

# Remembering the Hirschfeld Biograph: Ireland's first LGBT+ cinema.

**Housed in the iconic Hirschfeld Centre, the cinema was a groundbreaking inclusion in Ireland's LGBT+ life.**

Community: 30 March 2020. Written by Dr Patrick McDonagh.



In 1979, *In Dublin's* film critic reported on the opening of Dublin's newest cinema, the Hirschfeld Biograph, describing its winter/spring programme as “adventurous” – that season's programme included Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane* and Max Baer's *Ode to Billy Joe*. The film critic was also very impressed with the cost of attending the cinema which he noted was “remarkable value for money”. Even more remarkable – not only was the Hirschfeld Biograph Dublin's newest cinema but it was also Ireland's first LGBT+ cinema, a remarkable feat in 1979 considering that the gay rights movement in Ireland was only five years old.

The Hirschfeld Biograph was housed within the Hirschfeld Centre, which was opened in March 1979 by the National Gay Federation and acted as the headquarters for their political and social activities. The Biograph, with a max capacity of 55, operated every second Monday with screenings at 8:30p.m. and 11:30p.m. After the initial first six film presentations, the times were changed to 6.00p.m. and 8.45pm. Such was the popularity of the cinema that the NGF had to limit access to NGF members only who were granted free access to the Biograph once they had paid the £5 NGF annual membership fee (£3 for students and unwaged) – it was, as the *In Dublin* film critic noted, great value for money. The free entry to the Biograph simply reflected the strong desire amongst the NGF leadership to provide as many social activities as possible to its members at a reasonable cost.

Between 1979 and 1986 the Hirschfeld Biograph screened over 137 films, which included the Irish premiere of *The Times of Harvey Milk*, *Sunday Bloody Sunday*,

*We Were One Man*, *Victor Victoria*, and *The Best Way to Walk*, helping to bring LGBT+ themed movies to an Irish audience. The success with which the NGF were able to screen so many films owed much to the efforts of one man, Johnny McEvoy, who ran the Hirschfeld Biograph throughout its almost seven-year history. McEvoy brought a great level of commitment and professionalism, more than that, McEvoy was very successful in building up connections with other Irish film societies through his involvement with the Federation of Irish Film Societies, ensuring that the Hirschfeld Biograph had access to the latest film releases in Ireland.

McEvoy's connections were not limited to Irish organisations. During the 1980 Gay Pride Week, McEvoy succeeded in bringing Vito Russo to the Hirschfeld Centre to speak about his latest book, *Celluloid Closet*. While a few years later, in October 1984, thanks to the support of the British Film Institute, Terence Davies came to speak at the Hirschfeld Biograph on his acclaimed trilogy of films, *Children*, *Madonna and Child*, *Death and Transfiguration*. Of all the films that were screened in the Hirschfeld Biograph, Davies' generated the most positive reviews and attention outside the gay community. Ray Comiskey, writing in the *Irish Times*, gave considerable attention to Davies' trilogy, noting that "Hirschfeld Biograph club members will have an opportunity to see a marvellous piece of film."

Monday 24<sup>th</sup> June (Gay Pride Week)

Terence Davies'

CHILDREN (1976)

MADONNA AND CHILD (1980)

DEATH AND TRANSFIGURATION (1983)



Terence Davies has just been awarded the 1984 British Film Institute Award. The award is presented annually to the maker of the most original and imaginative film introduced at the National Film Theatre during the past year.

The Trilogy was "written and directed by Terence Davies, a film maker of exceptional gifts ... is the story of the guilt-burdened life of Robert Tucker, a Merseyside homosexual from a lower-middle-class family home ... But the films do not present him simply as a victim, and offer less a social critique than a tragic, stoical view of human courage ... At the end of the mere 101 minutes it takes to view the whole trilogy I felt emotionally drained" (Philip French, film critic, *The Observer*).

Due to the overwhelming reception the film was given when it opened the current season of films last October with the personal appearance of the director, it has been decided there could be no better way to start the celebrations of Gay Pride Week than by having a return presentation. It's return also pays tribute to the magnificent and beautiful performance of Irish Actor, the late Wilfred Brambell.

(This presentation is open to all ... no admission charge)

Showing at 6 pm & 8.45

Finishing at 7.41 & 10.26

THE HIRSCHFELD BIOGRAPH RE-OPENS  
MONDAY 7<sup>th</sup> OCTOBER 1985

While Donald Houram, of *In Dublin*, was even more praiseworthy of the film, arguing that: "Most films, quite frankly, are shit. A few are merely mediocre. But occasionally there comes along something to justify all those hours spent sitting unhappily in the dark wishing that the cultural division of some illegal organisation would bazooka the projection booth. Terence Davies' trilogy of films constitutes quite the most extraordinary and affecting cinematic experience of recent years."

Although not every film shown at the Hirschfeld Biograph generated as much praise as Davies' trilogy, it was nevertheless important that the Biograph was actually acknowledged in mainstream publications. The nonchalant references give the impression that these film critics simply viewed the Biograph as a cinema, not a gay cinema to be feared or avoided, but rather one which screened high-quality films. This was important at a time when there were still many misconceptions about homosexuals and the activities they got up to.

Perhaps, however, the biggest impact the Biograph had was its ability to provide an alternative space for Ireland's LGBT+ community.

In offering something more than just discos, the NGF ensured that its activities catered to a diverse group of individuals from all ages.

McEvoy stressed that the Biograph was set up so “all gay persons, regardless of age, could attend without having the feeling of being left out of things or being in a cruise-y atmosphere they felt uncomfortable with.”

This was particularly important for an organisation like the NGF which had a very diverse membership. In particular, many older members often felt isolated from activities. One member lamented that “at many of the set piece gay functions, especially discos, the more senior gay people may feel conspicuously in the minority, a situation that can hardly encourage them to relax and enjoy themselves.” In many ways the Biograph went a long way to resolving this issue and it is hardly surprising, therefore, that it was so popular over its seven-year existence.

It is wonderful to see that in recent times Dublin Pride launched [Older Than Pride](#) in an effort to celebrate and provide a space for older LGBT+ individuals. [Gay Project](#) have similarly sought to be more inclusive to older members of the community. We owe a debt of gratitude to those who have gone before us, and we can learn a lot by engaging with them and utilising their experiences.



## 1984/85 Programme (Part 2)

10 Fownes Street, Dublin 2. Tel: 710939

Writing on the closure of the Hirschfeld Biograph in 1986, McEvoy stated that he hoped it would be remembered as being “part of a positive evolving gay scene, cherished and let go, but not forgotten. It is time to advance, and it is the turn of the next generation.”

McEvoy was overly modest in his statement. Many have recalled the wonderful times they spent going to the Hirschfeld Biograph and how it provided them with a rare opportunity to view gay themed movies. Ciaran Coleman, for example, has cherished memories, recalling one of the “wonderful things about the Hirschfeld Centre, you know, to see movies and documentaries... at the time, we had no internet, so it was like seeing things about places far away, about the gay community, and ... San Francisco and the whole Harvey Milk thing really informed the gay community on our rights and what we should do [...] that whole thing was really part of my own personal liberation.”

It’s memories like Ciaran’s that remind us just how important and liberating arts and cinema can be.