

home news

IT IS HARD to believe the newer generations of gay people may never have heard of the Hirschfeld Biograph, but that's what the passing of time does.

In late 1978 (or early 1979, the memory is not what it used to be) David Norris called to his home a group of 25 people whom he considered had something to offer should a new gay club get off the ground. Many had been involved in organising functions for and on behalf of the gay community. I had not. I was only 'out' about one year.

This new club was to offer as wide a range of activities as possible. David, like myself, had no particular interest in discos and very much wanted the new club to be more than a disco. He wanted a cinema on the premises.

In April of 1979 I arranged for David to visit my home where I had my own cinema set-up. We watched Franco Zeffirelli's "Brother Sun, Sister Moon". When the performance was over David said he wanted the same set-up in the Hirschfeld Centre. Building took place throughout the summer of 1979.

OPENING DAY

The 55-seater Hirschfeld Biograph, situated on the third floor of the Hirschfeld Centre, opened on Monday 20th August 1979 at 8.30 with the presentation of "The man who would be King". This was the beginning of what was to be a very happy six and a half year life span.

From the beginning, I decided that the gay community was going to get something they could be proud of. The Biograph was going to be run on a professional basis with standards as high as possible. Bad projection can ruin all. For me, presentation was everything and, what's more, it would start precisely on time.

The early '80's in the Hirschfeld Centre were hectic times and much work was being done in the political field. The Biograph was not going to be specifically political but it would show as many gay orientated films as possible. At least gay people would have their own surroundings to enjoy them in. Whatever emotions might be raised by any particular film it would be safe to express them. It allowed those who might be shy to be in contact with other gays through sharing in this entertainment.



The break between the two performances became a great socialising event. It allowed people to get to know one another. Friendships were formed, news swapped (and sometimes created) amid the sipping of tea and coffee. It was as important as the film itself. A community spirit was in evidence.

It was intended to show a season of six films for a minimum charge. This, on the suggestion of David Norris, was abandoned and the Biograph membership offered free to all members of the National Gay Federation.

The showings took place once a fortnight on a Monday night from late September to the following Gay Pride Week in June. There were two performances each evening unless the film was so long as not to allow it.

On such occasions a second performance was arranged for the following evening. The first twelve presentations took place at 8.30 and 11.30. Thereafter they became 6pm and 8.45pm and remained so until the end.

Two illustrated leaflets were produced for each seasons presentations. Part one was produced in August and contained details of the first ten films. Part two was published in December containing the balance. This delay allowed for the latest titles to be included. During 1982 and 1983 the relevant films received a two page review in NGF's publication *Identity*. The listing was also carried by *In Dublin*.

On 29th February 1980 in the Earl of Desmond Hotel, Tralee, I gave a talk on film projection to delegates representing 33 film societies, who were attending the annual viewing session of the Federation of Irish Film Societies. It was the first time they had heard of the Hirschfeld Biograph. It was my first time to face a non-gay gathering and explain what the Hirschfeld Biograph represented. It became a very special

occasion; two people 'came out' as a result.

The following year I was asked if I would take over responsibility for the presentation of the films for the Federation's annual viewing session. I agreed, and continued to do so until I retired two years ago.

In return the then administrator Michael Dwyer proposed that FIFS make the Hirschfeld Biograph an honorary member allowing it to avail of all its facilities. This proved to be a great turning point for the Biograph. It meant it could partake of films coming in from abroad for other film societies and cut down on expenses. The annual budget for the Biograph was £1,700, but I usually managed to keep expenditure to £1,400. In time the Biograph, by selecting gay films for its own season, would be responsible for many of these films being shown by the other film societies throughout the country.

Whatever emotions might be raised by a film - in the Hirschfeld it was safe to express them

There were many milestones in the history of the Biograph. Very early on I heard of Vito Russo who was writing for *Gay News*. He had also written a book called *The Celluloid Closet - Homo-*

sexuality in the Movies. I invited him to come to Dublin to give his illustrated talk based on his book. He addressed two full houses and presented on film many excerpts showing how the theme of gayness was treated from the earliest days of the cinema up to the days of Stonewall. A lively discussion with the audience followed each presentation. Vito allowed the occasion to be videotaped - that tape is one of my prized possessions.

TERENCE DAVIES

One of the many important premieres the Biograph obtained was the Terence Davies Trilogy, a remarkable trio of films showing a gay man's life from boyhood to old age. I had arranged to have the film flown in a week early to allow for a press showing to take place. *The Irish Times* gave us a rave review and *In Dublin* had us billed as the 'event of the week'. It was a gala occasion.

The producers of the film, the British Film Institute, helped us fly in the director Terence Davies, who took part in a very positive debate after each film presentation.

Monday 21st October 1985 saw the Irish Premiere of the Academy Award winner *The Times of Harvey Milk*. Harvey Milk, a gay activist was elected at the age of 47 to San Francisco's Board of Supervisors. The following year both he and the city's Mayor, George Moscone, were assassinated by a fellow member of that Board, Irish-American Dan White.

White was convicted on a reduced charge of voluntary manslaughter and sentenced to five years' imprisonment. By a remarkable coincidence news came through in time to announce to the Tuesday night audience for the Harvey Milk film that Dan White had committed suicide.

There was no bargain in town like the Biograph. So much so that non-gay friends of the NGF joined up. For me, it was a very valuable exercise in public relations of behalf of the gay community.

When the occasion demanded, more speakers were installed to give extra dimension to the sound. *Divine Madness*, *Don Giovanni*, *The Rose*, *Carmen*, *La Traviata*, and *Rocky Horror Picture Show* benefited from such presentations.

The gay scene is richer for the existence of the Biograph. Without it important films such as *Word is Out*, *Sebastiane*, *The Killing of Sister George*, *The Best Way to Walk*, *Army of Lovers*,

The Boys in the Band, *La cage aux Folles*, *Taxi zum Klo*, *Tenderness of the Wolves*, *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, *We were one man*, *Making Love*, *Victor Victoria*, *Querelle*, *Another Way*, *Twice a man*, *Un Chant d'Amour*, *Next Stop Greenwich Village*, *Lianna*, *The Fourth Man*, *Forget Venice* (and there were more) might never have been seen in Dublin.

END OF THE BIOGRAPH

Just after I had decided that 1985/86 would be my last season as manager of the Biograph, I learned that the Centre was to be sold, the likely date being March 1986. Part One of the season was in full swing and plans for Part Two well advanced. I took the decision not to continue with Part Two as it would not be possible to run the full course of films planned. So the final presentation in the Biograph would be on Monday 8th February 1986.

As no new product was available I decided to go out in true entertainment fashion. *Singin' in the Rain* would be the last show..... but not quite. To the end credits I added the last minute of *Some like it Hot*. Jack Lemmon (still dressed as a woman) and Joe Brown, are cruising away to sea together with Lemmon trying his best to fend off Brown's marriage proposals. Finally in desperation, he takes off his wig and snarls "I'M A MAN!" Brown, oblivious, smiles that immortal line, "Well, nobody's perfect." With these words the Biograph faded out. In its six and a half years it had presented 137 films in 285 performances.

The Biograph should be remembered as 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. There's a lot to be done. A fond farewell.

Johnny McFvoy (January 1990)