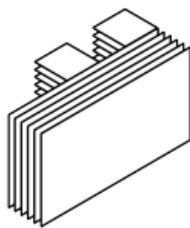


**WONDER
LAND**



Wonderland Oral History Interview with John Neville Cohen

Introduction

This oral history interview was recorded with John Neville Cohen for the Wonderland Project on 21/03/2022 at John's home in Winterthur, Switzerland

Wonderland explored Birmingham's unique cinema story. It was produced by Flatpack, in partnership with Birmingham Museums Trust and presented as part of the Birmingham 2022 Festival. It was supported by Arts Council England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

The Interview

John Neville Cohen grew up in Birmingham and went to work in the family cinema company founded by his Grandfather Joseph Cohen, which went on to become known as the Jacey Company. This interview discusses the history of the Jacey Company, John's early life and working roles in the company, as well as many of its cinemas, employees and notable events. It focuses particularly on Birmingham but also discusses the company and John's work at venues in London and at international film festivals. Further information about John's life and work is available on his website, a link for which can be found at the end of this interview transcript.

Speakers

Interviewer

Felicity McWilliams (FM) – Curator of Science and Industry at Birmingham Museums Trust

Interviewee

John Neville Cohen (JC)

[JC Interview Recording 1]

FM: So, the date is the 21st March 2022, and I'm here in Winterthur in Switzerland recording an interview with John Neville Cohen. So, could you tell me your name and just some detail about when and where you were born?

JC: Yes, my name is John Neville Cohen, and I was born in Welford-upon-Avon, which is near Stratford. It was wartime, so home for us was Birmingham normally.

FM: Thank you. And who else was in your family, your immediate family so parents and siblings?

JC: Right, my parents were George Arnold Cohen and Betty Valerie Cohen. And I have a sister who's four and a half years younger than me, Rayner.

FM: And you said that home was normally in Birmingham, so did you- did the family sort of temporarily move out to Welford because of the war?

JC: That's right. Yes.

FM: So did you spend most of your childhood actually in Birmingham itself?

JC: Yes. Except I was shipped off to boarding school [laughter]. Ah, yes but... is it recording?

FM: Yes it is!

JC: Oh I'm sorry, I didn't realise it was on!

FM: Not at all! No no, just carry on, take your time.

JC: Oh okay, well I've messed that up a bit. Okay. Um, yes, my very youngest years were in Birmingham, my parents lived in Hamilton Avenue, which is the road I ended up living in too, later on, when we got married. Ah, whereas my parents moved when I was, I suppose

somewhere around 7 or 8 to Woodbourne Road, which was the house my grandfather Joseph Cohen actually built. Ah, quite an amazing house because we had a billiard table that it was possible to lower below the floor and change the room into a sort of party dancing area. Ah, we had snooker - that was the snooker table, we had tennis courts in the garden, so it was a very nice, beautiful big house. But I ended up going to a boarding school, so life in Birmingham for me started being I suppose less frequent, just for school holidays. And ah, it was later on as we got a bit older and wanted more life, Birmingham seemed rather a quiet industrial city, there was certainly no nightlife to speak of, only the cinemas or the odd theatre. And I found a lot more was going on in London, and I was lucky enough to be able to go and spend quite a lot of time in London. Swinging Sixties time! Which was great [laughter].

FM: So, could you tell me a little about your- what did your parents do, and you mentioned your grandparents, your grandfather, I think?

JC: Yes, okay well my grandfather qualified as a solicitor, and so did my father. However, my father did not practice. And ah, he went into various other things, he had an antique shop in Birmingham called Rayner's after my sister's name, but it wasn't very successful, and my grandfather did practice but was far more interested in property development and cinemas. In fact, Joseph Cohen my grandfather, he partnered with Jack Cotton, also from Birmingham, who became the, I think his company City Centre became the biggest property development company in the world, he built things all over the UK and America. But to begin with Joseph Cohen and Jack Cotton built King Edward House which is in New Street. And, Kenilworth Court, which is in Hagley Road. But soon after that they separated, Jack went on his own and my grandfather built quite a few properties around the Calthorpe Estate, Calthorpe Mansions, Norfolk Court, Moorland Court. Two roads were named after him, one in Shirley and the other one in Edgbaston. Um, but his real fascination was with cinema. And, in the early days he was involved, would you believe in 50 different cinemas. He actually built the Pavilion in Wylde Green and Stirchley. This was before he started concentrating on his own cinema circuit, which did not go under the name Jacey, that happened later. But he introduced the idea of the news theatre into the provinces, and in Birmingham the very first one was the High Street News Theatre, and the second one he changed to a news theatre was the Tatler in Station Street, which is now known as the Electric.

There was a very interesting thing with the News Theatre in High Street that he did that I think caused a lot of interest, and that was the creation of what was called a scintillating sign. This was a 40 foot long sign on the top of the front of the cinema, with masses of little bulbs, and he create a moving sign that was giving the latest news. So, all sorts of announcements could be put up, it was quite an ingenious system operated from the projection room where we punched into a wide fairly thick card that was looped, and with the punch you could select the letters to create a message. It took about 20 minutes or so to create a message, which wouldn't be very long, and this would go and run continually

until one decided there was something more appropriate to put up! But of course, lots of people in and around that area, it was very busy, the Dale End part of Birmingham, ah, this was quite a feature in those days. We had, ah, a Mr Ogilvy was the manager. And, Mr Bishop was the projectionist, the head of the projectionist department, and at the Tatler we had Miss Shakespeare, who from the day one starting was with us right 'til the end of the cinema. Many many years. Um, it was as far as I was concerned, great fun to see cartoons, these fascinated me and I thought they were so funny and enjoyable. We had Laurel and Hardy, Charlie Chaplin, various others, the Three Stooges thrown in, but the cartoons were my favourite, the Bugs Bunny, Tom and Jerry, [laughter] Tweetie Pie.

FM: So how old were you, um, when your grandfather first started running these cinemas, sort of in addition to- you mentioned that he started out building them and then started taking them over?

JC: Yes. Because he was- he took over the News Theatre in 1932, so I wasn't born! [Laughter]. And ah, actually both of them- The Tatler was in 1932 as well, I think. I think I've got that right. But later- I don't know which month they were. But The Tatler came second, I know that. Um, yes. I went to see the shows from quite a young age. In fact, I would say, a lot of Birmingham people who went into town to do their shopping would deposit their kids at the cinema, knowing they were quite happy for an hour, and they'd have an ice cream and enjoy the show! Of course, in those days it wasn't dangerous, these days I don't think anyone would dream of leaving kids in a cinema, but it wasn't like that then!

FM: So, did you used to go to the cinemas, they were a regular part of your childhood, you visited them a lot?

JC: I think quite often, not many times in the same week, I think once a week basically as far as I was concerned. But I do know people did go more frequently.

FM: Do you- you mentioned that Joseph, that film was his big interest, do you think that was really what drove him into operating the cinemas in addition to- you mentioned his other property development work?

JC: Yes. Well, he did continue with property development, and a wider range, he used to be interested in Bournemouth area and Poole, he built things there. But the cinema business was the thing that he was really, I would say, most important to him. And the idea of the news theatre worked very well. It was so popular, and I think he got a real kick out of that.

FM: And you mentioned the High Street News Theatre and the Tatler which is now the Electric, were there any other venues within Birmingham that he operated?

JC: No, not 'til much later. What he did is expanded into various other areas, right up to Edinburgh and down to Brighton, with several in the centre of London, ah, I think it was in the 1960s he took over the Monseigneur Group in London and made all these cinemas news theatres, but they had different names. Ah, in Edinburgh it was the princes, there was the Tatler, the News Theatre, um, the Times, that was one at Baker Street in London. So, quite a lot, but they were not - as a company it was not good because the name didn't get known, and it was only much later that, when I got involved, that we decided to change the name of all the cinemas to Jacey, and even the property development company was making sure the Jacey name got known in all the properties in future. And that was to sort of, make the company better known really. And it worked quite well.

FM: So, when did you first kind of, get involved as an employee? In the company.

JC: Yes, ah, this was after school, I finished school at 17 having got my - well in those days GCEs, the five basic ones that were important I managed to pass. Hated school really [laughter]. Can't say it was much fun, and I was very glad not to continue to university, or consider going on, and I was quite keen to join the company, and ah, there was a feeling sort of, oh is this a cop out, ah [laughter], but they decided alright, we'll test him, and they made me Assistant Projectionist at the News Theatre. And this was not easy for a young fellow at 17, because weekends had to, I think it was alternate weekends I got the weekend off, otherwise the odd day in the week. And it started, which suited me, quite late - I'd have to get there about 9.30, because it didn't open 'til 10, and it would run 'til 10.30 at night. And we'd get the odd hour break, but it was long hours, ah, weekends every other weekend was not a case of joining friends! So, it was quite a tough life to begin with.

Um, I enjoyed watching the cartoons, I was fascinated at the way they were created, because I studied the films when there were pauses for us to do anything, and I could see how many frames before there was a slight movement, and it was this aspect of animation that I found fascinating. But we did have some experiences in the projection room. What the public never saw, was the panic stations when the bloomin' film would decide to break! [Laughter]. Thank God it always broke after it had been projected, lower down, but that meant the film zoomed all over the floor, we were panicking to try and get it back onto the other spool and wind it, and it was really something of a nightmare, if you didn't do it quick enough it snaked everywhere and tended to twist and- horrible! And you had to get this right, because, each projector ran for about 20 minutes, then we'd swap over to the next - there were two identical projectors. So, you'd load the one up with the next sequence, the one that's playing, as soon as that finished and you changed over to the other one you had to get this film rewind, repaired where it broke, which took some doing, and um, it was a bit of a nightmare to be honest when this happened. And it happened all too often, it was

nitrate film in those days, and unlike other cinemas where you had feature films where you showed two or three times only, we were showing the programme ten times a day, it was an hour programme, and this meant the film got quite a hammering through the projectors.

The other aspect of the - that people wouldn't realise today, is in those days when I first began, the light source was created by carbon rods, and there was a gap between the two rods, that were electrically charged, so that you got the light in between the two. And the projectors had an automated system to try and keep the gap continually at the correct distance to keep the brightness, if it moved too close or too far away you ended up getting either a blueish cast or a brownish sort of orangey colour, which spoilt the projected image. Or worse still the damn thing could go out! [Laughter] You'd suddenly be plunged in darkness! So, the automated system unfortunately didn't work as well as it should, and we had to keep an eye on it and keep manually adjusting it to keep it the right distance. Later on, we had new casings for the projectors that used Xenon lamps which was a hell of a lot easier, but when I started it was quite an ordeal to keep the programme going!

FM: It sounds very physical!

JC: It was rather! [Laughter] Quite fun though.

FM: And where did the films that you were showing come from? Did they come in from distributors or were any taken locally?

JC: No, um, we had several distributors we worked with, that provided the cartoons and comedies et cetera. And ah, they were booked on the basis of a one-week performance, and I didn't have an awful lot to do with the booking stage and how that worked at that time. But I spent two years as an Assistant Projectionist, and then the family decided I should come under the wing of Mr Lesley Tonks, who was the General Manager. And he knew every aspect of running a cinema. So, I was under his control for the next two or three years, and we went to various cinemas that we had all over the country not just Birmingham and kept an eye on how the management of the staff were working and if things were being done correctly. And it was then that I got very interested when I discovered the method of checking if any cheating was going on! [Laughter] And unfortunately there was some. And ah, the technique was quite interesting to me.

The basis was that a client would come and buy a ticket at the cash desk, go into the cinema, was met by the usherette who tore the ticket in half, every ticket had a number at both ends, which went on consecutively. So, one half was given to the patron, the other half was stuck into a needle with a long chord and the usherette would end up with masses of tickets on this chord. And the way of checking was that every so often, one would get hold

of the chord and check the numbers, that they were all properly in sequence. But in order to find out if any cheating was going on, we used to get an employee from one of the other cinemas to come with us to a different city and sit in the cinema having bought a ticket, with a counting device in his hand, and he would spend a couple of hours there, and count everyone that came in. Then, as he came out, we took the ticket roll, and we checked all the numbers were in sequence and that there was the correct number of tickets. And most times, to be fair, everything was okay. But there was an instance at the Cinephone in London, where I'm afraid we discovered a big discrepancy. And it ended up with Mr Tonks having to fire the manager, the cashier, and the usherette, because they were all in league on this. And what was actually going on, was the cashier would sell the ticket, the usherette would collect the ticket, but not tear it half and did not give the half to the patron, just showed the person to their seat. And gave the ticket back to the cashier, who promptly sold it again. Then it would probably be torn and put on. And it was done in the quieter times so that the numbers still more often than not were in the correct order.

We discovered that, ah, they'd been doing this for quite a while, and it added up to quite a sum eventually. So that was the end of that, but it was very intriguing how the detective work was carried out! And we did that to all the cinemas with different people, and it was a good way of checking, but it was very important, not only for the financial income to us. The distributors always provided the films on the basis of a percentage of the takings, so they were also interested in whether there was any dodgy situation going on. [Laughter]. So, they might come and also do spot checks, and the last thing we wanted is for any distributor to find that our cinemas- that there was something like this going on. So that's why it was quite an important part of the job!

FM: And, you said- sorry, just making sure I'm getting the dates right, that you worked as an Assistant Projectionist for two years, so this, when you started working with Mr Tonks, this must have been in the-

JC: Yes-

FM: Late-1950s?

JC: '59, yes. That's right, yes.

FM: And, working with Mr Tonks, um, were you and he based at any particular cinemas or at a kind of head office? And where was that?

JC: Head Office, yes. We had a Head Office which was in Somerset House in Temple Street, which incidentally was one of the buildings Jack Cotton and Joe built together, um, and Grandpa had the first-floor area as our offices. Yes.

FM: How many people worked there? How big was the organisation at this stage?

JC: Oh, ah, we had about 25 cinemas in all, and I think it was somewhere around 260 employees. Overall.

FM: In terms of the organisation and how it sort of grew and changed over the years, was that- how did that compare to the overall size? Was that the biggest the organisation was, or did it grow from then onwards?

JC: Um, it grew a little bit. What happened, was my father joined my grandfather in operating the cinemas, and my father got very friendly with a fellow called Ken Rive from London, who was, ah, an interesting character actually. He actually worked for MI5 at one stage, but he started off as an actor, and he acted in films in Germany I believe, and later got very interested in films from all over Europe and persuaded my father that we ought to bring in some of these brilliant films that were from Sweden, France, Italy, there were some really excellent films that never got shown in the UK. And he formed a distribution company called Gala, and together with Dad, decided let's try one of your cinemas and see. And it was an opportune time, because what was happening is cartoons that we relied on were starting to be sold to television - the rights were given to television - which meant we got less choice of cartoons to continue booking all the time. So, there was a worry that this was going to, ah, be the end of the cartoon shows. And Dad decided, okay we'll, change one of the cinemas in London and see what happens, and we created Cinephone. Which was a cinema opposite Selfridges, doesn't exist anymore. Don't know what it is now, at one point it was a British Airways office, but I don't know what it is now! But the Cinephone was quite a nice cinema, very good location, and he brought over films by Fellini, um oh dear, Vittorio de Sica, lots of very famous wonderful films! And they did quite well! So, what happened is Dad decided, yes, this looks good, and in Birmingham, there was a cinema originally called the Broadway that was not doing any good, and we took it over. Totally rebuilt it and changed it to the Cinephone in Birmingham. And the films in London that did well we brought to Birmingham.

I should tell you something about the Cinephone because that was quite an interesting time too. In those days, I remember being a little bit scared of a gang that was the Fewtrell Brothers, ah, they were, I forget how many, there were a lot of them, and they were dangerous. I mean there was knifings and God knows what. Very risky. And they operated the coffee bar in Bristol Road somewhere, not terribly far from the Cinephone. But one of the features of our cinema, was the coffee bar that we created. This was a totally different

coffee bar, it was the height of luxury, beautiful big crystal chandeliers, ah, very nice seating and colour scheme. And the whole frontage window was the coffee bar, you could look out onto Bristol Street. But the other side there were small alcoves so you could have small private gatherings in separate alcoves. And ah, Ron Catton was the Manager- actually he was the manager for the whole term of the Cinephone- in fact most of our staff stayed with us, once they joined us, they always stayed with us and we tended to um, give people from within the company better positions if they came up. So, we had a very good relationship with staff in those days. And Ron Catton said, this is a magnificent area, coffee bar, the walls had these wonderful big pictures of Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, all the top stars, very glamorous. And, ah, he decided, we've got a jukebox in the coffee bar, and he decided it will only have classical music. And he selected Tchaikovsky, mostly piano pieces really to be honest, but really nice classical music which was unheard of [laughter].

But it did create a nice ambience and it was very very popular. It stayed open at least an hour, sometimes an hour and a half after the films finished, but it became a place that was used by people that didn't even come to see the film, it was free to anyone to use. And the first person my grandfather got to operate it was Andre Drucker. Who later on, there was Drucker's Patisseries all over the place, but he did these open sandwiches that were beautiful, and special Viennese cream cakes and things, it was quite a place! Not cheap, but very different to the other coffee bar that the Fewtrell's were operating! And I got a bit worried that, oh they might be out to come and smash the place up or something! [Laughter] Never had any trouble! [Laughter].

Um, but the Cinephone was unique in another respect, a technical one. To describe it- all cinemas in those days were equipped to play cinemascope, wide screen, standard screen, there were various different, ah, formats. And what happened is they had black sheets that were able to be moved to the correct size so that the film was shown against a black surround. At the Cinephone we had a very new system, but it didn't seem to catch on anywhere else as far as I know. But it was rather attractive- the screen was the optimum big size, to take every type of format, but with no black surround, and the edge of the surround was curved out towards the audience a bit. And there was a special lens that we put on the front of the projectors, that I think used some kind of prism system. But what it did was it created a blurred coloured surround to the actual picture that you were looking at, and that blurred coloured surround was reflecting the main colours that were actually being projected in the main picture. So, it was constantly changing, but it was very soft muted blurred colouring, and the main film was in the centre. And I thought it looked damn good! And I think it went down well, but for some reason no other cinemas to my knowledge ever used it. So, another unique little aspect!

FM: Were there any other, um, of the cinemas you mentioned earlier that- you eventually helped to take on the Jacey Brand, but before that when these cinemas had like Cinephone and the Tatler had their own sort of individual identities, um, are there any other particular

cinemas that stand out in your memory as- whether it's for technical features, or where they were, the kind of character of them?

JC: Well, the cinemas in Birmingham that I remember, the main difference between our group and them was that we specialised in new theatre which obviously Grandpa was a pioneer of, and Dad a pioneer of bringing in continental films. But most of the other cinemas relied on American or British products, and I remember, let me just think, there was the Gaumont, the Odeon, the Futurist, the Forum, the Scala, these I remember, odd times I used to go to see British films, or American films, um, like everyone else. But they were pretty standard, they were similar to all the other cinemas you'd find in other cities. They were the same groups- far bigger groups than Jacey, we were a rather small independent group. Um, which was probably one of the reasons we went the way we went because we couldn't compete with the booking power of an Odeon or Rank Film Company, so we had to find different things that we could show that thank goodness they didn't want! [Laughter] Although to be honest, with the continental films, what did happen is the big circuits started to realise we were doing damn well. And it was around the time that Brigitte Bardot got to be known and popular, that suddenly these were taken on by the big circuits and we couldn't get a look in! And these things happen, all part of business unfortunately.

FM: Obviously, with Odeon and these other cinemas and big cinemas in Birmingham that you mentioned, was there much of a sense of there being a Birmingham cinema community, did you- in terms of building up those relationships with distributors, did you feel part of a wider Birmingham cinema scene, or was it very much more centre on the company and your links with other cities?

JC: Yes, more than that - We didn't have much to do with the other cinemas really. I think they regarded us as a competition, um, and actually the way that business worked was that the distributors favoured the ones that would give them the most bookings. So, it was not an easy time for the smaller cinema circuits. The only thing is, we were fortunate in having, I would say, some of the best locations. In London we were all around the West End, I mean Piccadilly Circus, Leicester Square, Trafalgar Square, Baker Street, Oxford Street- we had two in Oxford Street- so you know, we were bang in the centre. Which gave us a bit of leeway.

[Post interview amendment from JC: In listing the London Cinemas I forgot to include The Strand and Charing Cross Road.]

FM: And, just to go back to, you mentioned that with the Cinephone bringing in the kind of European films and that in some ways that was to do with the increasing difficulty of getting the cartoons because of the competition with television, was there anything else that was

changing to either push towards those films, you know, what was happening with the newsreels at that time?

JC: Yes of course television killed the idea of the news theatre, so it- news theatres changed to more cartoon and comedy type shows because the news was always out of date. But in the early days, before television, what I didn't mention that my Grandfather managed to do which was extraordinary, the things like the Coronations, King George VI and the present Queen, 1953, ah, with the Queen's Coronation, we were able to show the whole Coronation, in colour, just a few hours after it took place. And this was because of ah - let me just refresh my memory on this- the name - um. Can we stop and I'll just look?

FM: Yes of course. Shall we take a short break?

JC: Okay. My voice is going a bit funny!

FM: I'll turn off the recording for a break now. [Recording 1 ends at 36:16]

[JC Interview Recording 2]

FM: So, I'm starting the recording again, after our break, so you were just telling me about being able to show the Coronation a few hours after it happened in colour.

JC: That's right, it was quite a success for the news theatres, all over the country, because my grandfather discovered this system called the British Realita Process which involved a special lens being put on in front of the actual projector lens, but this enable full colour to be shown literally a few hours after the event. Whereas all the other cinemas wanting to show it had to wait five days for the normal film process to be completed!

FM: Wow.

JC: So, we were able to show the Coronation so quickly, we had queues all-round the block all day long to see the Coronation, it was a huge success. But the other thing that was rather extraordinary that we did in those days, we had our own filming unit. We had a van and on top of the van they would mount the camera and create local news items that would be included in our programmes at the cinemas. And, one thing that was done, especially with things like the royal Coronation is, there were pageants and all sorts of things going on in Birmingham which we filmed, and the entire film was presented afterwards to the Lord

Mayor to keep on record. And I think this happened for the ah King George VI and our present Queen.

FM: And was it just in Birmingham that you- or did you have those camera units all over?

JC: Yes! We did. Yes, so we had our own news theatres filming units in Bristol, Edinburgh, all round, and these were shown literally a few hours after being filmed.

FM: Wow. And do you remember when those filming units first started? When did they start and did, they run right up until the end of like, the newsreel?

JC: That's a good question!

FM: It's okay if you can't remember!

JC: I'm not sure when they started, they went on I think not much longer than the 1953 Coronation, I think probably because - soon after - when television started being more popular, that ah, it was no longer continued. Yes, that's covered that aspect.

I'm just trying to think- Oh I'll tell you one other little thing that we did in Birmingham. Um, we had a little company we formed called Lilliput Records, and this was a matter of instead of filming news events, we set up a camera and a system to photograph all legal documents for companies. So that on 35mm film, all the records would be there, and this was particularly during the war, the worry of all these things being lost, so that a film record could be kept of any important documents. And this was something we did as a little side line from Somerset House.

FM: That's really interesting. So, in terms of the timeline, we were at kind of late-1950s, when you moved to work at Somerset House with Mr Tonks. After moving to Head Office, what other sorts of roles did you then start to take on in the company?

JC: Well, I kept an eye - firstly I wanted to know how the film bookings worked and I joined Peter Johnson, who was our Booking Manager, but I only spent a short time there, just to see how it was organised and what kind of difficulties there were. And there were plenty, there was some extraordinary characters that we met that were film distributors. The most colourful one that I remember was a fellow called E. J. Fancy, he operated - I think he had umpteen companies but that one that was best known was probably 'New Realm'. He was

a character, I'll never forget, and I think a lot of people wouldn't forget, he was larger than life, and the thing that I remember was that he would come up to you to shake hands, but woe betide you weren't on guard because he didn't shake your hand, he immediately grabbed you by the balls! [Laughter]. And it was his way of making sure you didn't forget about him! [Laughter].

FM: That sounds memorable!

JC: But extraordinary character! And he was a bit dangerous, I believe he actually knifed his accountant for some reason, he was a dangerous character. But uh-

FM: And he was a film distributor?

JC: Yes, and ah, it was a family business, he had his second wife who was also involved in it, and his daughter Adrienne Fancy was following in his footsteps. She started off she was a model and she started off in some films of his, and one of the things I remember is she decided to go into film distribution, and she got hold of the film called Emmanuelle, which was the biggest box office hit of all time in those days! She made an absolute fortune!

But one of the reasons I remember E. J. particularly well is because with my photography, I managed to photograph projected images to create my own kind of photography. And he was very interested in this, and he said, John, can you actually do this with moving film? And I said to him, well, I don't really know, I'm a bit worried it might not work because the projection would have to be timed exactly with the camera opening and - I said I don't know if we could synchronise that successfully. If one could, I'm sure it would work. I said, it might be interesting to experiment. So, he said, right, come to London, and he set me up with all the equipment he'd got, and he said, see if you can do something with it! Well, I had a couple of days there messing about and trying all sorts of things, and to our amazement although I was worried about the synchronising, and there was no way of making sure it would synchronise, I had a go. And I managed to get something actually working without even worrying about synchronising. And the result of this was that nothing actually happened, but it was just satisfying to know, but it was soon after this that the first James Bond film came out, and blow me, they projected the images on the girls' bodies in the credits and it was exactly using my technique! [Laughter]. Quite extraordinary.

Now I'm just trying to think what I should tell you next. Because, I haven't told you much about the Cinephone opening, where we had Martine Carol, the star of Nana, which was a fantastic film, very very big production, for the opening night. And, we actually had 50 Lord Mayors attend the opening, from surrounding towns, and ah, let me just see -

FM: And when was the opening?

JC: 1956. Ah, it was a film with Charles Boyer and Martine Carol, and it was based on ah, Emile Zola's classic about the corrupt high society during the Napoleon III period, and ah, it was a huge success this film, we had it on in London and I think it ran for - I forget how many weeks, but far longer than usual. And Cinephone Birmingham had it for the actual official opening, and I can't remember who it was but we had a fashion show on the stage first, then the film, and then ah, Martine Carol and - then what was his name again- yes- Christian-Jaque, the Director and Producer, they were invited as guests of honour at the Town Hall after the film, so this was all about the opening of the Cinephone. Later on, we showed all sorts of good films at the Cinephones, but later on there was an occasion when a distributor got hold of a film that would you believe the Duke of Bedford had been involved in, he allowed Woburn Estate to be open for a film crew to film nudists! Now this film was called Nudist Paradise, and all I can tell you is a bigger bore you could not wish to sit through! They were in the distance, so quite far away, you did realise they were nude - the story was pretty well non-existent, it cost peanuts to make it and when it was shown it was a fantastic box office success [laughter]- made a fortune!

The result was, everyone got on the bandwagon, let's make nudist films, and there was nudist film after nudist film and I have to admit, as a company, we made amazing profits. So did the distributors and the producers because these films cost next to nothing to run. The only reason people went to see them is because they thought they were going to see nudes! And they did see nudes, but certainly so far away there wasn't very satisfying! So, we had um, this happened for quite a few years, and it was, from our point of view, money-wise great, but socially and being involved in this kind of business was not something we really valued or enjoyed. And we decided we'd had enough of it; we'd far rather play decent films with good stories than this rubbish.

So we mounted up a campaign to try to kill off the nudist film, and what we did is we said right, we'll play the nudist film in all our news theatres as well as the continental cinemas, but at the news theatres we'll only charge the usual price which in those days - of course it's old money- was 1 and 6 pence - and 2 and 6 pence to go in as against the normal price for a feature film, and we'll run them as many six or seven times a day. And they did amazing, the more we showed them the more bloomin' people went to see them! And it was still a money-spinner and we thought, you know there'd be overkill and then people would have enough of it, because nine times out of ten there was no story at all it was just stupid! See them playing basketball in the distance! [Laughter].

Quite extraordinary! Um, so I'm trying to think of all the things to do in Birmingham. Now, the other thing that I can mention is that I ended up at the Head Office, and I had talked to my grandfather and my father about the fact that the company's not known, we'd got all

these different names everywhere, and it would be I thought, a good idea to base it on the Jacey name. We ourselves called the company Jacey and it was after my grandfather's initials, J.C. and everyone who knew him well called him J.C. rather than Joe, but ah, we spelt it Jacey, and I decided I'd like to form a publicity department where we would concentrate on designing the frontages of the cinemas, creating a logo image, and also, the layout and the design and the choice of title et cetera of the films, the front of house as we called it. And one of the things that we did, is instead of having posters in frames which was the usual thing, we put - boarded up the front entrance with boards that were from top to bottom full of colour advertising whatever film we chose. So, I ended up employing 2 people, I had a PR lady, that was Vicky Wright, and a Mike Field who was a designer, and we set together, we had an office within Somerset House, on the floor above the main Jacey office, and we came up with ideas and designs there. And it worked quite well!

We designed the canopies and how the Jacey lettering would be formed, and in the end, ah, I have to say, we were quite successful, because film distributors started talking to me and saying we like what you've done for us with this film in your cinema, we've got one or two other films that you're not booking but, would you like to do the idea of front of house for us, or at least give us some idea of how you would handle it, and we charged them of course for that! But it was quite interesting, and I must admit I enjoyed it.

But one of the things that happened is an usherette at the Cinephone Birmingham was a girl called Aisha Ahmed, I gather she was described as being an Anglo - oh it's gone out of my head, um- oh what is it, sorry stop the- I'm in a mess because I've gone in all sorts of different-

FM: Don't worry. I'll stop the recording so we can take another pause. [Recording 2 ends at 18.18].

[JC Interview Recording 3]

JC: Aisha was described as an Anglo-Arabian. She was quite a beautiful girl and came to our notice because she won a Miss Teenager competition, and we found that she was selected as the front cover of the Birmingham University Carnival Rag, so we thought, hello, we've got an usherette here that's causing a bit of a stir in Birmingham, we'd better meet her! So, we got her up to the office and she seemed to be a very nice type, she'd got a nice personality. Her smile was amazing [laughter], and that really did it, we thought gosh, she's just the thing. We'll create a 'Miss Jacey' to help promote this Jacey name. The only trouble was, when she spoke, she'd got quite a Brummie accent! So, we decided well we've got to do something about this, and my mother took her in hand, and organised that she had elocution lessons. Of course, these days it doesn't matter! People don't worry about dialects and things, but in those days, it sounded horrible! Um, so she had elocution

lessons and my mother gave her ideas of how to present herself in certain situations and what she should do when she meets stars and so on, and we decided when we have film premiers, and we had quite a few because in various cities one after another- and we had the stars come and personalities, my father didn't want to be doing this, and I can't say I did either. So, the idea of a Miss Jacey fitted the bill. And, ah, my parents spoke to her parents and guaranteed that wherever we were taking her to do this, she would be chaperoned and protected, she was only 17 when this happened. And she was a big success actually, the press loved her, and ah, she handled it very well. She presented flowers, stars came in and things- you know, general things like this. And it was a big success! And we used Miss Jacey for quite a number of years. I wonder if I could stop there?

FM: Yeah, shall we take another break?

JC: Yes, I need to just refresh what I was going to-

FM: Yes, I'll pause the recording now. [Recording 3 ends at 2.57].

[JC Interview Recording 4]

FM: Right, so we're back from our short break. So, I think you were going to tell me about any other- particular film events that had happened at any of the cinemas.

JC: Yes. Ah, there was a very unusual one at the Cinephone Birmingham. We had a film that was offered to us that was distributed by Michael Klinger and Tony Tenser, that really caused terrific headlines and a lot of interest. It was called The Yellow Teddy Bears. And what happened, this was a film that was about, well – teenage - Sixth Formers who had had a sexual experience and they wore the yellow teddy bear as a badge to mean they'd actually had this experience. And, in the film, one of the girls of course gets pregnant, and it's all the questions that arise over this. So, what happened is that Tony Tenser who was a very good marketing man came up with this idea to invite sixth formers from various schools to attend a private viewing, and we had, let me just remember- a marriage guidance counsellor, a vicar, a headmistress [laughter], all of whom were to discuss after the girls had seen this film, what they thought about it. Ah, the star was Annette Whiteley who was a 17-year-old, and she was present too. Well, at the end of the film, and ah, before discussing very much about it, they were asked if any of them were embarrassed or uncomfortable about seeing this film. Not a single hand went up. They then went on for quite a long discussion between various parties and the claim was that all boys should see this film [laughter], and, ah, there was a lot of interest. And of course, the press were very intrigued with this and it got tremendous publicity. And, from the point of view of ours, it

once again put Cinephone on the map as being a very different type of cinema. It was an extraordinary experience, ah, and the opening was quite amazing.

Robert Mitchum actually came [laughter], and Tony Tenser's comment was, oh if there's free drinks and pretty girls to be seen, he'll come! [Laughter]. So that was an event I remember that was quite interesting. There was a comment made that seemed a bit odd to me, Robert Mitchum was standing next to Aisha, Miss Jacey at the time, having a drink, and he wanted some soda, and was informed, oh dear, we've run out of soda. So, Aisha had to tell him, I'm sorry, we've - So he said, okay gal, just spit in it! [Laughter]. Very strange!

Now the other thing that was unusual that happened every year for quite a few years is all the staff we had at Head Office got together a Christmas show for pensioners at the Cinephone, and 600 pensioners were invited for this performance. And what happened is they played the music and the staff were on stage, miming, pretending they were doing it and - looks like they're singing, of course it was all just miming. And the old age pensioners really enjoyed the show, they got free ice cream and they also got a gift when they - when the show was ending, and they left. One year I think it was cooked- each one was given a cooked chicken to take home. [Laughter]. Um, don't know if there's anything much else to tell you about that but it was rather a nice - Oh, yes, the other thing was St Philip's choir sang carols to them as well, it was a nice sort of afternoon experience that was put on, free of charge.

FM: [inaudible]

JC: Yes. Um, I think that covers everything I can think of, except to say that the cinema industry was hit by two things really. Television certainly influenced us as far as news was concerned, for news theatres. Then came videos that were all the films available on videos, also hit the cinema industry. Ah, we got declining customers gradually quite a bit later, but as the nudist nonsense was coming to an end as we were trying to play the odd, better type film we didn't get the support.

I remember Arthur Steel was the film critic for the Birmingham Post and Mail, and he wrote some very nice articles where he applauded our efforts to show some films that he considered well worthwhile instead of this nonsense that was either a bit saucy or nudist, which none of the family really wanted to be connected with that much! And, the other thing that happened from our point of view, is that most of our cinemas were on leases that were coming to an end. And the new leases were going to cost so much we couldn't see really how we could make them pay. Um, the answer was, as far as the bigger cinema groups were concerned, was to split up big cinemas into several numbers of screens and show umpteen films, to try and get sufficient income. Um, for us, our cinemas were relatively small anyway, it wasn't very practical.

So, what happened is we ended up with a situation where none of us fancied the new leases, my father and his brother decided they'd like to retire, Grandpa unfortunately had passed away, and the decision was well the only way to do this is to sell out what it was - we'd still got some lease left - to see if we could sell them out. And ah, we did sell cinemas and a lot of the properties were bought up by the Saville Gordon group, so we ended up going into voluntary liquidation as it's called, so in other words we weren't made bankrupt, and we were able to get funds out that way for the directors which were mainly my father and uncle, to retire. Which meant I was out of a job! [Laughter]. Suddenly I had to think- I think I was around 40 something in those days, I had to find another way of earning a living. Um, and it was the end of Jacey Cinemas. Can we stop? [Recording 4 ends at 8.29].

[JC Interview Recording 5]

FM: You've - obviously we've talked quite a lot about the Birmingham cinemas, but you've mentioned a number of the venues that were in London and elsewhere in the country, so you must have travelled a fair bit for work and maybe further afield? Do you have any recollections of that aspect of the work, the link between the company and the world?

JC: Yes. Well, we were very fortunate and as a relatively young fellow for me it was tremendously exciting to go to the Cannes Film Festival, which we did a number of years running, because that was where you got to see the new releases. But more importantly, the distributors were very keen to ah, entertain us, and to introduce us to the films that they were contemplating taking on to distribute, but were concerned to know whether we would be likely to book them. So, it was ah, quite an interesting experience. Not only to go to the glamorous openings of which there were several every night, so you couldn't go to all of them, it was amazing! But to see the stars close up, I mean I was very close to Brigitte Bardot that was my favourite [laughter], I also Sophia Loren, and Gina Lollobrigida which was amazing to me! What I would say is that 99% of people that liked to see them got no nearer than the screen, and I was able to see them in the flesh within touching distance! I think I was too flabbergasted to actually speak to them! [Laughter]. But it was rather amazing. There were interesting characters as well, Anthony Balch was a film distributor in London who got some very interesting films and was quite a character, he was very amusing, so was Ken Rive. And we had some lovely evenings, Phil Kutner was another one, so I would say that was quite a highlight as far as I was concerned, to go to such events.

FM: I can imagine.

JC: Other than that, travelling around from Edinburgh to Brighton to all the cinemas was essential, but what I really enjoyed was, I used to plan Fridays as being the day to be in

London if I was going to change any of the front of house - I used to go to a company that did all the signwriting et cetera and make sure the design were what we wanted for the next film. And I did that so that I could spend Saturday and Sunday in London rather than Birmingham! [Laughter]. I must say Birmingham's been a good city to be in, but in the swinging sixties the place to be as far as I was concerned was London! [Laughter]. But it was exciting times in those days I must say, and very enjoyable.

Not sure what else I can add! Um, there is one thing I forgot to mention earlier about the opening of the Tatler, and what I would like to just mention that was rather unusual is that we had Sir Patrick Hannan MP attend the opening. And he did attend the opening, and the cinema was packed full. And he was supposed to give the speech to the audience to open officially the cinema, but he didn't, he was able to sit in the audience because we had filmed him and recorded his message which was shown on the screen instead of him sitting up there and talking in person which was somewhat unusual! Especially as talking films had only recently come about! [Laughter]. So that was something I forgot.

FM: We've talked quite a lot about a whole array of cinemas, but I guess before we finish is there anything about any of the Birmingham cinemas or the Jacey Company or anything really that you - think would be nice to cover that we haven't talked about? It's okay if there's not!

JC: [Laughter] I'm trying to think! One thing as a youngster, even before I started working as a projectionist, was I gained a lot of popularity with my friends because we had free passes we could issue [laughter] for people to go and view. So now and again if I wanted a friend do a favour I could say, here's a free pass to the Cinephone or a free pass to the Tatler, which was, quite nice to be able to do! [Laughter]. But no, I can't think at the moment of much else relating just to cinemas. I had a lot of other interests as well but that's another story.

FM: That's been really interesting, thank you so much for your time.

JC: Pleasure! Okay. [Recording 5 ends at 5.52]



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