

**ely
film
society** = **the
notes**

**june
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latest news
A reminder of our reciprocal membership arrangement with Kings Lynn Community Cinema Club. They usually meet on the second Thursday of each month in The Guildhall of St George, King's Lynn Arts Centre, King Street at 7.30pm. As well as films they host education events, including one this Thursday (18 June) on British Cinema and Crime. All details of their activities at www.klccc.uk/



The Smallest Show On Earth

Basil Dearden, UK 1957

Written by William Rose and John Eldridge (alternate title *Big Time Operators*)

**Virginia McKenna Jean Spenser
 Bill Travers Matt Spenser
 Margaret Rutherford ...
 Mrs. Fazackalee
 Peter Sellers Percy Quill
 Bernard Miles Old Tom
 Francis De Wolff Albert Hardcastle
 Leslie Phillips Robin Carter
 June Cunningham Marlene Hogg
 Sidney James Mr. Hogg
 George Cross Commissionaire
 George Cormack Bell
 Stringer Davis Emmett
 Michael Corcoran Taxi Driver**

Had it been made two years earlier, *The Smallest Show on Earth* might well have been an authentic Ealing comedy. It was co-written by William Rose (*The Ladykillers*, d. Alexander Mackendrick, 1955), co-starred Margaret Rutherford (*Passport to Pimlico*, d. Henry Cornelius, 1949) and Peter Sellers (*The Ladykillers*), while cinematographer Douglas Slocombe, producer Michael Relph and director Basil Dearden were long-term Ealing contract employees.

The theme of the film, too, is pure Ealing, with the rickety Bijou cinema's motley quintet fighting a seemingly futile battle against the Grand's corporate monolith, while the

nostalgia that suffuses *The Titfield Thunderbolt* (d. Charles Crichton, 1953) also occurs in the scene where the Bijou's equally decrepit staff (Rutherford, Sellers, Bernard Miles) treat themselves to long-forgotten silent films after hours.

Ultimately, though, *The Smallest Show on Earth* is closer to that, and the Rose-scripted *Genevieve* (d. Henry Cornelius, 1953), than it is to the great Ealing masterpieces like *Kind Hearts and Coronets* and *The Man in the White Suit*. There are occasional glimpses of a harder-edged look at the realities of running a failing business, but Dearden and Rose usually prefer to fall back on easy laughs, generally deriving from the Bijou's failure to measure up to expectations either aesthetically or technically.

The supporting actors are on excellent form - Sellers is particularly impressive, given that he was half his character's age - but Bill Travers and Virginia McKenna have little to do as the central couple except keep stiff upper lips and hope for the best, their sunny optimism usually at odds with grim reality. For all the impression they occasionally make on business rival Hardcastle (Francis De Wolff), they're hopeless cinema managers - they can't even address their customers without being physically mobbed.

Amusing though the film often is, its lasting value comes from its snapshot of British cinemagoing in the mid-1950s. Back then, there were a great many small cinemas like the Bijou, fighting a losing battle with television and their better-upholstered rivals, though the Bijou itself was constructed especially for the film, at the meeting of two train bridges in Kilburn, North London. Tellingly, while the Grand was based on an actual cinema, the building in question - the Gaumont Hammersmith, later the Odeon and now the Apollo - is now primarily used as a live concert venue, while most similar-sized cinemas have either closed or been transformed into multi-screen multiplexes.



“ Luckily, we can look behind and beyond... to take in the true star of the film – the Bijou itself. Whether or not the original audiences, back in the Fifties, were meant to agree that it's a derelict and worthless place, that's not how it comes across now. It is a tiny, lost Edwardian paradise, tucked under a railway arch, wreathed in smoke and brimstone from the passing trains. The cinema, a domed and ornate Moorish temple, with barley sugar pillars and gloomy framed pictures of forgotten idols from the infancy of the flicks, seems cut out by scissors from the shadows and black air. "It was a theatre way back; then a music hall; then an electric theatre," Mr Quill and his cohorts explain; and they are the resident spooks.

The cinema is an architectural fantasia, like Mrs Wilberforce's villa in *The Ladykillers*. The mouldering rooms and out-of-kilter staircases, the horn gramophones and fancy gasoliers, the chipped tracery and plaster cherubs falling off the sloping ceilings, link up with *The Titfield Thunderbolt*. The puff-puffs, in *The Titfield Thunderbolt*, are also vehicles of nostalgia; the branch line, threatened with closure by British Rail, is an enclave of whimsy and vanishing

Englishness. The ancient locomotives, rattling across the countryside, are large versions of a child's toy train set, or Rowland Emmet's cartoons sprung to life. In *The Smallest Show on Earth*, Mr Quill's projection booth is the footplate of a choo-choo or the bridge of a ferry boat. As he gets increasingly crotchety over the capricious levers and knobs, popping light bulbs and clanking magic lanterns, Sellers' character feels the need to take sustaining nips from a whisky bottle. The cracked lenses, mis-matched canisters of film and lost spools are the little cinema's equivalent of a senior citizen's decrepitude, hearing impairment and dimming eyes; Quill adores his equipment as he would if nursing his own dotard of a relative. He is the only person in the world who can keep this junk going. He is married to it...

from Roger Lewis
The Life And Death Of Peter Sellers
(1994)

NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS
AU REVOIR LES ENFANTS
(Louis Malle, France 1987)
Monday 20 July

www.elyfilmsociety.com

www.meetup.com/ely-film/

