

HIRSCHFELD BIOGRAPH

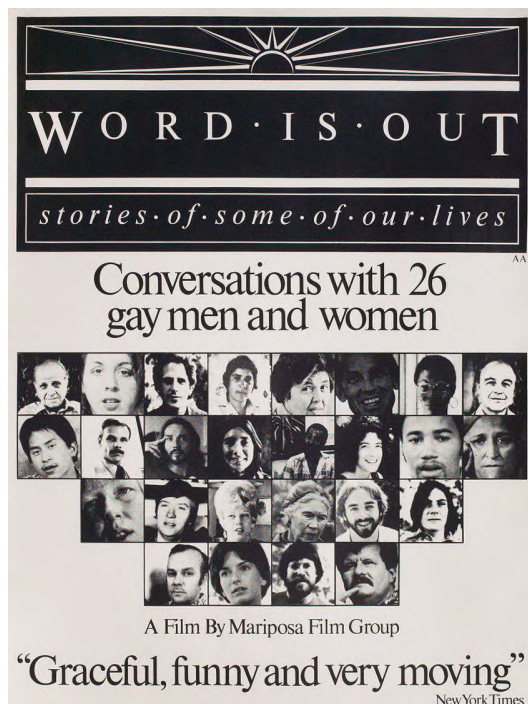
Written by John Mc Evoy, Founder of the Hirschfeld Biograph.

The writing of this account was prompted by the excellent article by Dr. Patrick McDonagh titled “**Remembering the Hirschfeld Biograph: Ireland’s first LGBT+ cinema**”, dated 30 March 2020 and published by GCN, and, to save a lot of repetition, is meant to be read in conjunction with that article.

I always had a great interest in cinema, especially as to how the films were presented. My saying was ... “you can spend a lot of money, making epics like “**Gandhi**” and “**Ryan’s Daughter**” etc., but get a lousy presentation, and it would ruin the impact.

During my 31+ year career in R.T.É., I founded and ran for 19 years the R.T.É. Film Club. During its history, I established a 32-seater cinema in my house.

I installed motorised curtains, motorised black tabs, and a large screen. The two 16mm projectors were placed on a specially built shelf structure in the kitchen extension, with all controls being wired back to there.



Around 1978 I came out as being gay and started to attend the Irish Gay Rights Movement (I.G.R.M.) gatherings at 46 Parnell Square, Dublin. Because of my interest in presenting films, I was asked if I could arrange a short season of four. They turned out to be, “**Word is Out**”, “**Fox and His Friends**”, “**Tenderness of the Wolves**”, and “**The Killing of Sister George**”.

With the subsequent closure of I.G.R.M., and at a time when the gay community was without a premises for nine months, David Norris invited 25 persons to his house in North Great Georges Street who were considered had something to offer the community. It was felt that a new premises should be more than just a weekend disco. It should be a meeting place that was welcoming, had warmth, and would be open seven days a week, thereby by being always available to its members.

It would facilitate meetings, social functions, and full involvement of the members. It would also have something special, something that no other gay club in Europe had, a *cinema*. Here, at last, was a function all gay persons, regardless of age, could attend without having the feeling of being left out, or being in a ‘cruisy atmosphere’ they may have felt uncomfortable with. This was the seed of an idea that grew to be the Hirschfeld Biograph.

It was the late great Irish film historian Liam O’Leary, who had a great love for early Irish Film and Cinema, especially James Joyce’s cinema, the Volta, who suggested the word ‘Biograph’, hence, the Hirschfeld Centre would have its *Hirschfeld Biograph*.



On 17th March 1979, David Norris opened the doors of the Hirschfeld Centre at 10 Fownes Street, Dublin. A short time later, in preparation for creating the Biograph on the top floor of the centre, I invited David to my house for a private presentation of Franco Zeffirelli's "**Brother Sun, Sister Moon**". When it finished, he said that was exactly what he wanted at the Hirschfeld Centre. We were now on the same page.

I am very grateful for the free hand I was given in its creation. I was totally supported along the way, and received great help from the then manager, Tony O'Shea.

As the disco had obtained a new Bose Sound System, I inherited the wonderful former large disco speakers. The main curtains were on a motorised rail, as too were the black tabs, that could fully open to accommodate Cinemascope ratio films. A single wooden beam which held the bottom black masking, could be moved up or down to accommodate the framing ratio of any given film. A carpet was installed, and stackable seats purchased.



The curtains were lit by coloured spotlights, on the left and right side, and were controlled by dimmers. There were two colours, yellow and red. A slow cross fade from yellow to red denoted the presentation was about to start. Each presentation was professional and started on the dot.

Initially, the screen was a white painted plaster partition wall. However, thanks to Conor Anderson of General Film Distributors in Abbey Street, a silver screen became available. Once more, carpenters were engaged, and a frame for the screen to be stretched upon, was constructed.

The main office became the projection "booth". A special shelf unit was constructed which facilitated the two projectors, amplifier, and lighting controls.

Two beautiful Hokushin 16mm projectors were also purchased from G.F.D. The cinema was now complete and had a capacity of 55 seats.

Adventure in all its glory!

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Universal L. Wolf presents

Sean Connery... Michael Caine
Christopher Plummer

In the John Huston-Arlo Franzoni film **The Man Who Would Be King**

The Hirschfeld Biograph opened on Monday 20th August 1979 with the presentation of John Huston's '**The Man Who Would Be King**' at 8.30pm, and a second presentation at 11.30pm. This was to be the first of a six-film season, with a £3 admission fee. Unfortunately, it was poorly attended.

David suggested to the N.G.F. committee that the films be shown free of charge to the members, and this free admission would be part of the annual N.G.F. membership, which at that time was £5, and £3 for students and unwaged. This was agreed.

It was around this time I heard of the Federation of Irish Film Societies (F.I.F.S.). I approached the then administrator, the late Michael Dwyer, with a view to sharing in the films that were brought into the country for the other film societies. With the help of F.I.F.S. an international film season at the Hirschfeld Biograph could be launched.

The Hirschfeld Biograph was being organised on a very tight budget of £1,700. Michael came up with the idea that the Biograph be made an honorary member of the F.I.F.S., thereby setting aside the affiliation fee, which in the Biograph's case should have been £500 per annum. In return, I was to be on call to repair any films that became damaged while doing the circuit of the film societies. I was also to be an advisor to the film societies regarding new equipment, or presentation problems. By 1984, the sum being saved by N.G.F. through this arrangement was approximately £800 per annum.

Once a year the Federation held an annual film viewing session, hosted by one of the member film societies. Representatives from most of the film societies were present. Anything up to 200 persons attended. A full weekend of viewing films that would be available for the following season's programming were presented; many came from the U.K. Distributors. On each occasion, the host film society created two screening areas, with the main one usually being in the hotel ballroom. Based on the films presented, lists were subsequently created by the various film clubs, thereby giving each other the opportunity to share those titles, and reduce costs.

Early on, I was invited by Michael Dwyer to attend one of the annual viewings which was being held in Tralee. I observed how the films were being presented, and humbly made a few suggestions. The following year, Michael asked if I would take care of presenting films in the main cinema. That was a very important moment for the gay community, N.G.F., and the Hirschfeld Biograph.

Because of my presence, the various film societies became more aware of the gay community. I was asked questions about N.G.F., and at least four people 'came out' because of the information given. It was a very healthy situation, and great credit must be given to the F.I.F.S. for the success the Biograph shared in. Great credit is also due to Hirschfeld Enterprises for their support in the financing of the creation of the Biograph. It must be remembered this was the period of 1979 to 1986, the life span of the Hirschfeld Biograph. It was a time when much was happening politically concerning the gay community.

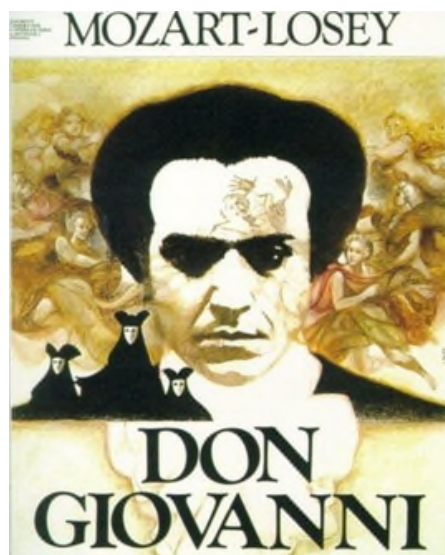
From the beginning, I saw the Hirschfeld Biograph as being a source of entertainment. However, it would, in time, also become a source of education, and by some of the titles shown, occasionally political.

Michael Dwyer was a renowned film critic and journalist. At one point, he also wrote the cinema listings for the *In Dublin* magazine. As a result, the Hirschfeld Biograph programme listings were published therein.

From the outset, my intention was to show as many 16mm gay films as were available and present them at the Hirschfeld Biograph. Because of the involvement with F.I.F.S., I also had at my disposal the best of foreign films to choose from. The spinoff from all of this was that the other film societies became aware of the gay films and started to add them to their seasons.

When the Hirschfeld Biograph was first launched on 20th August 1979, the films were shown every second Monday at 8.30p.m. and 11.30p.m. However, this all changed on Monday 21st January 1980 when I decided the presentations be 6.00p.m. and 8.45p.m. This would accommodate those wishing to attend directly from work, and others who, attending the later performance, could catch a bus home.

The Hirschfeld Biograph season ran from either the end of September or the beginning of October each year, to the Monday of Gay Pride Week the following year. A leaflet containing the presentation information was produced for each half of the programme.

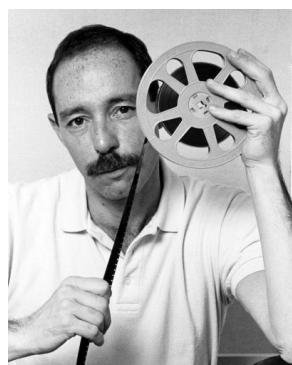


The first film of each half was usually gay themed and was presented on both the Monday and Tuesday nights, with two presentations each night. On a few rare occasions where the film was of such a length as not to allow two presentations on the same night, a single presentation took place on both the Monday and Tuesday nights. An example would be Joseph Losey's film of Mozart's "**Don Giovanni**".

As I was very attentive to the quality of the sound, on certain presentations, the existing sound system was augmented by two extra speakers to give it a boost. "**Don Giovanni**" was one such presentation, while "**The Rose**" was another.

For legal reasons the Hirschfeld Biograph had to be operated as a strict private cinema for N.G.F. members. However, there were a few occasions where we accommodated guests, free of charge. One such occasion was when two members of the German Embassy wished to attend the '**Don Giovanni**' presentation. Another was for the late Ray Commiskey, journalist for The Irish Times, who wished to attend the presentation of **Terence Davies' Trilogy**.

Throughout the lifetime of the Hirschfeld Biograph there were some wonderful special moments. While some of those are told in Dr. Patrick McDonagh's article "**Remembering the Hirschfeld Biograph**", they are worthwhile recalling here.

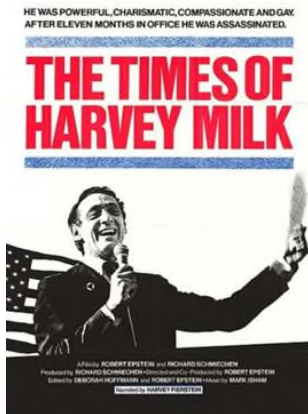


Vito Russo (1946-1990): Vito was working at *Gay News* in the U.K. Just before the publication of his book '**The Celluloid Closet**', I made contact and invited him to Dublin, to be my guest, and present his lecture at the Hirschfeld Biograph during Gay Pride Week 1980. It was a great success. The occasion was videotaped, and a search is on for a copy of that recording. Wikipedia states online, "between 1972 to 1982 Vito had been travelling around, delivering *The Celluloid Closet* as a live lecture presentation with film clips at colleges, universities, and small cinemas such as the **Roxie Cinema** in San Francisco and the **Hirschfeld Biograph** in Dublin".



Terence Davies (1945-2023): I had the honour to invite this wonderful Director and beautiful soul to stay with me, and present his three short films “**Children (1976), Madonna and Child (1980), and Death and Transfiguration (1983)**”. He did so on Monday 8th and Tuesday 9th October 1984, with a presentation at 6.00p.m. and a second at 8.00p.m. each evening. Terence facilitated a Q&A after the 8.00p.m. presentation on both nights. This was all achieved with the

great assistance of the British Film Institute. This collection of short films has since become known as the “**Terence Davies Trilogy**”. Dr. Patrick McDonagh gives this a special mention in his article “*Remembering the Hirschfeld Biograph*”.



The Times of Harvey Milk (Documentary 1984): **The Times of Harvey Milk** opened the 1985/86 season, and, by tradition, two presentations took place both on the Monday and the Tuesday. When it came to the Tuesday morning, it was reported that Dan White, who assassinated Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone on 27th November 1978, had just committed suicide. When it came to the end of both Tuesday night’s presentations, I shared this information with the audience. They applauded.



Cruising (1980): William Friedkin’s “**Cruising**”, starring Al Pacino was a very controversial film within the gay community, and many protests took place at its various public screenings. However, I decided to show it. One afternoon as I prepared the cinema for another evening’s presentation, two people, who may have been politically involved with N.G.F. passed through. As they did, they asked me why I was showing the film. I simply said that what better place for it to be viewed by the community, but within the safe confines of the Biograph. Besides, it was better to have an informed opinion when such protests were made.



On Tuesday 11th December 1984 the Hirschfeld Biograph presented a special screening of film director **Donald Taylor Black’s** documentary, “**At the Cinema Palace – Liam O’Leary**” (1983). The presentation was followed by a talk given by Liam.

While I could go on, it’s time to bring this article to a close. Approaching the end of six and a half years of presentations, I knew within, it was time for me to move on, and to bring my participation in the life of the Hirschfeld Biograph to completion. I put out feelers for anyone who might like to step forward and be trained in the procedure, but no one did.

Showing films at the Hirschfeld Biograph involved collecting the film prints a few days in advance, checking them for possible damage, and creating cue dots on the film to facilitate the changeover from one projector to the other. Each presentation day involved bringing all the required chairs from throughout the building to the third floor. When all was over, the film had to be returned the following day. A lot was involved.

With the decision made, I wondered how I could bring the life of the Hirschfeld Biograph to an appropriate close. I decided pure entertainment was required. I was able to obtain a mint condition new print of **“Singin’ in the Rain”**. However, I got the idea to borrow a copy of **“Some Like It Hot”** and, when the credits for **“Singin’ in the Rain”** finished, I switched to the other projector where I had set up the final two minutes in which Jack Lemon, in drag as Daphne, is getting into the boat with Joe E. Brown as Osgood Fielding III.



As the boat moves off, Osgood makes it know he fancies Daphne. Frustrated, Jack removes his wig and declares “but I’m a Man”, to which, with a grin on his face, Joe E. Brown replies ... “well, nobody’s perfect!!!”.

With those immortal words, on Monday 8th February 1986, the life of the Hirschfeld Biograph, after six and a half years, 137 film presentations, 285 performances, and two very special film presentations followed by Q&A sessions, came to an end.

In the early hours of the 4th of November 1987, a fire, which David Norris is firmly convinced was deliberately lit, broke out at the Hirschfeld Centre. The damage was such, that the centre never opened again!!!