



It's Saturday night at a cinema on London's South Bank. The projectionist is putting the final touches to the 35mm print before threading it through the projector. Ushers are settling the audience into seats and people are chatting to each other. Just before the lights go down, the cinema manager stands up before the screen, welcomes everyone and requests that people turn off mobile phones - all a familiar routine played out nightly at multiplexes and arthouse cinemas across the country.

And then the manager asks us to "remember that this is a nil-by-mouth cinema", offers blankets to anyone who is feeling cold and introduces the two nurses on duty that evening. It's Saturday night at MediCinema, St Thomas' Hospital - just like your local cinema, except that most of the audience is wearing pyjamas.

Cinema is a great leveller - within a cinema auditorium none of the usual divisions of life and society exist. Unlike theatres, concert halls or the opera, a cinema treats all members of the audience as equal - charging universal ticket prices and allowing the individual to choose their own seat. Irrespective of individual taste in moving image, there are few of us who have not seen at least one *Star Wars*, *Godfather* or *Bond* film. Action blockbusters or child-targeted merchandise-heavy franchise films (the moving image equivalent of a burger and chips) might share common cinema screens with celluloid delicacies such as *Werckmeister Harmonies* or *Orlando*. Film, both as an art form and as entertainment, travels fluidly across barriers of culture, age, gender, society and even language. Movies are truly universal.

And so too is illness. Cancer, heart attacks and accidental injuries are non-exclusive - once again, a great leveller. In a hospital, particularly a large NHS inner-city teaching hospital with a busy casualty department and many specialist centres such as St Thomas', all manner of human life and experience is represented - and treated - on the same level. None of the usual divisions exists - universal care is provided, irrespective of culture, age, gender, society and even language.

The idea of MediCinema was originally conceived to help alleviate the boredom and routine that comes with being in hospital. The screenings were envisioned as a form of entertainment but in reality, and more importantly, they have proven invaluable for helping relieve the unexpressed fear that people often feel about being in hospital - the unknown experience of upcoming surgery, the uncertain wait for test results, the painful treatments.

The energising effect of film that we feel when the credits roll and the lights go up, and as

MEDICINEMA



THE HEALING POWER OF CINEMA HAS RARELY BEEN BETTER DEMONSTRATED.

By Nancy Harrison

the images, the emotions and the escapism of the previous two hours percolate through your senses, is just as acute when you are in hospital as any other time. That opportunity to leave our own physical reality and experience different situations and places, other periods in time and to live vicariously is why cinema exists - and who better to benefit from that sensation than those with a damaged, imperfect or broken physical reality? Cinema lets us transcend our physical limitations just as hospitalisation can exacerbate those same limitations.

MediCinema screens current run films twice a week, free of charge. Mainstream films and blockbusters such as *Bond*, *X-Men*, *Mamma Mia!* and *Harry Potter* dominate the schedule, balanced out with smaller independent titles including *The Queen*, *Rachel Getting Married*, *Slumdog Millionaire* and *The Damned United*. Unsurprisingly, comedy and romantic comedies tend to be the most popular genres. Foreign language subtitled films are ruled out as many of the audience are on strong medication, and anything with a lot of violence is avoided, as is horror (although *Shaun of the Dead* was very popular). The screenings are open to all patients, and with the exception of infectious patients (eg MRSA) anyone who has been cleared by the ward nurses is included. As a result screenings regularly include a wide selection of people on drips, oxygen, feeding and drug infusions, drains and catheters, or in traction with broken limbs - even women in early-stage labour have attended: for these people, the notion of cinema offers a small scrap of normality and enjoyment during what is a far-from-normal or enjoyable time for most of them.

The uniqueness of the cinema means that the most typical reaction of the patients, when invited to attend a screening, is disbelief bordering on suspicion. Often people can't believe that we are screening current run films, or that the cinema is not just a plasma screen showing DVDs in a small room somewhere. They say that they can't walk very far, or are not able to walk at all. What about their drip? The psychological association of such a purely pleasurable 'ordinary' activity as the cinema with the exceptional physical reality of being in hospital requires a genuine leap of faith for first-time attendees.

However, once patients have been down to the cinema, the overwhelming majority, unless they are being discharged, asks to return for the next screening: friends and family get invited, and sceptical fellow patients in adjoining beds are talked into going along. The screening becomes a shared social event - patients have come to the films to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries and, recently, a group of pre-natal women and their partners attended a Valentine's night screening before heading to the birth centre.

Of course people also find a trip to MediCinema is just a little bit absurd and subversive. The reality of 'going to the pictures' in a hospital bed, wearing pjs and dragging along a beeping monitor and drip, is an irresistible adventure and a welcome bit of light relief at a time when it's needed most. So while long-stay patients worry that they will be discharged before the next screening, pre-op cardiac patients facing imminent heart surgery are teased about the cultural opportunities of hospital - "...cinema tonight, the theatre tomorrow..."

MediCinema is a charity operated independently of the NHS, celebrating its 10th anniversary at St Thomas' this year. In 2007 Glasgow's Yorkhill Royal Hospital for Sick Children became the second MediCinema branch; another cinema at Newcastle's Royal Victoria Infirmary has finished construction and will open later this year. Discussions are currently underway for a branch at St Thomas' sister hospital Guy's, as well as Buckinghamshire's Stoke Mandeville specialist burns and spinal injuries centre. Visit www.medicinema.org.uk

Nancy Harrison is a longtime volunteer with MediCinema.

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