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Autor: Jones, Brian
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An African home cinema

So she asked me to write an article. About 5000 signs. Something on the cinema. Something on the Pathé prize for the best newspaper critique, she said. Like, what you do it for?

So I wrote. Well, for the critique's clarity I suppose, its pertinence, its depth, its grasp of the subject. Things like that. And for the intellect behind it of course. Intellect that one can understand. I don't like pretentiousness. Or to be condescended to. I don't like

film critiques that read like something from James Joyce, where I to have to work at them. I like to understand first go. And there is the thing about being entertaining too, of course. Humour. Something that shows a larger spirit.

But those are only the criteria, aren't they? she said. Those are not what you do it for. Why do you do it? Why does Pathé offer a prize?

Well, I wrote, it's for the publicity I suppose, if I'm honest with you. Or should we call it public relations? Yes, that sounds better? Of course we like to encourage interest in the cinema. Of course we want

people to write about it, to write well, to keep their readers informed. But it's not a modest prize once a year that's going to achieve that, is it? It would need a lot more. Our interest is to get the name in front of people. And the more influential the people the better. Why do Red Bull sponsor motorsport? Why does Roger have Nike all over him and a Rolex on his wrist when he collects the trophies. All public relations isn't it? What it's about at the end of the day!

She was dubious. Are you sure you want to write that? she said.

Do you prefer me to lie? I asked her.

No. No, of course not, she answered. But we need more. You'll have to write something about the cinema then, if that's all you can say about the prize.

What would your readers like to know, I said? From a cinema manager! Something about seat spacing? What the margin is on a box of popcorn? How to plan your staff well? Calculations on the price elasticity of demand for a ticket on the first weekend of Potter? That kind of thing? Is that what they want to know?

Why not, she said, and then, thinking about it, no, perhaps not. Could you not write something less dry?

My eyebrow lifted. I'm a cinema manager, I said. Not a journalist.

Just try, she pleaded. Just try. And so I thought for a while.

Well I'm getting on bit, I wrote. I've been to cinemas, and enjoyed them, in many different places. We travelled a lot you see, when I was younger. One place I remember particularly with regards to films is a town called Ndola, on the copperbelt in Zambia. We lived there for a few years in the eighties. The house was lovely. It had a beautiful, decorative garden enclosed by a red brick wall, with a swimming pool in the middle of the lawn whose wa-

ter circulated through the open mouth of a small, bronze statue of a dolphin. The garden was rich in all manner of flowering plants – hibiscus, frangipani, jacaranda etc, and the wall was overhung for much of its length by a magnificent, vibrant bougainvillea. The place was home to scores of birds, and little, green tree frogs, and slow-moving chameleons with their big, revolving eyes, and occasionally we would find a snake in the thicker grass at the edges.

It was in this garden that once a month I would show a film. For some reason the company owned a 16mm projector and a small screen and I would use one of my trips to Lusaka to bring a copy back with me. It would lie in its battered box on the back seat of my Land Rover as I bounced up the Cape to Cairo highway. The chap I got them off was an Indian and the only distributor in the country. Heaven knows where he got them from.

I would install the projector in the lounge and project through the window onto the screen I had set up on the grass about ten yards away. That way, with the door closed, there was no noise from the reel and I learned you could project through mosquito mesh without affecting the image. It has to do with focal lengths I suppose.

We would make it an open house to our friends and the people would come along, bringing their children and their folding chairs and their Mosi beer and Stellenbosch wine and their boerewors and pork steaks. The insects hummed away to themselves as they always did there and, at that altitude, the air was crisp and clear and the African sky bright with stars. While we ate and drank we watched the film. There were many of them but I can recall *THE DUCHESS AND THE DIRTWATER FOX* and *PETE'S DRAGON* and a wonderful film called *GALLIPOLI* which, when I think of that music and Mel Gibson in the last scene going over the top and into a hail of Turkish bullets, can move me even now.

That was our African home cinema. The Southern Cross above. Me, full bellied, a little drunk and content. The kids asleep on blankets at our feet. The women, ankles nipped by mosquitoes, with a constant eye out for a child going too close to the pool. The men watching the wall for a gang, armed with machetes, coming over it to steal and perhaps do something silly in their fear. It never happened, to us at least. We were lucky. They were great times.

But you said you were a cinema manager, she exclaimed.

That is what I am now, I answered. I didn't say it is what I always was.

Could you write more? she asked.

More ? A lot more, I answered. But I think I'm over my 5000 signs.

Brian Jones

Managing Director Pathé Suisse SA

