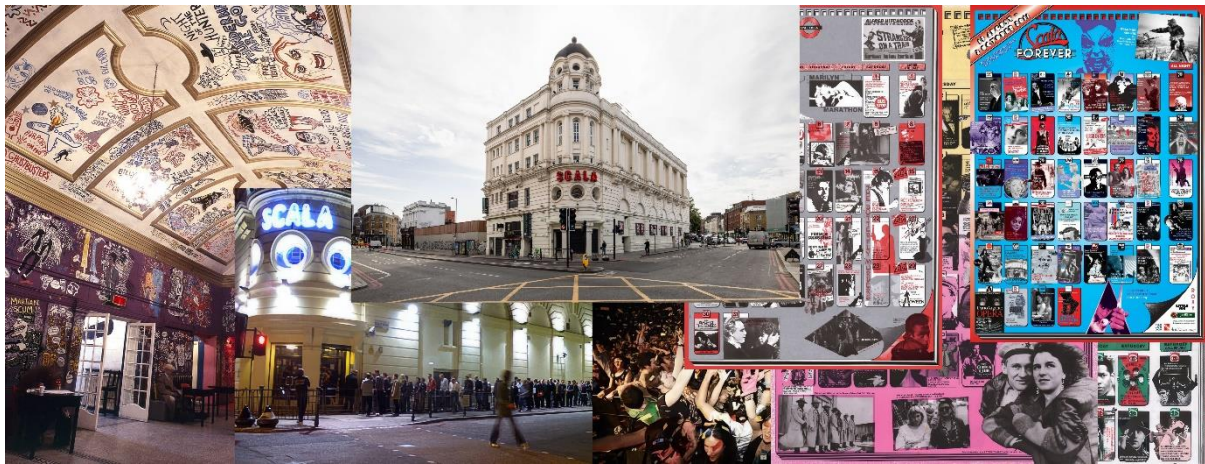


The Rebellious Scala Cinema was a Cinematic Experience Unlike Any Other I've Been To

Shôn Ellerton, January 1, 2026

The rebellious and unconventional Scala Cinema in London had to have been my favourite cinema experience of all time.



There is always something a little exciting about going to the cinema, and thankfully so, the cinema hasn't died. At least, not yet!

And far from it. It is still popular today despite all our streaming services being available at the drop of a hat within the confines of our homes.

Nothing beats the big screen, the wraparound sound, the fact that no one can nag you to turn the volume down, and best of all, the shared experience of others watching it with you *at the same time*. The only downside is to ensure that you try to time it right for the slow bits of the movie if you need to empty your bladder. There's nothing more irritating waiting for those final drips knowing that the movie's still rolling!

I've been to some great cinemas in my lifetime.

Full panoramic and IMAX style cinemas ideal for big masterpieces like *Interstellar* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Wine and dine cinemas like the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema in Austin, Texas, where you can order food and drinks. Outdoor cinemas like the Deckchair Cinema in Darwin, Australia. And a myriad of oldie-worldly cinemas that have lovingly remained open by dedicated cinema owners trying everything they can do to entice customers away from the somewhat clinical mall-style multi-screen cinemas.

Somehow or another, I've never been to a drive-in cinema as most of them had died off before my time. Today, there are thousands of abandoned drive-in cinemas left to the ruinations of nature having had countless memories of many good times in which young couples, during a seemingly more conservative time, were able to have a little privacy without being watched over by their parents.

Out of all this, there is one cinema I remember with utter fondness.

What was once the Scala Cinema in the Kings Cross area in London has to be the best cinema experience I've come across.

I remember it vividly as a student during the early 1990s. An elegant old-style building from the early 1920s in the slightly dodgy area around Kings Cross in London which still stands as of today. Although the cinema closed down during the mid-90s, it turned into a music club, but apparently, I believe they started showing movies again through their *Scalarama* events.

It showed movies every night of the week, often as double features. Saturday nights were often all-nighter events showing movies from around 7pm ending up in the early hours of the morning after the birds have woken up. It was always a discombobulating feeling leaving the cinema the next day, especially after consuming many cans of beer!

And that's what we did as classmates from time to time. Armed with knowing what the program was, we would ruck up there on a Saturday night, purchase many cans of Stella Artois beer and watch one film after another and slowly getting more and more wasted as the hours went by.

Double features and all-nighters usually had movies sharing some theme or common element to them. There was Arnie Night, named after muscle-bound Arnold Schwarzenegger, showing films like *The Terminator* and *The Running Man*. There was 'David Cronenberg Night' in which medical monstrosity movies like *Rabid*, *The Brood*, and *Shivers* were featured. Even a Super Vixens night showing a few slightly raunchy movies, some of them being quite out there indeed.

In general, the Scala Cinema prided itself on showing mainly cult movies, those movies which are either very unusual or have gained a timeless place in film history. There were nights showing those movies in which only the very brave would dare watch. Mainstream movie cinemas wouldn't touch a lot of the material that the Scala aired. But, there were also the usual suspects like 'Star

Wars night' showing the original trilogy of Star Wars movies and hilarious Pink Panther night with the five, and there were *only* five, original Detective Clouseau movies featuring Peter Sellers.

The program always came out in a large sheet of paper published each month which you could pick up in advance. It was nicely formatted in a duo-colour scheme with an advent calendar layout with each box showing what the movies were along with a nice little illustration.

We were always waiting with full anticipation as to what next month's program could possibly reveal.

Instead of going for a sleepover like a Scout's camp night or something like that, us students would, instead, bring enough food and drink with us to sustain up to five movies in a row. We'd arrive at the foyer of the cinema, which, in itself, is quite a work of art being covered with little handwritten murals featuring some aspect of some movie or another. Without them, the foyer would have looked rather tired and plain despite its grand barrel-arched ceiling and chandeliers.

The tickets were dirt cheap. I mean, for around five quid, you could prance in there with practically anything you want. You could bring your own food and drink, alcohol included. You could smoke in there as well, although I didn't myself. Bearing in mind that smoking was never allowed in the cinemas I've been to, it was something I've never encountered before. The light of the movie projector shimmering through the smoke in the cinema. It wasn't all that bad because the room itself was very large and vault-like with ample air being circulated around. With steep seating looking on to the stage below, there was plenty of space for everyone without having other heads obscuring one's vision.

Now and again, someone would smoke marijuana, an activity which is officially classed as illegal, but no one in the cinema seemed to care. It seemed that the authorities didn't care either. The Scala was a rebel within a sea of regulation and constraint.

Indeed, the Scala showed movies which were banned in the United Kingdom. Hundreds of uncut, unrated, and banned movies, many of those most of us have never have heard of. The Scala, despite Stanley Kubrick's own ban in British cinemas, defiantly aired his futuristic dystopian masterpiece, *A Clockwork Orange*. Unfortunately, there was a court case that ensued and the Scala had to

pay up forcing the cinema to close around the mid-90s. However, it did re-open in future years as a club.

The best thing of all was the shared experience.

I remember the Arnie night during scenes like, in *The Running Man*, when unfortunate unarmed game victims get knocked off by various so-called stalkers with weapons perfect for despatching humans like sharp-bladed hockey sticks, chainsaws, and flamethrowers. Each time someone got killed, there would be a rowdy response by the audience along with a couple of empty cans being tossed into the pit below the screen. Usually, it never got that rowdy, and often, the cinema was usually a quarter of capacity filled, but occasionally, there were those more popular and mainstream nights.

Watching five movies in a row is usually not the best of ideas. Especially after several cans of lager.

There was a memorable occasion for me when I was holding a can of Stella Artois during what was probably something like the third or fourth movie. I was falling asleep and a friend of mine by the name of Barry was sitting next to me was eyeing me as I drowsed off hoping that I'd drop the can on my lap. Eagerly he waited as my can tipped ever more to the point that it would start issuing beer over my lap. The can must have been at a forty-five degree angle or so and, by some stroke of luck, I woke up startingly just in time to catch my beer much to my friend's disappointment.

The Scala Cinema was one of those great places, seemingly void of being regulated by the law, that are so hard to find now in our smartphone-obsessed ever-increasingly monitored and regulated world we now live in.

Emerging out of the darkness smelling of smoke in the early morning with all the birds chirping was always a bit strange, but we didn't care. After all, we were students and it was Sunday morning!