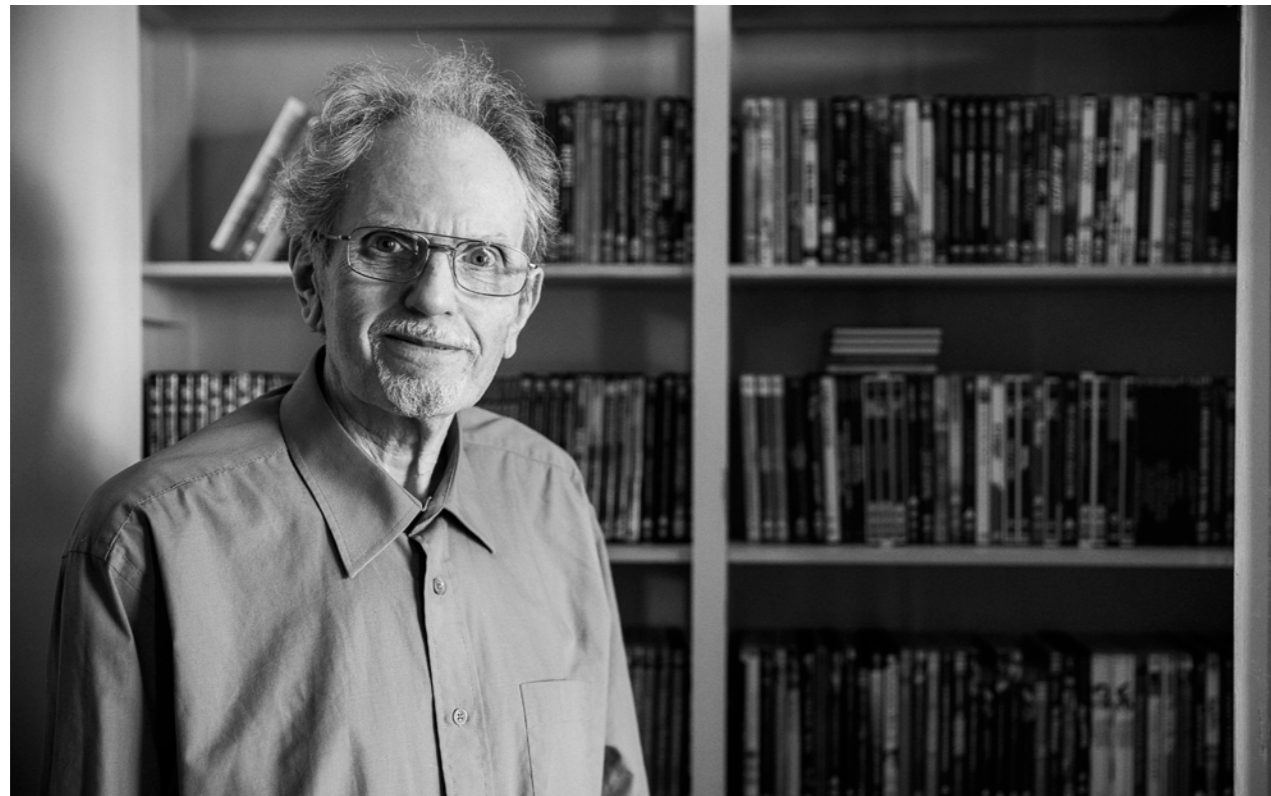


People often say one of the best things about living in Waltham Forest is their neighbours. They claim that, unlike other parts of London or even beyond, the people on their street are genuinely friendly and happy to look out for each other. Being friendly brings an added bonus in that once you do start talking, you might discover the most extraordinary stories emerging from seemingly ordinary people. In the third of this occasional series the E List shares another of these Hidden Lives.



Nigel Mantell - A Projectionist's Life

Anyone who owns an Italian-speaking parrot called Albert is bound to be a bit unusual (particularly when you find that Albert also does superb chicken impressions) but what makes Nigel Mantell really unique is not obvious at first meeting. Words: Jonathan Elliot. Photography: Simon Goodwin.

The quiet modesty of this self-taught artist belies an intriguing mix of master cinema projectionist, painter and draughtsman, and most of all, perhaps, a stone sculptor of exquisite pieces reminiscent of Eric Gill. A successful exhibition at the Wanstead Art Trail this year, with plans for a show of new work is proof that Nigel has no intention of slowing down but the journey to this point in his artistic career is unusual to say the least.

In the late 1950s, an extra six months at school training to be a commercial artist lit a flame that has burned brightly ever since, but making a career in art proved unworkable and the young artist had to consider other ways of paying the rent. A steady job as an apprentice, then chief cinema projectionist beckoned. As Britain gradually shook off the postwar years of austerity and embraced the swinging 60s, Nigel learned and practised his craft of film

projection - a career that would last for nearly 40 years. "When I started out I got given all the dirty jobs, I had to clean the projectors every day, scrub the projection room floor and keep the boilers heating the cinema stoked with coal all day long and clear all the ashes out. No overalls, no masks, no health and safety, nothing, nearly everyone smoked."

Next time you're hurrying home from work in the winter rain, looking forward to a night in with the latest release on Netflix in a warm, brightly lit home, it's worth remembering what a school night in working class Walthamstow was like in 1959. There would be a good chance that there was no heating of any kind in your small overcrowded dwelling and a coal fire a luxury reserved for only the coldest nights. Once Hancock's Half Hour was over, it was a library book or bed. But if you wanted to spoil yourself

and had a few pence to spare, cinemas of all shapes and sizes were within walking distance. The Century, The Rialto, The Gaumont and The Granada - Walthamstow and Leyton was stuffed with them before TV and then the dreaded VCR started their decline. You could escape the chill of 50s Britain, light up a Woodbine and settle back to watch Vertigo, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof or South Pacific in any of half a dozen venues in E17 and E10. If you managed to persuade your sweetheart to sit at the back, you might even get a snog. "People had nothing, many were living in slums, it was a night out, a grand night out, and it was warm." Nigel told me.

The famous Granada opened on Hoe Street in 1930, the first launched by the great media baron Sidney - later Lord - Bernstein (who would go on to build the Granada Television empire). It was the Granada chain that kept Nigel employed, while he toiled in his spare time on his love of painting and sculpture.

Making a huge cinema come alive with sound and picture was not the plug and play job it is today. By today's standards the technology was, well, literally, steam age. Lighting up the

screen needed bulbs based on industrial welding. The projector was fed a juddering ribbon of celluloid about the width of an iPhone, pressing each frame against a glass plate for a 25th of a second. The whole business was housed in a vast machine not much smaller than a telephone box. Each reel lasted 20 minutes so two projectors worked in tandem. Keeping the whole apparatus whirring to perfection was a team effort, leading it was a highly skilled job.

Cinemas like the Granada were packed at weekends, its projection room running a Sunday night special with two and half thousand people in the house had all the urgency and concentration of a steam locomotive's cab. A single mistake would mean a disastrous let down and careers could be made or broken by technology that was as unreliable as it was cutting edge. Young Nigel showed talent one night when the soundtrack of the latest hit started emitting a quiet but worrying clicking sound. Only the technically astute could tell anything was wrong, but Nigel knew that any minute, the whole system might blow and the crowd would be denied a crucial plot twist in



North By Northwest. The culprit was a red hot glass valve that was about to conk out, but Nigel saved the day. Wrapping a handkerchief around one hand, he signalled his mate to fade the sound out for a second while he whipped out the offending component and replaced it with a new one before anyone could tell anything was wrong and perfect sound was restored.

Before long, the coveted role of Chief Projectionist was Nigel's but all the time, he was developing his true love of painting and sculpture. In 1996 he made the break and committed himself to a full time career as an artist, working mainly in oils from his studio in the garden of his house. He exhibited alongside such famous names as Sir Peter Blake, Francis Bacon and Andy Warhol. At the age of 66 when many are thinking of slowing down, Nigel launched his career as a stone carver. Entirely self-taught, he started making original pieces in marble and Portland stone and giving demonstrations

around London, he quickly got commissions. Group shows followed and teaching for four years at the famous Abney Park Cemetery Trust in Stoke Newington.

His second career celebrates its 20th anniversary next year, and is a testament to a steady determination to nurture a unique talent, while being part of one of the greatest entertainment industries of the 20th century.



Inside the Granda Cinema (currently the EMD) on Hoe Street.



If you think you have a neighbour with an extraordinary story and who is happy for it to be told, please email editor@thelist.co.uk



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