

## **BFI Reuben Library visit 25 April 2016, Brigitte Istim**

Based on London's South Bank the BFI Reuben Library fulfils criteria desirable to many film stars, trim and good looking. Situated between the shop and ticket office with one wall mostly composed of glass window the bright red chairs, clustered tables and neatly lined bookshelves appear both elegant and inviting. With an eclectic collection including film, TV programmes, audio cassettes (yes still actually on cassettes at present), trade journals, festival programmes, over 50,000 books and a staggering 4.1 million press cuttings it would be hard to visit this library without finding something to surprise, fascinate or amuse.

We were introduced to the Reuben by Sarah Carrant, Librarian in charge of Reader Services. For our visit, Sarah had laid out a few items relating to health such as 'Signs of Life' 'Medicine in Cinema' and 'Lab coats in Hollywood'. Sarah explained that the library is the oldest part of the BFI's collection dating back to 1934 and 'we don't throw anything away'. These are exciting if hectic times for the library, access used to be via membership only but has now moved to free, open access with user numbers rising from 12,000 to 73,000 a year. There is an ongoing digitisation programme – all those press cutting are available online – and the last couple of years saw the launch of BFI Player, an online, on demand platform for film viewing with half of the material being free of charge.

One of the aims of BFI Player is to make the collection less Londoncentric, a goal that is reinforced by the 11 Mediatheques scattered across the UK where users can search the archive and watch TV programmes and full length films. Some of the most interesting material available is often the least expected; the BFI has a rich collection of social history and public information film and a quick search on one of the library computers brought up footage of the bitter winter of 1963, trains stuck in snowdrifts with workers digging paths through towering mounds of ice and snow all without a hard hat or high-vis jacket in sight.

Interestingly the BFI doesn't own rights to most of its films although it plays a huge role in the production and distribution of British film thanks in part to Lottery funding. Sarah says that her hunch/feeling is that in contrast to the French the British have traditionally had a somewhat sniffy attitude to film, viewing it as a rather downmarket, minor art form. Regardless of film's cultural status in society the Reuben Library's collection stands as evidence of the enormous popularity and influence it has wielded over the years, manuals listing all the cinemas in the UK which make strangely addictive reading show attendance peaked in 1946 and even in 1917 Croydon had 17 'cinemas' though some of these were little more than a room where a handful of people could see a film.

Among the treasures of the BFI archive are the special collections which include material from David Lean and Michael Powell and Derek Jarman's scrapbooks. Jarman's scrapbooks are wonderful distillations of inspiration with notes, sketches, collages and found objects forming a sort of DNA portrait of each film he made.

Jenny Beavan, winner of a Bafta and an Academy Award for designing the Mad Max: Fury Road costumes and famed for collecting her awards in her trusty leather jacket recently donated her collection to the BFI. All the special collections can be seen via appointment.

Unsurprisingly given its compact size the South Bank library is not the BFI's only bit of real estate. There is another archive in Berkhamstead that is not open to the public and a film store deep in the Warwickshire countryside, the latter housed in an ex-MOD building that was not even on GPS until a couple of years ago. There is a reason for this tight security, a significant number of the films stored in this location are silver nitrate, the dominant material for making films from the 1890s to the early 1950s – it's highly flammable and once alight is impossible to stop burning.

If you have any interest in film whatsoever from costume design to stats on cinema attendance the Reuben Library is well worth a visit – it's also important to note that despite its name the BFI collections are far from exclusively British, there is a rich array of material on more or less any place that has a film industry including France, Italy, Japan and Russia. Many thanks to Sarah for a fascinating guided tour.



