

THE STARS BELONG TO EVERYONE

Sally

I still can't get over the name: The Star and Shadow. It's beautiful. Simple words that may not seem like much at first but, the more you think about them, carry a hundred meanings - befitting for a place that will change your life but you wouldn't guess it from its modest appearance.

Each time I walk down Warwick Street towards the entrance (thanks to a thing called echolalia), I replay the name in my head - and each time I am in a different era, a different film.

Sometimes, it's the 1890s. Having just parked my bicycle at the fairground and straightened up what would, I imagine, be a very elaborate skirt, I would be making my way to see the latest short film, something from a far-off land played on a spectacle of a gadget in the Star and Shadow tent. Or maybe I have just finished my coffee at the Drugstore and draped my cardigan over my shoulders before striding through the sultry evening streets of 1940s L.A. on my way to the world-famous Star and Shadow Picture Theatre. Or perhaps, due to the chill in the crisp October air, I'd have my wool beret and matching wool coat on as I head to the 1954 premier of the new science fiction film everyone is talking about, Godzilla, at the Hoshi To Kage (The Star and Shadow) in Nagoya, Japan. There is no lack of drama in those two simple words.

The place itself is whatever you want it to be: somewhere you learn to project films, write stories, and crochet (not all at once, but you could try), a place you can organise club nights, grow sweet peas, draw Halloween zines, somewhere you can cook for the community, pull a pint, spill some gin, plan to change the world (or just a few opinions). And if all you want to do is chill out on a Sunday, read a book from the Canny Library, and eat a preternaturally good vegan flapjack (no, I don't know what they put in them, so don't ask me), you are always more than welcome.

But the thing is, you won't know what you want to do at the Star and Shadow because your ideas haven't sparked off someone else's yet.

My password for accessing the rota used to be In A Lonely Place. It's one of my favourite films because of the way it depicts how doubt, once sewn into a relationship, is almost impossible to unstitch...but that title summarised the state of my life at the time I signed up too. At the end of something big, when it is over, it's easy to find yourself moored. Your ride-or-die friends will have all stuck around, but are a diaspora spread across different countries, so you can find yourself existing on Whatsapps and greetings cards and occasional long-haul trips. What you need is connection. Conversation. A sense you are useful. A sense you belong. Better yet, a sense you are inspired. A sense that the world is full of possibility. That that big dark universe is waiting for the echo of whatever noise you and your new friends want to make...and all that.

What is the Star and Shadow? It...is nothing. It's not a building. It's not an organisation. It is not any one thing. It is a group of people. All vastly different in our backgrounds, in our hopes, in our intentions. All meeting up and connecting in different ways, at different times. As each new person joins, the Star and Shadow changes ever so slightly. 'The Star and Shadow' becomes whatever we all talk about; ideas brush up against each other and it just takes someone to say, "Hey why don't we make that happen?" for a new strand/class/project to begin. And of course this will extend beyond the building walls; new friendships will begin and before you know it, you are going to anti-fascist protests, to beaches to watch meteor showers, or up to the Edinburgh Fringe to track down Australian comedians together. It is a starting place, an in-between, a way station on the trail to somewhere and something else (one you return to though, or perhaps never leave, as you wish). It all begins with a conversation.

As someone with ADHD and ASD, coming out of a somewhat dark time, that can be the hardest part of it all - just striking up a conversation. So, the cheat code I would recommend (there are many, no doubt, this is just the one that worked for me) is the Friday Cleaning Club. Come along to the Star and Shadow at its most relaxed and its most accepting, do some simple, structured tasks, feel a sense of a job completed (ah, the sweet smell of resolution to an autistic brain), be reassured that you have been genuinely useful (always novel to an ADHDer) and then get the utter joy and nonsense of eating communally (ideally food made by Sarah, washed down with some of Joe's mint tea) with people who become very quickly like family.

I believe everyone deserves a Star And Shadow. I wish there were more of them all over the UK, in every city, but it seems to be a bit of a wild card, some perfect combination of inception, construction, utilisation, evolution...a couple of those ten-dollar words anyway...and, of course, the people. It all comes back to the people.

From what I have gleaned The Star and Shadow has already been many things in its lifespan, I have no idea what it used to be, and I can't speak for anyone else, but in the eleven weeks I have been a volunteer, being a part of it has lit up a much brighter path for me and I will be endlessly grateful for that.