

COMMENTARY *By* Dr. DHANPAUL NARINE

The Golden Age of the Cinemas in Guyana



Dr. Dhanpaul Narine

The music from 'Jaws' began faintly. As it reached a crescendo, the great white shark leaped and landed with a big splash. It's razor-sharp teeth ripped an arm, then a leg that colored the ocean red. A prim and proper lady in balcony screamed, jumped, and landed in the lap of a stranger! It was thrills galore at Astor cinema, in Georgetown.

The cinemas in Guyana are no more. But there was a time, not so long ago, when they were fun, exciting, offered escapism, and became the hub of the community. Many of the buildings were elegant, with pleasing lines of architecture and comfortable seating. The cinemas brought Guyanese of all shades together and the movies left a lasting impression.

The first cinema in Guyana was the Gaiety in Brickdam that was burned in 1926. This was followed by the London in Camp Street and in 1930 cinemas had spread across the country. The Jazz Singer arrived and there was sound. In 1960, Guyana had more than 50 cinemas and I visited quite a number of them.

I lived in Vergenoegen and nearest cinema was several miles away. The 1954 movie Nagin was the talk of the village. It was shown at Earlo cinema at Uitvlugt. This movie house was built by Robert Sookraj and named after his son.

Nagin fever took hold of Vergenoegen. We hired Manny's car to take us to the night show, about five miles away. The cobra appeared on screen and I fell asleep. It would be years afterwards that I would see my first real movie.

This happened at Raj Mahal in Canje, Berbice. The movie was River of No Return, starring Robert Mitchum. His co-star Marilyn Monroe was a picture of innocence. Raj Mahal showed Junglee with Shammi Kapoor and Saira Banu. I saw Junglee fifteen times! The owner Zaab must have been pleased.

It was now on to Roopmahal and Ra-

dio City cinemas in the Corentyne. These were spacious and comfortable; like Raj Mahal, they were well supported by patrons from the sugar estates and the star Mahipal reigned supreme in the Hindu epics. I visited the Strand cinema in New Amsterdam, where



Superstars Rajesh Khanna and Sharmila Tagore starred in many hit movies and kept the cinemas filled.

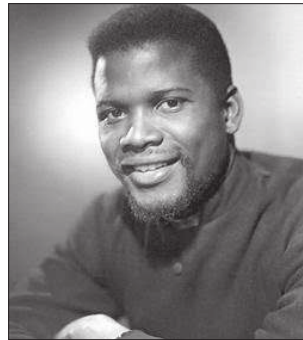
they showed the Ten Commandments, and the Globe where I saw an Audie Murphy movie.

The disturbances in the sixties led to the closure of Earlo. Tarla cinema, at Meten-Meer-Zorg, opened up a new set of audiences. Tarla had a chucker-out Mr. Chelmsford who was a kind man. James Bond was popular as was Bayee shop with the sweet drinks and toddies. Later, Astro cinema was built and it was modern and spacious.

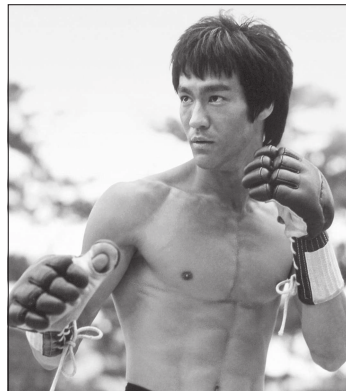
When To Sir with Love came to Tarla the Principal of Saraswat High School, Mr. Julius Nathoo, gave the class the morning off to watch the movie. Sidney Poiter, in the big red double-decker bus, and Lulu singing the theme song, were etched in



The once magnificent Astor cinema in Georgetown is no more. In its prime, thousands would flock to see the latest hits.



Cool and debonair, Sidney Poitier gave unforgettable performances and 'To Sir, with Love,' is one of them.



Bruce Lee captivated Guyanese audiences and there were long lines outside Globe and other cinemas

our memory. Mr. Nathoo also took the school to Monarch cinema, at Anna Catherina, to see Janwaar that was an Indian version of the Beatles.

Tarla took a toll on the spirit, literally. The old road at Zeelugt ran through a burial ground. Three of us saw the late night horror movie, The Skull, and it was now time to walk home

across the cemetery. The road was pitch dark. We closed our eyes and ran, sometimes falling over headstones. Someone screamed that he had seen a ghost. It was near midnight and the undead were out to play!

One year, my friend Narendra Guyadeen invited me to spend Christmas with his family, in Georgetown. His sister, Nalini, had qualified as a hairstylist in London, and her salon was in Robb Street. During the next few days, I was in Astor, Strand Deluxe, Globe, Plaza, Empire and Metropole. I was glued to The Russians are Coming, and For a Few Dollars More. There was also the strange sight of a lady with a torchlight, selling channa in the cinemas, and softly whispering 'nuts, nuts.'

The golden age that

began in the sixties continued in the seventies. There were blockbusters such as Dr. Zhivago, Gone with the Wind, Lawrence of Arabia, and For Whom the Bell Tolls. The Godfather broke records and The Sound of Music captivated audiences. One Armed Swordsman prepared the way for Bruce Lee. There were long lines outside Globe, in Georgetown, to see Enter the Dragon. Why did Bruce leave us so early?

The Airport movies were a big hit followed by Jaws, in the Heat of the Night, and Django. The Indian fare was no less exciting. The stars from Bollywood shone brightly, notably Rajesh Khanna in Aradhana and Kati Patang, Amitabh Bachchan with Dharamendra in Sholay and Rishi Kapoor in Bobby. Rajesh Khanna danced with an elephant and made seventeen hits in a row. Dilip Kumar (Ram aur Shyam), Raj Kapoor (Mere Naam Joker) and Dev Anand (Hare Rama, Hare Krishna, and Guide), reinvented themselves. The heroines too were amazing.

Who can forget Waheeda Rehman, Hema Malini, Sharmila Tagore, Sadhana, Asha Parekh, Zeenat Aman, and others? The evergreen Meena Kumari had us spellbound in Pakeezah. The playback singers and music directors gave us unforgettable music and

songs that are sung to this day. But Bollywood has deteriorated. It wants to outrival Hollywood for indecency and gore; many Indian movies today require an 'R' rating. The song and dance routine is inane and forgettable.

The days of the cinemas in Guyana were numbered for a variety of reasons. There were problems with foreign exchange in the eighties and distributors could not be paid on time. The biggest threat, however, came from television, the VHS and Betamax tapes, and later the DVD player and cable. A number of cinemas limped along but their demise was only a matter of time.

When the demolition crew pulled down the once magnificent Astor, a piece of us went with it. I still remember the day when the plot did not go according to the script. It was 1978, the ten o'clock show was over, and the patrons were leaving. I saw Sally from Vergenoegen. She was getting married to James but what was she doing with Harry in Astor? She tried to turn away but her eyes caught mine and they spoke volumes. She sat on Harry's bike, with pale lipstick, as they rode to Georgetown Stelling.

I was confused. Was this life imitating art? I remember thinking that this could be a story for the big screen, a movie within a movie, and with me as the director. You can imagine my shock when several years later there was a movie, When Harry met Sally!

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