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BY

JOHN F. ALLEN

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FIRST IN DIGITAL STEREO

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**by
John F. Allen**

Let me make my point right up front. Something is wrong. From a technological and marketing point of view, the motion picture industry is somewhere between asleep and dragging its feet. Now I know that blanket statements like this are not really true in every case, but I think the stagnant presentation technology and dropping grosses argues that the charge is true enough. We've all read the articles and heard the speeches which are critical of many current industry practices. We congratulate the authors, yawn and watch as little actually changes.

Any honest discussion of the state of the industry must, however, recognize some painful truths. Expansion and acquisitions aside, the simple fact is that people are watching movies at home more and more, and at theatres less and less. The only way left to persuade people to return to theatres is to give them a damn good reason to be there, and good movies alone won't do it. How has the industry responded to this? In my opinion, ineffectively. Most films aren't attractive enough and neither are most theatres. The theatrical experience just isn't what it should be. To many it's a flat out turn off.

Producers and distributors must share at least one half of the responsibility. They have shown little appetite for or interest in adopting the kinds of innovations which characterized the 1950's. Production techniques in the areas of special visual effects and sound have, of course, dramatically improved in the last ten years. But when was the last time you saw a 70 MM film photographed in 65 MM? When was the last time you saw a film projected on a wide screen at a flicker free 30 frames per second and recorded in full 6-track stereo? Why are today's 70 MM prints merely blow-ups of 35 MM negatives? This wastes much of the picture quality advantages of 70 MM film. Even 35 MM presentations are suffering. The so-called "wide screen" aspect ratio of 1.85 to 1 wastes both light and image area and diminishes the visual impact. Recently a 1.5 to 1 anamorphic process called Iscovision was developed to solve this problem. But the system has not been adopted by anyone. Even Cinemascope is rarely used anymore and is never advertised.

All in all, the picture quality available in current films is far below not only what it could be, but what it USED to be. Something is wrong.

I claim no expertise in either marketing or booking motion pictures. Indeed, I admire

those who succeed at this unpredictable task. But a casual observer will find him or herself dismayed by the ways distributors sometime seem to defy logic. Though 70 MM and stereo releases cost more to produce, these advantages are rarely mentioned in radio and television spots. Even more puzzling is the way some theatres which are equipped to offer superior presentations of these films, are often ignored.

Why have stereo equipped theatres had difficulty getting stereo prints? In Europe this problem is said to be particularly troublesome. An international client of mine plays his films after they have largely finished their US runs. He wanted to install 70 MM equipment in his largest theatre so he asked his distributors if they would supply him with 70 MM prints. Even though the prints would have completed their US engagements and would be available, and even though the distributors would share in the higher grosses 70 MM presentations typically bring, they said no. Something is wrong.

Over on the exhibition side: Despite the efforts of companies like Cineplex and others to build beautiful new complexes, movie theatres have an image problem. Customer complaints of poor presentations plus noisy, dirty and uncomfortable theatres, have been heard for years. And that's the problem. The causes of their complaints have not gone away, so now the customers are going away. It's hard to blame them sometimes.

I recently attended a first run theatre operated by a major chain which, coincidentally, was headquartered in the area I was visiting. The lady who accompanied me and I innocently selected the theatre because they advertised a stereo presentation of the film we wanted to see. Upon arriving we found the lobby was a somewhat darkly colored place and the carpet was unclean. The auditorium itself was one half of a larger room which had been twinned. The seats really didn't face the screen which itself was not centered at the front of the room. The film had been recorded in stereo, but mono it was for us.

Distorted, often unintelligible, no bass, no treble, I can go on but you get the idea; the sound stunk! The picture drifted in and out of focus and the shutter ghosting was a constant distraction. The seats were at least 25 years old, poorly adjusted, dirty and most unpleasant. I can only guess what covered the floor. Even though it was raining that night and I purposely walked through puddles to get to my car, my shoes were still sticking at every step the next afternoon. Something is wrong.

Sure I've described a bad example and there are pleasant well run theatres. But in talking to various people I get the sense that their image of movie theatres tends more towards what I experienced. In another city I visited two theatres that were playing different 70 MM films. They were advertising their super new sound systems but few could be

impressed. Though the theatre owners had surely paid a high price for their “State of the ART” sound, the systems suffered from poor dialog intelligibility resulting in audibly disturbed audiences, stage speakers that had buzzes in them, hum, artificial bass sounds and simply terrible surrounds. Something is wrong.

Of course, equipment manufacturers, dealers and technicians have a part in this as well. Since coming to this industry, I’ve been amazed at how some manufacturers seem to have it all too easy selling to theatres cheap low quality products which could not be successful in other professional markets such as broadcasting. Manufacturers of the genuinely superior equipment constantly complain about a large number of customers who refuse to recognize the value of quality and dealers who are no more than “order takers.” (Don’t yell at me, I didn’t make this up).

This industry enjoys many highly talented and capable theatre technicians. However, I don’t think there is enough training for those wishing to enter the field or expand their knowledge. My own mail seems to support this. Despite years of experience there are some who lack basic understanding of certain aspects of the craft, especially sound reproduction. They do the best they can but are capable of much more when provided better training. The most frustrating situation seen is a qualified technician who is demoralized by not being allowed enough time to do a good job or is forced to work on or provide inferior equipment by some one who either doesn’t know or doesn’t care. Something is wrong.

The theatregoing experience needs to be reinvented. The traditional idea of seeing films in our theatres is fast becoming obsolete. There is considerable disagreement as to whether or not this is true. However, sales and rentals of films on video cassettes are now greater than boxoffice receipts. The trend at the moment would seem to be away from theatrical viewing for all but the most spectacular films. The problem is that there just aren’t enough blockbusters to keep theatres full. The challenge is clear. For a dollar or two, one can rent a cassette of a recent film, avoid ticket lines and noisy audiences, view it at home or a friend’s home in a lounge chair and hear it on a stereo system which is probably superior to that in his local theatre. It’s time to innovate.

What’s the industry to do? In my opinion, going out to the movies needs to become more like a trip to Disneyland; a special and quality experience. From the time patrons enter the parking lot until they leave, every need should be anticipated and attended to. Theatregoers need to be surrounded in a luxurious experience. They should feel like they’re about to fly first class to the fantasy-land of motion picture entertainment.

No one should have to wait more than a minute or two to purchase tickets. And certainly patrons should not have to wait outdoors. Lobbies and concession facilities need to be spacious, clean and inviting. Even more than most of them are now. Large comfortable lounge areas with plush seats should be available for those waiting to enter a theatre. Personally, I would like to see just about every theatre chair dumped into a giant landfill somewhere in Siberia. Large padded chairs with lumbar support, ample spacing and drink holders should be standard first class theatre fare.

Ready for take off.

Whether 35 or 70 MM, we need to adopt the 30 frame per second standard and stop talking about it. At 30 frames per second, flicker is unnoticeable, light is better and strobing is reduced. This has been known for over 30 years. If the picture aspect ratio is to be 1.85 to 1, each frame should be anamorphically squeezed to occupy the entire available picture area on the film, i.e. Iscovision, just as Cinemascope does now. If a film is to be released in 70 MM, shouldn't it be photographed in 65 MM? Producers need to make the investment in the cameras and lenses required to bring this about. The picture quality presented in theatres needs to be as good as it used to be and even better. (I can't wait).

Sound, obviously, is my specialty. I worked hard in the efforts to bring full digital stereo sound to the theatre industry. Our 1985 pioneering efforts proved beyond any doubt that audiences will respond to digital stereo. After all, they have it at home. For theatrical presentations I have been advocating eight discrete channels of digital stereo. (See Boxoffice, January, 1986 for a description of digital stereo). Digital audio for theatre systems should be no less than the 16 bit, 44.1 kilohertz system which is the standard for compact digital discs. Five full frequency, full dynamic range channels of sound behind a wall to wall screen plus subwoofers and two surround channels would provide a visual and audio experience rivaled only by life itself. Home entertainment systems that people will be willing to pay for will not equal this kind of quality. When such luxury is standard. in movie theatres, audiences will return.

How do I know? I've seen it work. During an extensive European trip this past summer, I visited a theatre complex that has lately received some attention in the US press. As its owner tells it, home video had brought his country's theatre industry to a crisis point when he set out to prove that quality theatres could not only compete but thrive in spite of the video impact.

At his latest theatre, patrons wait inside to purchase tickets, but not for long. While approaching the counters they are surrounded by well lighted showcases containing all

sorts of movie posters and other items of interest. If they wish, they can scan an array of 12 video monitors each showing the films as they are playing in the theatres. The lobby, lounge and concession areas are large and comfortable. There's even an old projector operating at one end for all to see. Drinks are served in glasses.

Each of the 12 theatres (soon to be 14) is a separate building with its own foundation and roof so there is no sound leakage from room to room. The theatres are large with a steep rake. Screens are wall to wall and nearly floor to ceiling. The sound is stereo. Two theatres are 70 MM equipped. And the seats are heaven.

To this exhibitor, customer satisfaction is paramount and he has instructed his highly qualified staff to seek out and obtain anything that will improve the theatres. Because the prints must be subtitled, he has to buy any 70 MM prints he wishes to present. All this costs plenty, but he knows that investing in his customers brings higher returns.

Indeed, he has turned theatre attendance around and out performs his competitors. While US grosses steadily decline, his theatres are experiencing a steady growth showing the same US produced films. Something is right.

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