



CINÉMA EDEN-THÉÂTRE

The world's oldest cinema

LES LUMIÈRES DE L'EDEN LA CIOTAT - 2019



The Eden, the world's oldest surviving cinema



When he built the Eden on the Boulevard de la Tasse in 1889, Alfred Seguin couldn't possibly imagine that 'his' Eden would become a mythical cinema. For a very simple reason: in 1889, the cinema just didn't exist!

Alfred Seguin, an entertainment impresario from Marseille, had been refused the authorization to use the municipal theatre for his shows, and thus decided to have his own Eden theatre, which opened on June 15, 1889.

The place chosen for the building was along the seaside, next to the Chapelle des Pénitents Bleus, formerly a timber warehouse and, at times, a lovers' lane. Somewhat provocative, perhaps, but the Eden was soon to become a theatre that the people of La Ciotat would grow fond of!

The Eden was built in the style of Italian theatres: 2 long galleries circled the auditorium that could hold 250 spectators attending plays, music-hall performances, boxing or Greco-Roman wrestling matches.

It wasn't long before Alfred Seguin sold the Eden to Raoul Gallaud, whose wife, Adélaïde Soula, used to serve drinks at the bar of the Eden. The Soula family was to own the Eden for one century, till the City of La Ciotat decided to buy it in 1992.

At the time, Raoul Gallaud had made friends with a newcomer to La Ciotat: Antoine Lumière, a successful manufacturer and photographer, from Lyon. Antoine Lumière, an amateur water-colour painter, had fallen in love with the Mediterranean light and colours of the Golfe de La Ciotat. On the land he bought next to the Eden, Antoine Lumière built a magnificent 36-room Château, the Palais Lumière. What was to become the favourite summer residence for the family was inaugurated on April 3, 1893.

Raoul Gallaud and Antoine Lumière, same age, same social background, enjoyed meeting in the courtyard of the Eden for a chat and an 'anissette' (typical local anise-flavoured drink) under the locust tree. It so happened that several





months later, in 1895, the sons of Antoine, Louis and Auguste, who had made a fortune developing plates for still photographs, came up with an invention for motion pictures, which they called 'the cinematographe'.

In the summer of 1895, when on holiday at the Palais Lumière in La Ciotat, the two brothers used their cinematographe to make what were to become the first films in world cinema history: *L'arroseur arrosé* (*The sprinkler sprinkled*), *Querelle enfantine* (*Childish quarrel*) and *The arrival of a train at La Ciotat station*.

On September 21, 1895, the Lumières invited friends to watch some of their 'experiments' at a private screening in the Grand Salon of the Villa Lumière. In the audience was, of course, Raoul Gallaud. Enthusiastic, like all the audience, he offered to host a private showing at the Eden. Among the 50 or so friends of the two men, Laure and Marie Chouquet, the daughters of Adélaïde Soula, were responsible for turning the handle of the cinematographe .

However, it proved impractical for technical reasons and so the Lumières' first paid screening was finally held in Paris at the Salon Indien of

the Grand Café, on December 28, 1895. Among the 33 people in the audience was film pioneer, Georges Méliès. Méliès tried to buy the patent but Antoine refused, sensing the invention would bring fame and fortune to his family!

It was not until March 21, 1899 that the Eden, re-baptised the Eden Concert, showed the films to a paying audience. The short films of the Lumière brothers included *The launching of a ship in la Ciotat*, *A caravan to the Egyptian Pyramids*, *A transatlantic leaving Marseille harbour...* in all, 19 Lumière films described as "the most scientific of shows, fully moral and interesting, as suitable to adults and children alike". 250 people attended the first screening, repeated the following day.

This screening in 1899 makes the Eden the world's first cinema. In fact, all the other cinemas, such as the Salon Indien, destroyed in 1900, had by that time, been turned into hotels, banks, car parks...

For nearly a century, the Eden, where electricity had been installed in 1907, had a full programme with a mix of screenings, plays, operettas, music-hall performances, boxing matches,





dancing competitions, political meetings and patriotic events, school fairs and family gatherings. It was said that “one half of la Ciotat met the other half on the balcony of the Eden”. The picture of Clemenceau, Prime Minister of France at the time of the 1st WW, meeting with François Corte, a trade-union leader of the shipyards, in the courtyard of the Eden, places the Eden’s history within that of the period.

The first talking movie shown on August 31, 1931 was received with acclaim. Some of the audience were in tears at the intermission and everybody shook hands, as if at a ceremony! The film was a French musical melodrama: *La Route est belle (The Road is fine)*.

From then on, on the stage of the Eden, beginners rubbed shoulders with stars such as Fernandel, Yves Montand, Edith Piaf and Juel, her accordionist, who just happened to be the son of Adélaïde and Raoul Gallaud, the owners of the Eden, and so many other actors: Bernard Blier, Charles Aznavour, Rina Ketty, Gabi Morlay, Reda Caire , etc.

It could have been the end of the Eden on so many occasions....

On March 25, 1945 when a German submarine mine damaged the front of the building... but the Eden resisted. It also stood up to the cinema industry crisis of the 60s when TV and cars drew the people of La Ciotat towards other pastimes.

On a December evening in 1982, when the manager of the Eden was killed, thus putting a stop to the business. But a group of young people then organised a short yearly festival “La Ciotat, Berceau du cinéma”. It was taken over by the city in 1992.

In Autumn 1995, when a safety committee ordered its closure... but once again, it resisted. In February 1996, it was officially listed as a French Historical Monument and thus, no longer exposed to the risk of a demolition or of being turned into a restaurant.

With the help of volunteers from two associations: “La Ciotat, Berceau du cinema” “ and the “Lumières de l’Eden”, show business backed the idea of restoring and re-opening the Eden which had been abandoned and was suffering from water damage.

Against all odds, the Eden resisted: a book and a digital reconstruction brought it back to life. Finally, its saviours succeeded in getting its renovation programmed as part of the events of “Marseille, Capitale Européenne de la Culture 2013”.

A new page in the troubled history of the Eden was written when La Ciotat delegated authority to the Lumières de l’Eden association to operate the theatre. In 2017, the oldest movie theatre was granted official art cinema status by the CNC (national film and moving image centre).





From then on, the programming at the Eden was to be rich and ambitious. Many artists and stars such as Belmondo, Lelouch, Fanny Ardant have a red velvet seat in their name at the Eden. It also holds important festivals such as the Festival of the “Berceau du cinema” or Lumexplore, a festival celebrating the first Lumière operators.

As a partner of numerous prestigious organisations, such as the French European cinema-theques, the Authors’ society, famous producers and film makers, the Pathé-Gaumont archives, the Eden decidedly fits into the world of contemporary French cinema.

In 2018, on the occasion of the national congress of the FNCF, the Eden was recognised as an innovative cinema by the CNC, for its ability to link tradition and modernity.

From the Lumière Brothers’ cinematographe to Hollywood blockbusters... what an extraordinary adventure for the Eden!



The Lumière family in La Ciotat



The Lumière family lived in La Ciotat for about 30 years but were so important to the city that it now boasts that it is the cradle of the cinema.

The choice of La Ciotat as summer residence for the family was that of Antoine Lumière, a determined, visionary and audacious character. Born in 1840, he was brought up in a modest family, in the Franche-Comté region. An orphan at 14, married at 20 to Joséphine Costille, Antoine started his working life as a sign painter, and then became a portrait photographer.

The young couple settled in Besançon in a little house close to the house where Victor Hugo was born. They soon had two sons, Auguste in 1862, Louis in 1864 and one daughter, Jeanne in 1870, when they moved to Lyon, where three more children were born: France, Juliette and Edouard.

In his photographer's studio, Antoine Lumière became famous for his portraits of celebrities.

He even won a prize at the photography show in Paris. This enabled him to enrol his two sons, Auguste and Louis, at La Martinière, a famous

scientific and technical school in Lyon.

Antoine never ceased to encourage his sons to look for innovations in photography. The revolutionary invention of the Blue Plates (the plates which reduced the need for a dark room) was to bring fortune to the family and work to some 300 workers in the Lumière factory of Montplaisir.

Now a rich man, Antoine was able to realize his dream of being a builder and decided to invest in real estate. This is when La Ciotat came into the picture. During a congress of the Masons in Paris, he met Lazarre Sellier, the head mechanic of La Ciotat shipyard, who convinced him that life in la Ciotat was wonderful! Antoine, a talented water-colour painter, was attracted by the light of the region and decided to invest in La Ciotat.

From 1890 to 1902, he bought more than 80 hectares of land and built the "Château Lumière", a Tuscan-style Palace inaugurated on April 3, 1893. Built at the highest point of the property, it included 40 rooms, a huge living-room, 3 painting studios, enormous cellars where the grapes harvested in the surrounding vineyards





were processed. A landscaped park, farmland and a little harbour for the family boat completed the picture.

Needless to say that for La Ciotat, a small city of 12000 inhabitants, mainly relying on the prosperity of the shipyard for its economy, the arrival of Antoine Lumière was a great event. As a philanthropist, Antoine Lumière helped the city on numerous occasions, as related, for instance, in *Le Petit Marseillais*, a local newspaper. A journalist wrote on July 15, 1892: "The mayor of La Ciotat has received from Antoine Lumière of the Clos des Plages, 12 ten-Franc savings booklets for the pupils of the primary schools of La Ciotat and bags of sweets for the youngest. This way of celebrating Bastille day will come as no surprise to those familiar with Mr Lumière 's generosity and concern for education." The following year, Antoine offered 200 Francs (equivalent to 3 months' wages for a postman at the time) to poor pupils of the schools of La Ciotat. In 1897, Antoine donated to the town a piece of land to build a school.

As an important local character, Antoine also invited to the Palais Lumière famous people such as Frédéric Mistral (French writer and Nobel laureate),

various ministers and prefects and friends including Raoul Gallaud, the owner of the Eden theatre.

But above all, the Palais Lumière remained a summer residence for all the Lumière family. Louis would say:

"There were sometimes more than 30 of us round the table, nieces and nephews, cousins, friends... and my mother would take care of everything. In La Ciotat, with its swimming and fishing, bowling and tennis, outings in the car, life was pleasant!"

Auguste and Louis married two sisters and their own sisters married the brothers of the wives. A double Lumière-Wrinker quatuor living in perfect harmony and a favourite subject for the autochromes invented by Louis.

Antoine was obsessed with the idea that photography could be brought to life by moving the images. He sensed that Edison's kinetoscope could be the key and encouraged his sons to take it further. In the spring of 1895, in his Lyon laboratory, Louis invented the moving picture. Not forgetting that they had made a promise, when young, to patent inventions jointly, the 2





brothers registered the patent for the cinematographe. During summer 1895, at the age of 30, they made the final adjustments and filmed family events in La Ciotat: *The arrival of a train at La Ciotat*, *Baby's breakfast*, *The gardener*. These films are the first in the long history of the cinema. The cinematograph may have seen the light in Lyon, but La Ciotat is the cradle of the cinema.

But this major invention was nothing but mere entertainment to Louis and Auguste. Antoine, much more determined, managed to organize public showings; first in the big living room of the Palais Lumière, next at the Eden on Sept. 21, 1895 and then at the home of his friend R. Gallaud. The first show to a paying audience of 33 people was held in Paris on Dec. 28 1895 at the Salon Indien.

The success of the cinematograph was immediate and spread worldwide, ensuring the Lumière family a fortune. In La Ciotat, Antoine went on buying land, perhaps with the idea of fulfilling his dream: to build in Provence another Lumière factory.

But in 1911, Antoine died in Lyon, followed by his wife Joséphine in 1915: a real loss to La Ciotat. In 1917, the fighter plane of Edouard, the young son who had played the part of the naughty boy in a version of *l'Arroseur arrosé* (*The gardener*), was shot down in combat. The two sisters, France and Juliette died in 1924. Now, the laughter that once echoed through The Palais Lumière (which means light!) was replaced by shadows.

The Palais and the Lumière properties that had witnessed so many happy times were sold on July 11, 1925 to an estate agent who set up the Clos des Plages building development. One of the architects of the project was André Jacob, the father of Simone Veil (former minister and Holocaust survivor) who, as a little girl, thus spent the summers in La Ciotat. As to the sumptuous Palace, it was, for a time, turned into a hotel: the Golfe Hotel where *Feux de Joie* with its famous song *Qu'est-ce-qu'on attend pour être heureux* sung by Ray Ventura, was made.

For sure, the Lumière did have a happy time in la Ciotat. Louis Lumière's letter to the poet Emile Ripert testifies to this: "La Ciotat, holds such precious memories: the favourite meeting place of all my dear ones, in the happy affection that surrounded us". And Auguste shared his brother's feeling in another letter : " When I was obliged to leave the region it was with a broken heart and tears in my eyes."

The people of La Ciotat paid tribute to their famous guests when they built the Lumière monument on the Grande Plage in 1958. Its design reminds us that "The cinematograph reveals the world to us". A screen on top of which 2 medallions show the profiles of the 2 inventors of the cinema opens onto a blue sky.

One medallion is missing: that of Antoine, who chose La Ciotat as its cradle!

