

IN SUSAN'S SHOES

IN HER SHOES

BY BLOWN FUSE ©

VERBATIM STORIES FROM THE WOMXN OF THURROCK

SUSAN

I remember having to leave before the end of the film in order to catch the last 328 bus home. Back then, films were shown on a loop so I would watch the end first. Construction began in October 1937 and was completed in July 1938 at a cost of £100,000. It was designed by architect Frederick Chancellor of Frank Matcham & Company for the Frederick's Electric Theatres Company. Twenty houses in George Street were demolished to make way for it. It was one of the largest cinemas in Essex seating 2,200 people. It was air conditioned and had an illuminated Compton Organ that rose out of the orchestra pit.

The backstage facilities were designed to enable use as a cinema, theatre or live entertainment venue. The State first opened its doors to the public on Monday 5th September 1938 at 7.30p.m. The first film to be shown was 'The Hurricane' starring Dorothy Lamour and Mary Astor. Coincidentally, it was also the last film shown when the State closed on 5th September 1988, exactly fifty years later.

The auditorium was steeply graduated and extended out over the entrance lobby which was round with a circular dome. As you entered, the pay box was on the left and the sweet kiosk was on the right. The entrance to the Stalls was behind the pay box. To access the balcony, you climbed the staircase with the brass handrail at the rear on the right-hand side. There was an awful lot of brass to be polished at the State.

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Once at the top on the right hand side were the manager's office and some small storage rooms. Across the upper foyer was the entrance to the balcony seating area. It was a no smoking auditorium but always someone would light up to have a crafty smoke. I used to stand at the back of the cinema underneath the projection window and wait. The smokers would hold their cigarettes with the lighted end facing their palms so you couldn't see them but eventually they would burn down and this always elicited a yell from the offender when their hand got burned. On a couple of occasions, I was allowed to visit the Projection Room. This room retained the original Simplex projectors and three peerless Magnarc Lamps (two converted to Xenon). The Dolby sound system dates from 1976.

I remember when 'Fatal Attraction' was shown every night all the staff would make sure they were in the auditorium for the scene where Glenn Close rises out of the bath because the entire audience would jump out of their seats en masse. Another film I remember there was 'Rocky' with Sylvester Stallone fighting Dolph Lungren and as the boxing crowd in the film chanted 'Rocky, Rocky, Rocky' so did the 2000 people in the cinema. The building shook with the noise. When the Rocky Horror Show was on, this was generally a special late Friday night performance, the audience came dressed in bin bags and fish net tights throwing toast and rice which we had to clear up afterward, but it was fun to watch them.

The building was re-opened as a cinema in 1989 but, sadly, this was a short lived venture. It was also used on Sundays for organ concerts. Over the years the cinema had been used for live concerts including David Essex, The Merseybeats and Dave Berry and the Cruisers. On another occasion they had 'Adonis' a group of handsome, muscular, young men dancing on stage. This event was very well attended by young and old women alike.

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Eventually the building was refurbished and opened in 1991 as a nightclub called 'Charlestons'. The club/wine bar opened at 8:30pm on Thursday 28 January 1991. Boxing bouts were also held at the venue, but this too eventually passed into history in 1998. In February 2000 the Thurrock Heritage Forum approached Historic England to suggest that the listing on the cinema be upgraded and on 28th June 2000 the building was reclassified as Grade II* to preserve the Art-Deco interior.

During its working lifetime the cinema was used in the films 'Who Framed Roger Rabbit' and 'Chicago Joe and the Show Girl', the music video for the Jamiroquai single 'Deeper Underground' and two television series 'Jericho' and 'Lipstick on Your Collar'. Now the building stands looking rather sad and neglected which is a shame for what was once a beautiful Art-Deco structure. At long last it looks as if this piece of Grays' history has a future.



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