 53rd and 54th we were very fortunate in having Dr **Jon Hackett**, of St Mary's (Programme Director for Film and Screen Media) introduce two films. These were *Two Days One Night* and *Tehran Taxi* and, as with the previous 49th season, the introductions were very well received by the membership.

In terms of the Society's present (December 2016) membership the number of members has stayed static with an average of 66 for the last 13 years; i.e. the move from Richmond to Strawberry Hill has had no influence on the membership numbers. The move though did create a shift in the membership demographics to the west. We lost some who came from Richmond or came post-work, who found the RACC venue being opposite Richmond station very convenient but Twickenham not so. We have now picked-up replacements from the Twickenham-Teddington area.

The biggest change though to our fortunes with the move has been the growth in sales of tickets on the door. In **Parkshot** days we had around 5 per film. Today we have 25 non-members per film and are regularly attracting audiences of just fewer than 70 per film and for some films more than 80; up from around an average of 42 attendees per film during our last six years in **Parkshot**. Our present success means we are in the fortunate position of having to face-up to the fact that we could out-grow our present **G5** venue, which although officially rated to seat 117, in practice 100 is more than enough to fill it.

By the end of Season 54 we had screened 769 films. In our previously completed season (season 53) in **G5** we had 964 attendees for that season, which can be compared to an average of 645 per season for our last eight years in **Parkshot**.

Peter Sheil

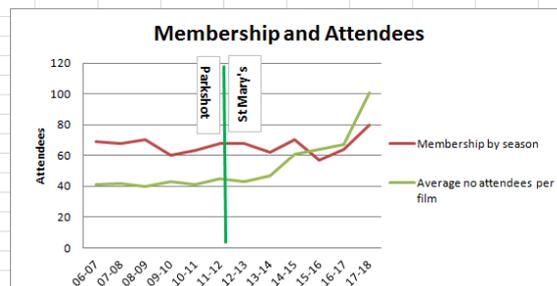
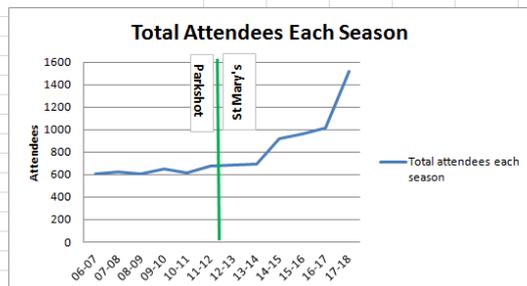
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## **The Years From 2017-2018 (Seasons 54 and 55 first part) – Peter Sheil** **07/01/2018 Revision**

Happily the Society has continued to go from strength to strength, as foretold above.

We concluded season 54 with 1,012 attendees for that season, 424 of them being non-members. This is an average of 67 attendees per film. Our numbers continued to increase and for the first 7 films of season 55 we had an average of 98 attendees per film. Along with this attendee increase membership numbers have also increased from running at an average of 66 for the last 13 years to nearly 80 in season 55 (2017).

|                               | B        | C        | D        | E        | F        | G        | H        | I         | J         | K         | L         | M         | N         | O | P | Q |
|-------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|---|---|---|
| Season                        |          | 44       | 45       | 46       | 47       | 48       | 49       | 50        | 51        | 52        | 53        | 54        | 55        |   |   |   |
| Year                          | 06-07    | 07-08    | 08-09    | 09-10    | 10-11    | 11-12    | 12-13    | 13-14     | 14-15     | 15-16     | 16-17     | 17-18     |           |   |   |   |
| Average no attendees per film | 41       | 42       | 40       | 43       | 41       | 45       | 43       | 47        | 61        | 64        | 67        | 101       | estimate  |   |   |   |
| Total attendees each season   | 610      | 624      | 606      | 651      | 618      | 680      | 684      | 696       | 918       | 964       | 1012      | 1515      | estimate  |   |   |   |
| Membership by season          | 69       | 68       | 70       | 60       | 63       | 68       | 68       | 62        | 70        | 57        | 64        | 80        | estimate  |   |   |   |
| Venue                         | Parkshot | St Mary's |   |   |   |



So in season 55, as predicted, we found we had outgrown **G5** at **St. Mary's University**. During the course of season 54 (2016-2017) our seating capacity concerns were realised when we had 82 attendees for **Tehran Taxi** and just a few less for a couple of other films that season. This capacity limit became a practical reality at the third and sixth films of season 55 (**The Salesman** and **Letters from Baghdad**, Oct and Nov 2017 respectively) where we exceeded **G5's** capacity and on both occasions had to turn four non-members away.

Much of the Society's growth can be attributed to the services of Elle Mahoney. For Season 52 Elle took over production of the annually produced publicity brochure. More significantly for season 55 Elle revamped the website, so we now have a first rate professional internet gateway to the society. Elle's work replaced the amateurish efforts of the author of this history, who had been producing them both for 11 years, since 2004 (season 42).

Meanwhile from 2015, in central Twickenham, a residential complex, **Brewery Wharf**, with a new arts venue was being built/developed on the site of the old **Post Office Sorting Office** opposite Twickenham station. The arts venue is Richmond upon Thames council owned and run by a third party on their behalf. RFS has been watching the developments of this site since the 2014 granting of planning permission, knowing that a cinema/theatre/arts centre for community use was to be included in the development. Although ready for public use in late 2016 the council could not find a third party willing to take it on until St. Mary's University stepped-up in early 2017. This is an ideal venue for them as it dovetails nicely with their expansion plans and is used as part of their drama faculty during the day and from 5pm is available for community use. Officially St. Mary's took over the venue on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2017 and is now known as **The Exchange**. RFS expressed an interest in using its facilities.

**The Exchange** theatre has a capacity of 285 and the seating is much more comfortable than in **G5** and the raking is much better. The committee extensively researched the pros and cons of a move there and attended a **Twickenham Cinema Club** film screening to check that its projection was fit-for-purpose. So at the Society's 54<sup>th</sup> AGM (14<sup>th</sup> Nov 2017) we announced that mid season 55; i.e. from the start of 2018 we would move to **The Exchange**.

Finally, one sad note from 2017, was that in May 2017 Douglas MacVicar died (mentioned in Tom's section above). Douglas was one of our Honorary Members, a founder member of the society who became Treasurer in season 5 (1967-68) a role he performed for at least 30 years.

## The Exchange 2018 Onwards (Season 55 second part onwards) – Peter Sheil - 01/09/2021 Revision

The first film shown at our new venue, **The Exchange**, was *Paterson* on January 16<sup>th</sup> 2018. Once more we were fortunate enough to have this film introduced by our now regular guest introducer **Jon Hackett**.

Our move to **The Exchange** has proven to be an outstanding success. This is illustrated by the table of season 55 attendances below. I repeat the information from the above section where we state exceeding the **G5** capacity limit became a reality with the third and sixth films of season 55 (*The Salesman* and *Letters from Baghdad*, Oct and Nov 2017 respectively) on both occasions we had to turn four non-members away. So driving us to **The Exchange** for 2018.

What then happened once in **The Exchange** took us by completely by surprise our attendances took off. One can see from the table below for the 2018 part of season 55 we had two audiences of above 200 in the new venue.

| RFS Season 55   |                               |                     |                |          |                 |                               |                |                |          |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|----------------|----------|-----------------|-------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------|
| Screening Order | Film                          | Number of Attendees |                | Location | Screening Order | Film                          | Number of      |                | Location |
|                 |                               | 15 Film Season      | 18 Film Season |          |                 |                               | 15 Film Season | 18 Film Season |          |
| 1               | <i>Julieta</i>                | 92                  | 92             | G5       | 8               | <i>Paterson</i>               | 141            | 141            | Exchange |
| 2               | <i>Rams</i>                   | 98                  | 98             | G5       | 9               | <i>Embrace of the Serpent</i> | 159            | 159            | Exchange |
| 3               | <i>The Salesman</i>           | 112                 | 112            | G5       | 10              | <i>Graduation</i>             | 151            | 151            | Exchange |
| 4               | <i>Chevalier</i>              | 105                 | 105            | G5       | 11              | <i>Men &amp; Chicken</i>      | 108            | 108            | Exchange |
| 5               | <i>Tangerines</i>             | 89                  | 89             | G5       | 12              | <i>Outside the Law</i>        | 126            | 126            | Exchange |
| 6               | <i>Letters From Baghdad</i>   | 105                 | 105            | G5       | 13              | <i>Marshland</i>              | 203            | 203            | Exchange |
| 7               | <i>The Other Side of Hope</i> | 84                  | 84             | G5       | 14              | <i>Toni Erdmann</i>           | 138            | 138            | Exchange |
|                 |                               |                     |                |          | 15              | <i>A Man Called Ove</i>       | 201            | 201            | Exchange |
|                 | Mean G5                       | 98                  |                |          | 16              | <i>Hotel Salvation</i>        |                | 125            | Exchange |
|                 | Mean Exchange                 | 147                 |                |          | 17              | <i>Le Havre</i>               |                | 100            | Exchange |
|                 |                               |                     |                |          | 18              | <i>The Florida Project</i>    |                | 162            | Exchange |
|                 |                               |                     |                |          | <b>Total</b>    |                               | <b>1,912</b>   | <b>2,299</b>   |          |

**The Exchange** was a new venture for the University and we were their biggest revenue generator in the venue. So they were very keen for us to extend our season. **The Exchange** provides us with online/telephone booking service (we are getting up to 60 ticket sales per film from this). Another plus point is **The Exchange** has a bar, so attendees are treating coming to a film *as a night out* not just a film viewing. **The Exchange** not only provides a much bigger auditorium but also provides us with a pre-booking service, both over the phone and on-line. Unfortunately, we do not at present have the ability to handle the social evolution towards cashless payments for on-the-night ticket sales – those that arrive without cash are dispatched to the Post Office ATM!

The high attendance with many on-the-door sales put us in an embarrassing position of riches. So we said yes to **The Exchange** and increased the season by extending it by two bonus films in May (*Hotel Salvation* and *Le Havre*) saying all members could attend them for free, giving them something back.

Subsequent to this the news of our success reached the ears of the organisers of the **Twickenham Festival** who approached us and invited us to show a film as part of the **Twickenham Festival** programme. We accepted the invitation and selected *The Florida Project* as the film, which was screened on 12<sup>th</sup> June to 162 attendees. Once more we said all RFS members could attend this film for no extra cost. In light of this success, we have been invited back to show another film as part of the 2019 Festival. We also offered two tickets to any film of next season as one of **Twickenham Festival** raffle prizes.

The outstanding success of the 2018 move to **The Exchange** prompted the committee to think this season was a once in a lifetime opportunity to enter the society for **Film Society of the Year** (FSOY) awards. RFS submitted in two sub-categories (out of seven – two is a minimum requirement required in order to enter the main FSOY award): **Film Programming**, and **Marketing and Publicity**, as well as the overall **Film Society of the Year – The Engholm Prize**. The original drafts of which were put together by

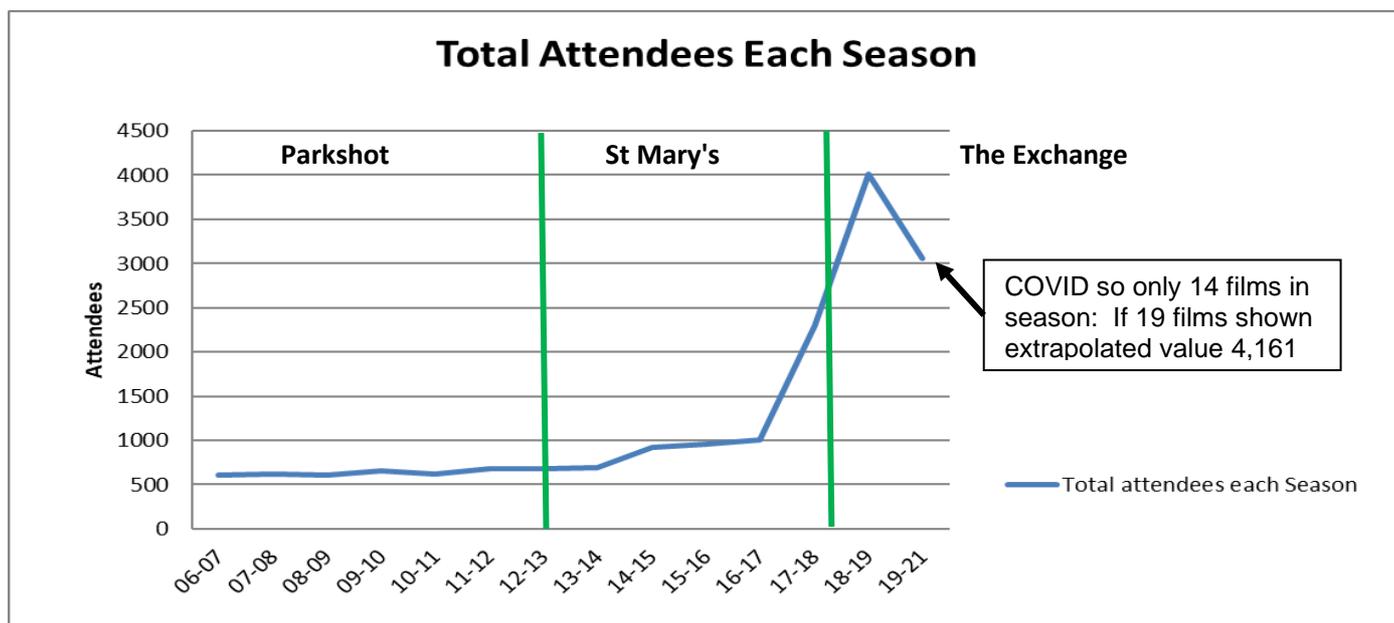
respectively: Peter S and Steve for **Film Programming**; Peter M and David for **Publicity and Marketing**; Peter S and Steve and contributions from others for the overall **FSOY**. The final presentations were then pulled together by Peter M, Mike and David. This involved significant work to make eight files/data packs for eight judges. We learned on 23 July that RFS has been short-listed, along with five others, in the **Marketing and Publicity** category. Awards were announced at the **Community Cinema Event** in Sheffield on 9th September. Sara attended this and though we did not win were **Highly Commended** and presented with a framed certificate (see below).

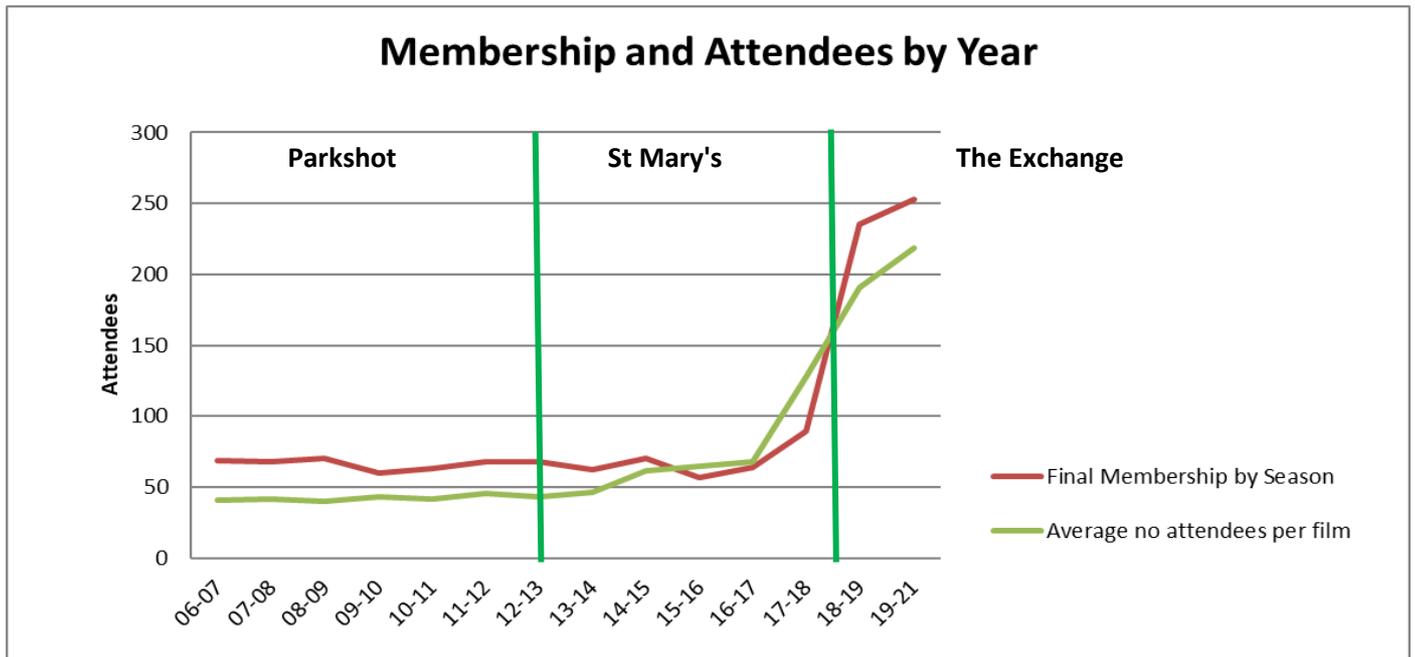
Mentioned above we have, as the result of the success of **The Exchange**, found the move to be embarrassingly lucrative for us. So we took the bold move to reduce our prices for season 56. We reduced the season membership from £60 to £40, the same price it was in 1998. Additionally, we reduced the on-the-door tickets from £6 to £5 and took the policy decision to increase the main season by one from 15 to 16 films, adding back in the post Christmas early January slot (a slot that we lost when we were in **Parkshot** as that venue stayed closed for a long Christmas break) so with the **Twickenham Festival** film that's 17 films for £40 (or £2.35 per film). The aim being to convert the on-the-door attendees to season ticket holders – we ended season 55 in May 2018 with 89 members.

Season 56 started in September 2018 where the success of **The Exchange** move has continued to astound us. Not only has the reduced season ticket price generated the hoped-for new membership (it's more than doubled to 235) but we are still getting a high on-the-door attendance. At the time of this update, we have screened the 7 films, all the 2018 part of season 56, and have had an average attendance of 222, the highest being 252. So we are now once more concerned about seating capacity!

The revised graphs tell the story:

| Season                                 | 44       | 45       | 46       | 47       | 48       | 49       | 50        | 51        | 52        | 53        | 54        | 55                 | 56       | 57       |
|----------------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|--------------------|----------|----------|
| Year                                   | 06-07    | 07-08    | 08-09    | 09-10    | 10-11    | 11-12    | 12-13     | 13-14     | 14-15     | 15-16     | 16-17     | 17-18              | 18-19    | 19-21    |
| Average no attendees per film          | 41       | 42       | 40       | 43       | 41       | 45       | 43        | 46        | 61        | 64        | 67        | 128                | 191      | 219      |
| Total attendees each Season            | 610      | 624      | 604      | 651      | 618      | 680      | 684       | 693       | 918       | 964       | 1012      | 2299               | 4014     | 3062     |
| Final Membership by Season             | 69       | 68       | 70       | 60       | 63       | 68       | 68        | 62        | 70        | 57        | 64        | 89                 | 235      | 253      |
| Total member attendees each Season     | 473      | 510      | 507      | 563      | 550      | 610      | 582       | 578       | 620       | 584       | 588       | 875                | 2336     | 1991     |
| Total non-member attendees each Season | 137      | 114      | 97       | 88       | 68       | 70       | 102       | 115       | 298       | 380       | 424       | 1424               | 1678     | 1071     |
| % membership attending each Season     | 78       | 82       | 84       | 86       | 89       | 90       | 85        | 83        | 68        | 61        | 58        | 38                 | 58       | 65       |
| Number of films per season             | 15       | 15       | 15       | 15       | 15       | 15       | 16        | 15        | 15        | 15        | 15        | 18                 | 21       | 14       |
| Average Overall Rank % for Season      | 82.7     | 82.2     | 79.8     | 81       | 81       | 79.2     | 84.2      | 84.1      | 85.1      | 84.5      | 84.3      | 85.6               | 84.5     | 85.8     |
| Maximum Ranked film % in Season        | 92       | 92       | 94       | 92       | 96       | 94       | 96        | 97        | 95        | 96        | 92        | 96                 | 95       | 96.6     |
| Minimum Ranked film % in Season        | 72       | 71       | 69       | 62       | 65       | 57       | 59        | 68        | 71        | 67        | 71        | 70                 | 60       | 74.2     |
| Venue                                  | Parkshot | Parkshot | Parkshot | Parkshot | Parkshot | Parkshot | St Mary's | St Mary's/Exchange | Exchange | Exchange |





At the end of 2018 we completed our first calendar year at **The Exchange** with the move being a resounding success. So much so that at a 3rd December 2018 committee meeting we decided:

- 1) To close the membership for season 56, which stood at 235 (more than three times the number at the start of the previous season).  
Key drivers for this success are:
  - (i) **The Exchange's** location right by Twickenham station (analysis shows that 70% of the members live in proximity to a railway service that stops at Twickenham).
  - (ii) The reduction in membership fee to £40.
  - (iii) Word-of-mouth locally (which the author of this report has had personal experience of proving it's happening);
  - (iv) **The Exchange** providing an on-line and telephone booking service.
  - (v) **The Exchange** has a bar so it's not just going out to watch a film but an evening out.
- 2) For the first time in the history of the society not to offer a half season membership for the post-Christmas films.
- 3) Instructed **The Exchange** not to sell any more than 60 pre-booked tickets.

Analysis of the 35 films from season 56 & the COVID truncated season 57 films shows that for any one film at **The Exchange** we get:

- (i) c 62% of the members attending, c 156
- (ii) up to 70 on-line/telephone pre-booked sales
- (iii) an average of c. 40 on-the-door sales

Since we observed only c 60% of the membership attends a specific film and knowing the numbers of non-member sales we decided, for season 57, to increase the membership to 250. In the mid-August 2019 membership deadline day batch of letters, where the 250 cap was reached, there were three additional membership requests, so to be fair, we landed on 253 members; i.e. the 2019 membership cap for season 57 was reached significantly ahead of when the 235 membership cap for season 56 was reached, it was only reached at year-end 2018.

From the companion article on historic and current cinema capacity in Richmond on a Richmond Film Society screening night our capacity is 26% of all the available cinema seats in the Richmond and Twickenham area.

For our Christmas parties at **The Exchange** we restricted it to members only. About 100 members attend, post the film, in the Conservatory, a top floor room in **The Exchange**.

For season 55 we charged membership at £60 the level it had been since season 51. At the end of season 55, with only half the season at **The Exchange**, we found we had made c. £5,500, as opposed to the few £100 or so loss or excess we had been achieving over the previous 27 years. Hence for season 56 onwards we reduced the membership fee, as previously mentioned, to that of the 1998 level, £40 – to help our aim of reducing our excess income. Unfortunately, the strategy has not worked in that the revenue we have lost by reducing the membership fee has more than been made up by the volume of non-member ticket sales (the on-the-door on-the-night and the pre-film booking sales).

After screenings the committee continues to be in need of refreshment and if lucky we can get a quick one in at **The Exchange** bar before they close it and/or we adjourn to the **Timberyard!**

## RFS and the COVID Pandemic (Seasons 57 & 58) – Peter Sheil - 01/09/2021

Season 57 started off fine on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2019 with membership closed at 253. Come mid-January the COVID-19 pandemic was taking hold worldwide. The UK was though slow to act in terms of locking the country down to prevent its spread. RFS was following government guidelines, as was everyone else so by the time of **3 Faces**, screened on March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020, we took the stance of advising our members that there was potentially a COVID transmission risk in attending but we were going ahead with this screening. Our position throughout has been: "**We are dealing with consenting adults here, all of whom are more than capable of making their own judgments.**" **3 Faces** had an attendance of 245, so almost capacity of 285, indicating that the members were not disturbed by the increasing prevalence of COVID. Things though were getting worse quite quickly very soon after and although we planned to go ahead with **Woman at War** on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2020, we were getting some feedback that "Was it sensible?", continuing to follow government guidelines all looked good for the screening. That was until on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2020 a full lockdown was declared by the government and cinema screenings had to cease, which included our planned one of **Woman at War**.

The government dictate meant we pulled this screening and all subsequent films of season 57, i.e. we had only screened 12 films of our planned 19 for season 57.

During the lockdowns film streaming services took off. In order to continue to engage with the members RFS committee investigated the use of Virtual Screening Rooms – technology supplied by Filmbank, a significant distributor of films to the Film Society market. The committee tested the technology on 12/04/2021 by watching **Socrates**. It was a success, so we arranged for a film on our 58th season short list to be screened to the membership, Pedro Almodóvar's **Pain and Glory**. The screening was on 8/6/2021 and again was a success. We acquired 80 licences which we distributed to those members who signed-up but we know a number watched the film as a household/party, so we estimated that 150-200 tuned in.

There is a limitation on VSRs at the time of this screening in that only c 40 films are available to be screened this way, the majority of the 40 are not RFS material or of they are we have already shown them. The technology has since been enhanced so that you can now have people at home watching a film and at the same time screen the film live to an audience in a cinema. This is a development the committee will investigate further but for RFS VSR is presently (Sept 2021) limited by the films on offer.

Things looked on the up for the screening films to an audience post 19th July 2021 Freedom Day (lockdown social distancing end). So, we planned, with The Exchange, an in-person screening of our 2020 season 57 close-out summer film **Wild Rose** on 20th July 2021, originally scheduled for 16/06/2020. Since it was only a day after all restrictive measures were in place, we decided to show the film under COVID conditions with (i) face masks and (ii) seating socially distanced and pre-booked. So, we ran with The Exchange's reduced capacity of 130. There were 87 attendees who appreciated being back with an audience. Prior to the screening in association with The Exchange (Catherine Graham and Lisette Barlow) we prepared both a comprehensive **Health and Safety** and a **Risk Assessment** document that was distributed to all members, so they could **make their own judgments** (as referenced above) to attend the screening or not.

**Pain and Glory** and **Wild Rose** we consider to be part of season 57 making a total of 14 films for the season.

Post **Wild Rose** we set in place the launching of our 19 film season 58, a year late, on 14th September 2021. The 19 films of season 58 include the seven lost from season 57 due to the pandemic.

During lockdown we decided we will always include one classic film in the season. For season 58 **Rashomon** has been selected, it is to be screened on 15th February 2022.

#### Actions Taken Due to the Pandemic

- 1) Almost immediately, at the start of Lockdown in March 2020, The Exchange (Ruby Penman) was able to reimburse all the one-off ticket sales purchased for our future films from season 57.
- 2) The committee has met monthly throughout the lockdowns initially via Zoom and then in the Chairman's garden and subsequently indoors to monitor COVID restrictions and developments to see how, if and when we could continue.
- 3) At the June 9<sup>th</sup> 2019 committee meeting we made the decision that we call time on season 57 realising that we were unlikely to be able to go ahead with the outstanding 7 films of season 57.
- 4) Following on from the abandonment of season 57 we implemented a programme to either provide members a refund on their membership prorated and rounded-up for the "missed" films of £15:00 or instead giving members the option to donate this £15:00 sum to RFS. 226 members kindly donated their £15 to the society giving us £3,390.
- 5) In January 2021 we approached each £15:00 donors if they would like to Gift Aid that donation. 81 did, allowing RFS to make a Gift Aid claim and gain £305.
- 6) We obtained a refund for the paid in advance bookings at The Exchange venue.
- 7) We successfully claimed against our insurance for cancelled Exchange bookings but we reimbursed the insurers when The Exchange gave us the refund mentioned in point 6 above. Thanks to Peter Maguire for addressing this.
- 8) RFS made a £200 donation to Cinema for All (British Federation of Film Societies) to support them.
- 9) RFS made a £250 donation to The Cinema Museum in Lambeth to support them.
- 10) RFS made a £250 donation to the Watermans Arts Centre to support them.
- 11) Throughout the pandemic we kept up interest ups in RFS by producing a weekly "best" of Richmond Film Society recommendation, reproductions of film notes from the top ranked films of our past seasons. These were published in the **Richmond and Twickenham Tribune** and on our website and emailed out to out to those on our mailing list. By the time of the end of restrictions 67 recommendations had been produced and sent out.

### RFS Committee September 2021

Your society is run by a committee of nine whose help is much appreciated by the Chairman:

| Committee Member | Role                                                                                              | When Joined Committee |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Peter Sheil      | Chairman                                                                                          | 1984 (season 22)      |
| Mike Day         | Treasurer/Technical Officer. Treasurer since Douglas MacVicar's retirement from this role in 2002 | 2003 (season 40)      |
| Sally Maynard    | Membership Secretary and Front of House                                                           | 1997 (season 35)      |
| Sara Steinke     | Secretary, Front of House and Film Notes                                                          | 2014 (season 52)      |
| David Mahoney    | Social Media Officer – FaceBook/website/mail-outs/etc.                                            | 2016 (season 54)      |
| Peter Maguire    | Publicity Officer: keeping 20 plus sites abreast of our offerings                                 | 2013 (season 50)      |
| Steve Karpel     | Programme Manager: books films and ties them to show dates                                        | 1979 (season 17)      |
| Annie Cartland   | Disbursements Officer                                                                             | 2018 (season 55)      |
| Julieta Bowyer   | newly elected                                                                                     | 2019 (season 57)      |

[The chronological list of 401 feature films shown, as referenced by Tom at the end of his section above, has obviously continued to grow, the latest count now stands (at the end of season 57) at 823 films.]

**Peter Sheil 30/08/2021**

## RFS Awards

Below are the award certificates received from BFFS and its rebrand Cinema for All:



1981



1986



2018

## RFS Appendix I

### RICHMOND FILM SOCIETY & CINEMA IN RICHMOND – The Start by Tom Ruben, c 1983

The first Film Society was formed just sixty years ago, and the movement soon spread throughout the land. By the late 1940s the Richmond Community Centre Film Group secretary Walter Lassally, who later became famous as a cinematographer- was meeting at the Community Centre in Sheen Road. This building, originally the Masonic Hall, was a cinema between 1911 and 1921 under the names, successively, of Pictorial Hall, Lounge Theatre de Luxe, Scala Kinemacolor, Clock, Grand and Queens; the Waitrose supermarket now occupies the site. The Film Group closed in the 1950s.

The present Richmond Film Society was founded by Peter Strachan in 1963, and has been showing films regularly during the winter season every year since then. It followed in the footsteps of the Film Group by meeting in the Community Centre in Sheen Road, until that building closed in 1983; projection Community Centre was from the original cinema operating box dating from 1911.

## RFS Appendix II

### PETER STRACHAN – An Appreciation by Tom Ruben, 1989

It all started in the early 1960's. Peter Strachan lived in Richmond and he and his wife Jean joined the nearest film society, at Kingston soon felt it would be nice to have a film society on his doorstep. He suggested to Kingston that they should start a Richmond section, perhaps showing the same films the day after or the day before they were shown in Kingston. It soon became clear that this would not be viable, and early in 1963 the idea of a separate society for Richmond was born. A committee was formed with Barrie Wood, who was Kingston's secretary, as chairman, and there was much other input from Kingston: one of the founder members was the Kingston treasurer, one Douglas MacVicar, who today is serving his second spell as treasurer of this society. But the most important post was of course that of secretary, and this was filled by Peter Strachan. And Jean Strachan was membership secretary.

The first trial film show was in April 1963, and this was so successful that it was decided to embark on a full season of nine shows starting that September in the **Community Centre** in Sheen Road. It was found that the only regular days on which the hall was free was every third Tuesday, and our meetings have been held on Tuesdays ever since.

Before the beginning of the season proper Peter was involved in a great deal of activity, a lot of it not strictly secretarial. For instance he made a large projection screen, consisting of a collapsible wooden frame covered with a sheet of canvas painted with white emulsion paint; transporting it to the **Community Centre**, assembling it and erecting it on stage was a major feat performed for every show. With Tom Ruben (who joined the committee soon after the start and with Peter has served on it continuously ever since) he built a projector stand constructed largely of gas tubing filched from demolition sites on Richmond Hill; we using that stand today. And he designed a series of very artistic covers for the programme notes in the early seasons, with a different design for every show, and he and Jean printed them. They have since become collectors' items.

Efforts were made early on to buy a projector for the society, but without success. Richmond Council refused to help - nothing much changes! The only response to an advertisement which one of our members put into the Times was from an American living in Vienna but who wrote from Moscow. As a result we had to borrow projectors, and Peter used to drive miles through the Surrey countryside to collect one from various obscure educational establishments before the show and to return it the next day. Peter also took his turn at projecting, in addition to carrying out his secretarial duties.

Then in 1971 there was a crisis when our chairman Roy Beckett died suddenly, and Peter accepted the challenge of taking on the chairmanship as well as continuing as secretary for some months. In November 1971 Peter stood down as secretary and is far as is known he has not written a word since. As chairman he played a very active part in the discussions that led to our move from the **Community Centre** to this auditorium, and in addition to his film society role he has taken on much voluntary work at **Parkshot**, notably thinking up the idea of the ArtSpace exhibitions and running them almost single-handedly; as a result he was appointed a governor of the college.

Peter Strachan was secretary for the first eight and a half years of the existence of Richmond Film Society, and has been chairman for the last eighteen years. In recognition of his services he, together with Jean was made an Honorary Life Member last year.

## RFS Appendix III

### Richmond Film Society 40th Anniversary [From *Film 2002*] by Pat Hodgson

#### Pat Hodgson recalls some of the 'magical' experience of Richmond Film Society over the last 40 years

Richmond Film Society held a party on September 17<sup>th</sup> 2002 to celebrate 40 years of films about 536 of them, plus numerous shorts and film clips. There were speeches, a birthday cake and naturally, a film - a new print of *IT* directed by Clarence Badger in 1927 and starring Clara Bow. "As fresh as the day it was made 35 years ago" said the Treasurer, who was dispensing drinks at the time and had temporarily lost his numeracy. Peter Strachan, founder and Chairman of the Society during the formative years, recalled in his speech the sheer hard work of the early days, when shows were held in the local **Community Centre Hall**. All equipment had to be brought in on the night - the borrowed projector installed, screen erected and chairs put out, after first ejecting reluctant badminton players from their court. It was the first time, Peter said, that he realised the true significance of the word "Chairman". The Hall was large, but not sound-proof. Sometimes music and intermittent thuds from the ballroom dancing class above could be heard over the sound track. The seats (award-winning stacking chairs) were extremely hard, and those in the know brought cushions with them. On the plus side around 220 people could be and were seated in the first 21 years of the Society. At the screening of Godard's *Weekend* in 1970, which was then banned in Surrey, the Hall was invaded by a nearby hippie colony. It was standing room only, and regular members complained that they could not see the screen because of babies on backs and Afro hairstyles.

Several members of the original committee later gave up careers in school teaching or insurance to work in film full-time, among them Peter Cargin and Barrie Wood, who went to the British Film Institute and Oliver Horsborough, who became a TV director. The first Treasurer Douglas MacVicar, in common with several founder members, had previously belonged to Kingston Film Society, the only Society in the vicinity at the time. Douglas is still in charge of Richmond's funds and Tom Ruben, the Society's first technical expert, still gives invaluable help to the present committee.

Richmond's links with the cinema go back a long way. A "bioscope" was shown here during the Christmas pantomime at Richmond Theatre in 1899. In 1908 the Palais opened, showing "The very last word in scientific electric and singing pictures". The first purpose-built cinema, the Talbot, opened on the site of stables, in Hill Street in 1911. Richmond's first recorded film society, also based at the **Community Centre**, was founded by cinematographer Walter Lassally in the 1940s-50s. The current Society remained at the Centre until 1984, when the building was pulled down for re-development. A new home was found at the **Studio Theatre**, part of the **Richmond Adult Community College** in **Parkshot**. Seating capacity here was only 120, and membership reduced accordingly, Ismael Merchant introduced his own production **Heat and Dust** at the first film show in the **Studio Theatre**.

Almost all the catastrophes common to film societies have happened at Richmond - missing lenses, damaged screens, the theatre group's spot-lights left in unreachable positions obscuring the screen, poor sound tracks, illegible sub-titles, interlopers who crept in after the lights had gone out to eat supper. The list is endless. Non-delivery of films was commonplace, particularly in the early days. On one occasion we were sent mixed reels our *Two-Lane Blacktop* intermingled with a very straight film indeed. We wondered what the other society had made of the mix. Once when a frame started to burn we admired the director's unusual technique for a minute before realising that this was actuality! We were generally quite pleased if someone walked out during a performance. At least this showed a reaction. (We later got more professional and gave out reaction slips). For the record, the biggest walk-out was for Borowczyk's *Immoral Tales*, but even the committee felt that the walkers-out probably had a point. One woman fainted during Franju's *Le Sang des Betes*, but the rest of the audience sat through it enthralled. Recently several people complained about the language and personalities of the characters in *Clerks*.

The committee has always chosen the programme in a reasonably democratic way each member recommends three films that he or she has seen and then argues it out with the rest. We have a large committee, representing a wide range of interests, and by the time the list is tweaked into shape, making sure that different countries and directors are represented and that the film has not been widely shown, it generally works out quite well, although there have been some memorable slanging matches at the early stages. Happy memories include three "spectaculars" in the Queen Charlotte Hall at **Parkshot**, which holds nearly 300 people. The 1988 event was called **Saturday Night at the Pictures**. Billed as "*A Nostalgic Return to the Golden days of Pre-War Cinema*", it was a sell-out. There were films, a talk by film historian John Huntley, and a Bar, Cafeteria, Ice-cream Girls, Potted Palms, Music and Memorabilia! A short pre-war documentary showing the benefits of the telephone called *Fairy of the Phone* was particularly appreciated.

Music was played on a portable organ, as the Hall had nothing to compare with the Compton electric organ, which had once graced the Richmond Odeon. An accompanist was always booked for silent films. Florence de Jong, a distinguished player from the silent era, gave the piano accompaniment for Eisenstein's *Strike* in 1981 in full evening dress. It was an expensive evening, as Florence rightly demanded star treatment. Among the many talks given over the years, one by Leslie Halliwell stands out. It was given shortly before he died, when he was choosing films for one of the TV Channels, as well as compiling his yearly guide.

It was a good time for film societies when Richmond was founded in the 1960s. Some of the greatest directors in cinematic history were working and seemed to produce a new masterpiece every year. Although traditional audiences were declining, the young were passionately interested in every aspect of film. Anyone who did not experience the excitement and debate has only to see Woody Allen's films, where he happily confesses to an obsession with the cinema and with the work of Bergman and Fellini in particular. Today some of this passion has faded. Film societies have to compete with cinemas, television and video. Equipment needs updating, as few films are transferred onto 16mm. Many early classic films are no longer available. The Richmond Film Society and others like it survive because the economics of film distribution mean that off-beat, subtitled films do not stand

much chance on the circuits or television. People also still like to see films in a club situation, where there is a chance to discuss them afterwards rather than rent a video.

Margaret Sutcliffe, the current Chairman, read out messages from those unable to attend the party including Jean Strachan, one of the founders. Lord Attenborough sent a message of support, as did John Huntley and Peter Cargin. Peter wrote: "Is it really forty years?" I read today that this is the fortieth anniversary of Marilyn Monroe's death, yet her image is still with us and thanks to the continuing efforts of you and the committee, Richmond Film society is still going. Long may it continue. Derek Malcolm's message was encouraging. He suggested that the way forward for film societies in the future might be to group together in regions to purchase equipment, perhaps showing the same programme of films. I would personally resist any joint programming, as it would take away the identity of local societies - and imagine the regional arguments about choice of films, which would take place. Film choice has been the key to Richmond's longevity. Susan Sontag has written: "cinophilia implies that films are unique, unrepeatable magic experiences". In all art it is the original voice that matters. These are the films that Richmond tries to show every year.

**Pat Hodgson**