

Foreign film buffs fuelled 50 years by Ottawa society

By Noel Taylor
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With close to 50 cinema screens in the capital region showing films from Hollywood and around the world — and sometimes, even Canadian — the Ottawa moviegoer is positively pampered.

But it was not ever so, which is where the Ottawa Film Society (OFS), oldest in the country and this year celebrating its 50th anniversary, takes a bow.

Fifty years ago, or 25 or 15 years even, the only place to see a foreign movie was at one of the screenings — often in a museum, a public hall and sometimes the Elgin Theatre on a Sunday afternoon before Sunday commercial shows were allowed — put on by the OFS.

There are some in the society today who see interest running down because these same foreign films are regularly getting a first run at commercial theatres like the Phoenix, Towne and Vanier Cineplex. But there's little evidence of that in the current season when 200 applicants had to be turned away from the regular international series, one of the three regular series in the OFS program.

Though demand dropped off about five years ago and screenings for each film were cut from two to one, it has been building up again since, and next year the society plans to return to two screenings.

All this puts up costs, especially those charged by distributors, who want a fee of around \$150-\$300, depending on the title, for a single screening of their film.

Although the society has a healthy bank balance, including their own 16 mm. projector permanently installed at the Great Canadian Theatre Company's building, their regular subscription rate of \$20 per series, has to pay for all renting expenses, shipping, theatre rental etc.

The society has even bought a few of its own films, including three *Live and Learn* documentaries by Harriet Pacaud, a graduate of the Algonquin film studies course.

Membership today is around 1,200, plus those who attend special sell-out showings like this season's series at the National Museum of Natural Sciences

where a film is shown and an expert invited along to talk about it afterwards.

The next in this series is *Jaws* on March 17, when museum director Dr. Alan Emery, an ichthyologist who has worked with sharks, will be bringing along shark jaws, teeth and other small specimens to illustrate his talk.

There are few around today who remember the early years when the society started out as the National Film Society, then changed its name to the Ottawa Film Society immediately after World War Two. Soon after other societies started in Toronto and Vancouver.

Lyle Stern, an OFS board member recalls hearing about the enthusiastic core of Ottawa moviegoers in the '30s who journeyed over to a Hull theatre on Sunday mornings to see the likes of Theda Bara in *A Fool There Was* along with some John Grierson documentaries.

Ron Bolton, a former officer in the society, remembers showing silent films, complete with pianist to accompany the action, as well as sitting all-night through the 10-hour screening of *Judex*, a crime-mystery series compressed into one movie.

In the early days the society shunted around between the old Imperial Theatre, the Glebe Theatre on Bank Street and the old Regent downtown, before settling down to Sunday afternoons at the Elgin.

For several years in the late '70s they used the National Archives theatre but a change in policy which restricted advance bookings to only two or three months ("We need at least six months to cover the whole season," says Stern), brought them back to the museum.

Of the two other regular series, contemporary French films usually include mainly first-run screenings.

The third series can be anything from 50 years of comedy (this season's choice) to series based on the work of one director, or couple of stars, to films of individual countries.

They all seem to be popular though certain topics stand out



Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers series sure hit

such as the Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers series a few years ago to which one elderly moviegoer regularly brought her own embroidered Astaire-Rogers cushion.

Agatha Christie films are also a hit, and more recently a series of current Australian offerings were regularly sold out.

One year they persuaded author Pierre Berton to introduce a series based on his book *Hollywood's Canada* which featured

films with a uniquely American view of life in Canada.

One of the main events of the 50th anniversary is on the Victoria Day weekend when the Ottawa society plays host to the Canadian Federation of Film Societies where 100 representatives get a preview of over 100 films being made available for non-commercial screenings — what Stern describes as a mini-Canadian Cannes.