



## ***The Smallest Show on Earth* (1957)**

**Production:** Hallmark Productions and British Lion Corporation

**Certificate:** U

**Run time:** 80 minutes

**If you liked this you might also like:** *The Mouse That Roared* (1959), *The Titfield Thunderbolt* (1953)

*The Smallest Show on Earth* is a charming postwar British comedy directed by Basil Dearden (*League of Gentlemen*, 1960) and written by William Rose (*The Ladykillers*, 1955) and John Eldridge (*Operation Amsterdam*, 1959). It follows struggling young writer, Matt Spenser and his wife Jean, who unexpectedly inherit a run-down little picture house: the fictional Bijou Kinema in the fictional town of Sloughborough.

The film stars Bill Travers and Virginia McKenna, married in real life, who had recently returned from Hollywood after working together on *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*. Its real heart, however, lies in the film's stellar supporting cast of curious, perpetually bickering characters who work in the Bijou; Peter Sellers as the sozzled projectionist Mr Quill, Margaret Rutherford as the formidable cashier and pianist Mrs Fazackalee, and Bernard Miles as the timid caretaker, whilst Leslie Phillips plays the Spensers' well-meaning solicitor.

The film functions as a vivid time capsule, capturing distinctly British anxieties around class, social mobility, and modernisation in the late 1950s. Matt and Jean dream of travelling the world and see selling the Bijou to Mr Hardcastle, the owner of the gleaming yet impersonal Grand Cinema just down the road, as a way to fund that ambition. However, they struggle to negotiate with the hard-nosed Hardcastle (played with aplomb by Francis de Wolff), who prioritises profit over community and plans to demolish the Bijou to make way for a car park in the heart of the town. Meanwhile, shabby, outdated, and literally shaken each day by commuter trains travelling to and from Stoke, the Bijou embodies a fading past. Yet the cinema and its staff remain a lovable, nostalgic oddity, standing in sharp contrast to the corporate, modernist anonymity of the Grand, which ultimately wins Matt and Jean over.

Though repeatedly dismissed as "the fleapit", *The Smallest Show on Earth* is a loving tribute to the small, family-run local cinemas that were once central to community life in our country. Made before streaming, DVDs or multiplexes, it already shows these independent cinemas as under threat, from social change and the rising popularity of television.

Like the cinema this film celebrates, *The Smallest Show on Earth* offers homespun comfort, and a gentle lift of the mood. The film is about finding joy and community in unlikely places, making it the perfect opening to our season of films about filmmaking, and an ideal first film for our cinema community here at The Playhouse cinema in Louth. We hope you enjoy.

### **Sources:**

Wikipedia ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Smallest\\_Show\\_on\\_Earth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Smallest_Show_on_Earth))