



Lincoln Film Society

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Patron: Jim Broadbent

Registered Charity No. 1156478

Friday February 9th, 2024

Scala!!! (18)

Dir: Jane Giles, Ali Catterall

with: Barry Adamson, John Akomfrah, Rick Baker

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Synopsis: This feature-length documentary is unashamedly a celebration and an exercise in nostalgia, covering the riotous rise and fall of London's legendary sex-and-drugs-and-rock'n'roll Scala cinema, which inspired a generation of artists and other creative people during the Thatcher years between 1978 and 1993. It includes clips of many cult and art house films which played there, with brief moments of strong sexual content.

The seats were uncomfortable, the floor was sticky, it smelled weird, there was often illicit behaviour occurring in the dark, and the whole building rumbled every time a Northern Line train passed underneath. The Scala cinema in King's Cross offered a filmgoing experience like no other, and 30 years after its closure, mention of the venue still inspires misty-eyed reveries in cinephiles of a certain age. Some will recall the epiphany they experienced watching *Eraserhead* (1977), or a sexual awakening sparked by films like *Sebastiane* (1976) and *Un chant d'amour* (1950), but many will be just as likely to reminisce about the venue itself. Being part of the chaotic atmosphere in the audience appeared to be as much of a draw as the images on the screen.

Former Scala programmer Jane Giles (who also produced a 2018 book on the cinema's history) and journalist Ali Catterall have assembled many of the Scala's habitual attendees for their feature documentary *Scala!!!* – perhaps a few too many, in truth. There are more than 40 interviewees in this snappily edited 96-minute film, and a more judicious edit may have lost such contributions as Ralph Brown remembering serving Boy George a cup of tea or Paul Putner's account of watching Laurel and Hardy with an enthusiastic crowd. A more memorable soundbite comes from an archive clip of a prim middle-aged woman named Mrs Reeve talking about her love of the Scala's horror programme. "I don't see there's any harm in it at all," she says. "I mean, I don't go out of here wanting to chainsaw somebody."

Scala!!! is on firmer footing when Giles and Catterall manage to place the cinema within a wider social context. They open with Margaret Thatcher's "Where there is discord, may we bring harmony" speech, which she gave on the eve of one of the most politically and socially fractious decades in British history, and during this era the Scala was an inviting place for anyone who felt unwelcome elsewhere. It was a particularly important hub for the



gay community in the era of Aids and Section 28. It is notable just how many of the outsiders who found their place at the Scala would impact British culture in the subsequent decades, with filmmakers like John Akomfrah crediting the Scala with helping them find their artistic voice.

It is suggested in the film that the Scala had become a marked venue some time before its closure, with the authorities looking for a reason to shut it down, and it's not hard to see why. The cinema's culture of drug-taking and sex is cheerfully discussed, as is the lack of any age restrictions on its clientele. Two customer deaths during screenings are mentioned by interviewees; the second of these, recounted by an emotional Mark Valen, is the film's most affecting moment.

The Scala ran into trouble in 1993, when Giles was prosecuted for a screening of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), a film that is now a staple of the repertory cinema circuit, not least at the Scala's spiritual heir, the Prince Charles Cinema, off Leicester Square. Curiously, despite John Waters playfully questioning Giles, there is no interrogation of the decision to screen the film or the consequences of it, beyond Giles telling us it was "a big deal".

This isn't a documentary in the business of interrogation, however. *Scala!!!* is unashamedly a celebration and an exercise in nostalgia. On those terms it must be regarded as a success, and anyone who attended the Scala in its heyday is likely to enjoy a vicarious thrill from the anecdotes, the trashy film clips, and the distinctive printed programmes. For those who didn't, *Scala!!!* may be most evocative as an enticing portrait of life in a pre-gentrified London, where a night at the cinema cost you £2 and came with an added frisson of excitement and danger, a sense that anything could happen. As Stewart Lee notes, after recalling an old man berating the audience during the porn epic *Thundercrack!* (1975) before sitting down to watch the rest of it, "You don't get that in a multiplex."

Credits

Barry Adamson	Self
John Akomfrah	Self
Rick Baker	Self
Ralph Brown	Self
Paul Burston	Self
Adam Buxton	Self
Caroline Catz	Self
Bai Croce	Self
Helen de Witt	Self
Jane Giles	Self
Lina Gopaul	Self
Beenban Kidron	Self
Stewart Lee	Self
James O'Brien	Self
Peter Strickland	Self
John Waters	Self
Ben Wheatley	Self
Stephen Woolley	Self
Writers/Directors	Ali Catterall, Jane Giles
Music	Barry Adamson
Cinematography	Sarah Appleton
Editing	Edward Mills/Andrew Starke
Sound	Simon Capes/Nikki Ruck

UK 2023. 96 mins

Another View

The Scala was a repertory cinema that was first established in 1978 in the Fitzrovia district of London before moving to the then rather unsavoury area of King's Cross in 1981. It was there that the cinema truly came into its own, developing a reputation among those in the know as the place to be for exploring the more weird and wonderful side of the film world.

It was dilapidated, dirty, picked up the sound from the underground running beneath it and would often be used as a place to get laid or take drugs. However, the Scala remains fondly remembered by those who frequented its cavernous auditorium before it was closed down in 1993.

Jane Giles, who was a film programmer at the Scala between 1988 and 1992, clearly held the place close to her heart as she went on to write a book about its history, speaking to various fans and staff members. This was published by FAB Press in 2018.

Her experiences in conducting research for the book and hearing passionate, eye-opening stories from numerous Scala visitors, many of whom went on to be filmmakers, artists, musicians or writers, inspired Giles to turn her book into a documentary. She co-directed it alongside her editor, Ali Catterall, and the film, entitled *Scala!!!*, has gone on to find many fans of its own.

After playing in selected cinemas and numerous festivals, the BFI have now recently released *Scala!!!* on Blu-ray and numerous digital platforms, including their own BFI Player. I'd already seen the film but wanted to give it another look to share my thoughts and dive into the treasure trove of extra material on the Blu-ray.

Scala!!! is a lot of fun, offering a wealth of amusing, affectionate but unvarnished stories about the history of the cinema. On top of singing the praises of the Scala, the film is, generally, a celebration of the power of film and shared experiences in a cinema in particular. This very much spoke to me, despite never having ventured into the Scala myself (I lived up north back then and was only 11 when it closed).

The film and, maybe even more so, the extra hour of interviews included here where the contributors flesh out their backstories, also

reminded me of my youth when I first got into films and didn't have the internet as we know it now. Back then, we found out about films from books and magazines or word of mouth if we had friends into films. Places like the Scala were vital in educating people about what films lay beyond the Hollywood studios.

The period the cinema ran is important to note too, being, as Giles and Catterall put it in their booklet notes, "a turbulent period of political, social and technological change in the UK, divided and presided over by a hard-right Conservative government and reported on by an analogue media". This might help explain the relevance of a venue that celebrated counterculture and provided a second home for those wishing to step away from 'the norm'. With the state of the UK today not so dissimilar to how it was back then, it makes the nostalgia prevalent here even more affecting. Perhaps we need a new Scala in our lives.

The film particularly notes the place the Scala had in the LGBT+ community in London back then too. The programmers' progressive outlooks often synced up with their tastes, meaning it became a safe haven for those often marginalised from society.

Whilst I did appreciate what was being celebrated in the film, I did find the documentary quite straightforward, in essence. It's very much a 'love-in' and with numerous well-regarded, largely British artists, filmmakers and such throwing their two-penneth in, it did have a slight flavour of those nostalgic 'life in the 70s/80s/90s' TV documentaries you get often filling gaps in the schedules.

What does separate the documentary from these though and another aspect that kept me glued to the screen, even on a rewatch, was the wealth of film clips included. Countless snippets of the wild and thrilling titles shown at the Scala are thrown into the mix, as well as some fun animated sequences and the sketching of a comic book-style tableau depicting some of the documentary's anecdotes.

So, whilst it may be fairly straightforward in terms of style and approach, it's hard not to fall for *Scala!!!*'s charms and wish you were back there in the 80s, sat in the filthy chairs, enjoying some bizarre cinematic treats.

David Brook: Blueprint Film/Lincoln Film Society

Our next screening: Friday February 23rd Mother and Son (12a)

Directed by Léonor Serraille (Jeune Femme), *Mother and Son* is the story of single mother Rose and her two sons Jean (10) and Ernest (5). In 1989, they move from their native Ivory Coast to France in search of a better life. Rose is a formidably resilient character and a loving mother, but her love can be tough. She is ambitious for herself and her two sons, on whom she is forever keen to impress that they must strive to be "champions" and never show weakness in front of others. She is also fiercely independent in her personal life, leading to some problematic relationships with various men of her choice. The film is divided into three distinct chapters, each one highlighting a specific member of the family, charting life's ups and downs and shifting family dynamics over a period of 16 years.