Usherettes shine light on cinema of Sixties... for research project

UNIVERSITY students dressed as usherettes to recreate the experience of watching a film in the Sixties as part of a research project into cinema-going.

History and drama students from University College London staged a screening of the 1968 Jane Fonda classic Barbarella complete with boiled sweets, shake-in-the-bag crisps and Kia-Ora drinks on sale in the foyer.

It was to mark the end of a three-year project to analyse and archive the memories of hundreds of people about what it was like to go to the cinema in the decade.

The only difference for the audience at the Prince Charles cinema off Leicester Square was that unlike in the Sixties they were not allowed to smoke in the auditorium. The film was shown alongside newspaper adverts and cartoons from 1968 – when political protest and the anti-Establishment mood was at its height. In the summer of 1968 US athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos shook the world with their black power protest salute on the winners’ podium at the Mexico City Olympics, while in London an anti-Vietnam protest turned into a riot outside the US embassy in Grosvenor Square.

Melvyn Stokes, a professor of film history at UCL, who led the research team, said one key finding was the importance of cinema as a focal point for chronicling people’s social experience of the Sixties.

He said: "People don’t tend to remember the stars, it’s the social experience they recall. It’s what they go with, what they did afterwards and how it fits into the general tenor of their lives."

The UCL research, which was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, has resulted in a large digital collection of material. Some remembered going to children’s matinees where a cinema employee would spray an insecticide to combat fleas or head lice.

People can access the collection in the UCL library.