

DCS Cinema Conference success



There was a time three or four years ago when courses on digital cinema topics were held every couple of months, and there was even a standing joke in the industry that the only people then making money out of digital cinema were the course organisers. All that changed as cinema people got down to the serious tasks of digital installation and making the new systems work, so it was perhaps appropriate that at a time when well over 90% of UK screens have now gone digital, there should be a new digital cinema conference.

Rob Arthur, well known for the RAAM conferences in the past, is now a Director of Digital Cinema Solutions along with Derek Cownty and Nicole Oakley, and it was DCS that organised this one-day conference on 7th February 2013 at Vue Westfield, in West London.

Absence is supposed to make the heart grow fonder, but it must have surprised even the organisers that more than 260 people wanted a cinema conference so much that DCS had to put up 'Sold Out' signs on its website, days before the event. The auditorium of the Vue Screen One was packed, and it was great to see 'everybody you have ever known in digital cinema' and a fair few more besides really enjoying the chance to socialise during the breaks. The conference was supported by the CEA and FDA, plus a wide range of industry sponsors. It had been advertised as focusing on the UK and Irish cinema markets, and it was good to see a number of people from Ireland. It turned out that there was a vast amount of information provided by the numerous speakers, much of which would help cinema exhibitors large and

small to understand the likely implications of the new technologies that seem to be an unavoidable knock-on effect of having 'gone digital'. It was therefore something of a shame that the proportion of small exhibitors on the delegate list was small. Perhaps the cost of getting to London and the £150 +VAT fee put off some potential delegates, although there was a concessionary deal for CEA/DFP/FDA/ECA members.

After the 'breakfast' social gathering, the day began with an overview of the state of the digital cinema rollout from IHS Screen Digest's 'King of the statistics' **David Hancock**, who was affectionately referred to as 'Statto' during the day. David provided a wide range of facts and figures, which I shan't relay here, but it was notable that 91.4% of all UK screens had been converted to digital by the end of 2012, with growth continuing, and that the digital screens show a 50% split between 2D and 3D. David said that 75% of the conversions have relied on some form of VPF agreement, and it was interesting to learn that there are some 1200 screens worldwide capable of showing High Frame Rate movies.

Steve Perrin then acted as moderator for a series of technical presentations. **Dave Monk** gave an interesting and entertaining talk focusing on various aspects of laser projection and how it will affect the industry, and **Jim Slater** gave an overview of the different immersive sound systems that are currently available to the cinema exhibition business, helping exhibitors to understand the differences between them. **Richard Welsh** from Technicolor then provided a truly entertaining presentation

on frame rates, taking us on a journey from the historical 16fps of the silent movie area through today's 48fps HFR through to the hundreds of fps that are used for 3D to the super high frame rates that could become the norm in future years.

Steve Perrin and **Rich Phillips** of Arts Alliance then drew up their armchairs for a discussion on how digital cinema has



affected and is affecting cinema exhibitors, especially as the new technologies seem to require constant change and ever more investment for the small cinema operator. Rich gave re-assurance that existing DCI projection equipment will continue to provide excellent images and sound for many years to come. The discussions concluded that all the new technologies currently being examined at the conference could sensibly be regarded as 'enhancement' layers on top of the excellent existing systems, and that operators will be able to choose whether or not to use any or all of them. As an example, cinemas which install immersive sound systems are likely to use them only in their main auditoria, and HFR is also likely to be used only in some of a cinema's screens. I was interested to be reminded that the DCI specs have always included the capability to provide HFR for 2D showings, so current projectors could cope with this, but it had never become a popular option with exhibitors.

Keith Pullinger of dcinex UK explained how the new company had been established and that it will be the exhibitor services arm of dcinex in the UK as well as becoming the flagship for a new consulting business under John Sullivan. David Pope will continue as head of VPF UK/IE for dcinex. Keith made the important point that **cutting back on cinema projection staff mustn't be the way forward**, saying that the business needs to retain these core skills, and that projection needs managing.

An interesting panel discussion moderated by **George Eyles** of Technicolor looked at ways of achieving the cost-efficiencies



that digital cinema has long promised. **Rod Wheeler** of Unique, **Gerald Buckle** from Odeon and **Richard Aseme** from Paramount agreed that we are not currently making the most of the business potential of digital cinema. Discussions on DCP distribution using hard drives were revealing, with cinemas wanting to hold on to them 'for security and comfort' reasons whereas the distributors naturally wanted their hard drives back! A great deal of work is going into developing electronic methods of distribution via satellite, fibre, and IP networks, but there are so many different companies offering different solutions that I was left with the impression that no cinema chain or distributor wants to 'back the wrong horse' and that it will be some time before commercial scenarios are developed which will lead to one method of working emerging. Managing content, especially at the local cinema level, is also difficult, and the discussions ended with agreement that **the various parts of the distribution chain aren't joined up enough**, and with the easier said than done intention that all parts of the business need to work together to maximise the commercial benefits that digital cinema should be bringing.

After a Cine Europe 2013 update from **Phil Clapp** of the CEA and a good 'networking lunch', **Oliver Pasch** of Sony moderated an interesting set of short presentations under the title 'Past, Present & Future', notable for covering all aspects of the cinema business from shooting to exhibition, followed by a panel discussion. DoP **Nic Morris** explained how the latest 4K high bit depth cameras can now produce results superior to those from 35mm film. He estimated that film has an equivalent resolution of around 8K, but only when there is no camera movement, which is hardly realistic for shooting movies. **Saul Mahoney** from Disney gave his thoughts on distributor-related topics including Trusted Device Lists, KDMs and Versioning, explaining the current situation and looking to improved methods of working in the future. **Andrew Myers** of Everyman Media and **Graham Spurling** of Movies@ brought out the views of smaller operators, saying that they can't afford to get into a technical arms race and don't want

to compete on a technology basis. I was amused that Oliver had somehow managed to get all his speakers except Saul to gently mention the advantages of using Sony 4K!

Alternative Content was the next topic, and after a facts and figures' update from David Hancock, **Melissa Keeping** from the Event Cinema Association explained that they are rebranding 'Alternative Content' as 'Event Cinema', and she highlighted their website www.livecinemaevents.com. I checked this out before publication and found it to be currently just 'work in progress'.

Marco Tinnirello from Arqiva spoke about the success of the live cinema events that they are carrying via satellite (55-60 expected this year) and **Don Ward**, owner of the Comedy Store and **John Bullen** from Sony explained their plans for live broadcasts by comedians. **Alastair Roberts** from the Royal Opera House spoke about their recent successes and future plans for transmissions to cinemas, and **Tim Plyming** of the British Museum gave some interesting news about their 'bringing objects to life' plans to make much of their unique material accessible via 'event cinema' presentations. **Tony Jones** of the Cambridge Film Trust explained their work and gave some interesting examples of recent events that they had put on.

Lucy Jones of Rentrak said that there is currently a lack of reliable published data about Event Cinema, which the company is about to put right by introducing a new service. Best estimates for last year were that some £9M gross was raised by Event Cinema, but they are expecting this to be around £20M in 2013, with 100 releases, perhaps around 1% of total cinema box office. Special deals are available for those wanting to subscribe to this new information. **Matthew Preen** of Veezi, who had flown over from New Zealand specially for the conference, gave a brief talk about their new cinema management system for independent cinemas, which has been designed by the well known Vista Entertainment Solutions.

Peter Buckingham chaired a session provocatively entitled 'Cinema has never looked and sounded better, but do our customers know it?' **Cameron Saunders** of 20th Century Fox introduced the topic, but it was **Will Brown** of PSA Comms, currently working on a project with the CEA, who surprised me by saying that their tracking of cinema web 'conversations' had only shown 3% expressing negative sentiments. This

just didn't tie in with other messages from social networking sites that the CTC and FDA have been considering recently. He said that Odeon are doing an amazing job in responding to groups on social media.

Justin Skinner of Cineworld stressed that the industry mustn't rest on its laurels and that we must all work together to give the public a consistent message and to increase the perceived value of a visit to the cinema. This led to a good deal of discussion about how the HFR showings had been promoted, with audience member **Roderick Snell** saying that things just hadn't been explained to the public, a point that Pete Buckingham confirmed when he bravely admitted that he had no idea whether he saw The Hobbit at HFR.



The formal proceedings concluded with a very special event - the presentation of an **Industry Award for Outstanding Achievement in Digital Cinema** to **Steve Perrin**.

Peter Buckingham led the tributes and the audience warmly endorsed this most well-deserved recognition for a guy who has done an enormous amount to drive forward the adoption of digital cinema. The celebrations continued over drinks in the bar, sponsored by Sound Associates, and it was long after the scheduled conference closing time that the last delegates departed.

I felt that the conference really did provide a valuable opportunity for cinema industry members to update themselves with the latest happenings and to consider future predictions and opportunities, and the chance to talk with a wide range of industry peers was obviously welcomed by all who attended. If this were to become an annual event, it would be good if the organisers could find ways to persuade more small cinema exhibitors to attend - they really would benefit from such a day.

Jim Slater

Further details and some of the presentations are available at the **Digital Cinema Solutions** website: <http://digitalcinemasolutions.co.uk>