

## DOMINIC SIMMONS

## BFI Southbank: the nation's repertory

Projecting films at BFI Southbank is a mammoth task — Mark Trompeteler meets head of technical services, Dominic Simmons, to see how it's done



In the heart of London, attached to the side of Waterloo Bridge, on the South Bank of the River Thames, is a piece of cinema signage that dates back to The Festival of Britain. In post-war austerity, Britain's National Film Theatre was initially opened in a temporary building (the Telekinema) at a location close to this sign in 1951, and then it moved to its present location in 1957, replacing the Thameside restaurant on the site. Now known, since 2007, as BFI Southbank, this has become a thriving and essential destination for anyone who loves cinema and is visiting London or Britain. It is the première repertory cinema in the UK featuring seasons of contemporary, classic, independent and non-English language films and a host of film festivals. Open to the general public, it also operates a membership scheme. BFI Southbank is one of the few remaining cinemas regularly to show film on film, in the format the filmmaker originally intended. It is operated by the BFI (British Film Institute), which is also responsible for the country's national film and television archive, one of the largest film archives in the world.

With its four cinema screens, its host of film festivals, special events, growing private hire of auditoria, the technical services operation at BFI Southbank must be one of the most challenging in the UK. All in a day's work, the team might be called

upon to undertake several private hire functions or events, as well as undertake the projection of movies that might be anything from a highly flammable nitrate print dating from the silent era, to a 16mm sixties "underground" movie, or a 70mm film presentation as well as dealing with DCPs in 2D or 3D.

CT readers may remember recently retired Richard Boyd when he was Head of Technical Services and the pioneering conferences in Digital Cinema hosted at the venue. Dominic Simmons is now Head of Technical Services at BFI Southbank and I was delighted to spend time with him to catch up on what happens there today.

screens and four houses in the fourth, making a total of 68 public screenings a week on average with about 15-20% of those houses being non-standard screenings, a mix of shorts programmes, clip shows, and on-stage discussions. The rest of the time is devoted to corporate hire — an increasing source of revenue — education events for schools and content preparation and rehearsal. Corporate hire often entails early starts and overnight get-ins, so we have a lot of time to cover.

**MT:** How is the technical services team made up? How many are there in the team, and in what kind of posts?

## "WE ARE UNUSUAL IN THAT WE STILL HAVE A LARGE TEAM OF TECHICIANS... ABOUT 40% OF OUR SCREENINGS ARE FROM FILM"

**Mark Trompeteler (MT):** Dominic I wonder if you could describe the kind of hours you and the team have to cover. For instance are you showing films seven days per week morning, afternoon and evening?

**DOMINIC SIMMONS (DS):** On a standard work day the team covers hours from 9am to 11pm. Generally we only have one afternoon matinee on weekdays and two houses per screen in the evening. At weekends we run three houses in three

**DS:** We are unusual for a cinema in that we still have a large team of technicians. This is due to the number of events that we cover and the still considerable amount of analogue film that we screen — approximately 40% of our screenings last year. Apart from me there is the technical manager, Chris Clarke, five shift supervisors, four for projection and one for content, and 16 technicians. All of the supervisors are full-time but most of the technicians are part-time with 10

▼ The biggest of BFI's three screens, National Film Theatre Screen 1 is an imposing auditorium with 450 seats and a 9.2m x 3.8m screen



permanent and seven casual employees.

All our techs have to be multi-skilled operators and run analogue film and digital screenings, and live events. It's a testing place to work with a large range of equipment and such a varied programme. The content team could be considered specialist in that they are responsible for the material as it enters the building and creating DCPs for events and screenings, rather than operating on shows. We also have Orianne Bastar, our co-ordinator, who amongst many other things, looks after the very complex rota.

**MT:** You must have quite a challenging workflow and work management system to maintain and operate. How do films and drives enter the premises? How are they recorded, checked and prepared, rehearsed and tracked through to projection, repeat showing and then returned?

**DS:** We have more than 1,500 titles coming through the building each year. As you say, this does require a huge amount of processing and co-ordination. Much of the initial administrative work for this is undertaken by the cinema and events team,

rather than the technical team. They are responsible for sourcing and booking digital and analogue prints and the physical print transport.

Our team takes over when the content arrives at the building. All material into the building is logged on a database by the Content team. So both DCPs on physical hard drives and networked DCPs are recorded. As with most cinemas, everything is ingested on to our TMS or NAS boxes, and networked around the building to the screens.

We have around 80TB of available storage if needed and we do get pretty close to needing this much during the BFI London Film Festival. Again, as with most cinemas, we run pretty much all of our DCP content on automated playlists so, once ingested, the techs build and rehearse all titles. This is the point when ratios, volumes, subtitles etc are checked and saved on the playlist for screening.

All analogue prints are also recorded on the database on arrival, but we still use a pretty manual process to track film prints. When they arrive they are briefly checked by the Content Team to ensure that it's the correct version or title and that it has the

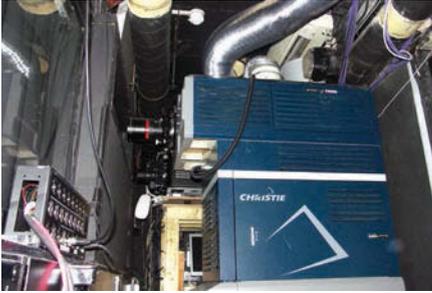
correct number of reels, then they are noted in a log book under the correct screen and date. The technicians then take the prints to the projection boxes for a more thorough examination during makeup.

We have a strict makeup procedure, all titles are run through fingers on flatbed rewind benches, every join and torn perf is checked and repairs undertaken where necessary, condition reports are produced and the print is made up on reels for screening. We often screen archive prints so we regularly run on single reels with multiple changeovers.

Finding screenable prints is becoming harder and the cinema and technical teams undertake a lot of research. We often check multiple prints in advance of a season to ensure that we have the best copy available.

In terms of keeping track of titles, the weekly schedule is king — this provides all information needed on screening times and screens, repeat screenings, film length and year and date of return. It's produced via the cinema team's database, but we use a paper print out. It's also used for notes and screening updates. Ultimately we will do this electronically, but at the moment the analogue version works for us. →

→ (Top) the digital cinema booth in NFT1 and (below) the customised Kinoton FP75E projector that serves the same screen



**MT:** Keeping track of the myriad aspect ratios, and projecting them correctly in front of a discerning audience, across four different auditoria, must be challenging? There are times when the Director, Cinematographer or members of the crew are in the audience...

**DS:** We have comprehensive notes on ratios in the makeup procedure document, so there shouldn't be too many mistakes in choice of ratio, but ultimately it comes down to the experience of the technicians and we have a wealth of good knowledge in the team. There are areas of confusion of course; the mid-1950s period when widescreen was first brought to cinemas can throw up some conundrums, especially when credits were shot for both academy and widescreen.

UK titles in particular being shot on both 1.66 and 1.85 and occasionally 1.75 can catch you out. Often if there is no perfect reliable information, it comes down to sticking it on screen and making a judgement based on what looks best. This is pretty rare though and I think we have a good record of getting it right. When all the correct information such as ratios and sound formats have been determined, detailed screening notes are written on leaders for repeat screenings. **CT**

*In the next issue: running festivals at BFI*

## BFI SOUTHBANK SCREENS AND EQUIPMENT

All screens at BFI Southbank have mini-perf matt white screen fabric. The vast majority of screenings are 2D and Technical Services don't want to compromise image quality.

### 1 NFT1: THE PREMIÈRE SCREEN 450 seats with 9.2m x 3.8m Screen

➡ **D-CINEMA:** Christie CP4230 4K (Dolby 3D) with Doremi ShowVault, & HFR and 4K capable.

**BACKUP:** Christie CP2000S 2K also with Doremi. All high profile events are run with main and backup. ( Multi format video shows use a Barco ImageProll matrix switcher to output a Mac Pro, a Blackmagic Hyperdeck StudioPro, Oppo multi-region Blu-ray, Icecrypt S6000 for satellite screenings and a DVD player. CineIPM and Crestron system for running SD tape shows – Digibeta tape deck )

➡ **ANALOGUE FILM:** 2 x Kinoton FP75E 35/70mm projectors - adapted to run with white light readers, six track mag and capable of screening nitrate, as well as the standard reverse scan red laser, Dolby SRD and DTS (35mm and 70mm). 2x FP16 16mm projectors, ( occasionally running 16mm on changeovers ). Magnatech sound follower for 35 and 16mm separate magnetic sound ( - rarely used in NFT1 but reasonably regularly in NFT2 )

➡ **AUDIO:** Panastereo CSP1200 Cinema Sound processor, with a CSP4000 for 70mm. Coupled with Yamaha DME64N mixing engine for EQ. Luis Wassman Speakers.

➡ **SOUND BOOTH:** 32 channel DMX lighting system, with a mixture of LED fixtures and tungsten lamps. Analogue Venice Midas mixing desk connected to a separate PA for onstage interviews. Separate PA installed.

### 2 NFT2 125 seats with 7m x 3.6m Screen

➡ **D-CINEMA:** 2K Christie CP2000Z and a Doremi DCP2000, set up more pared down, but includes a Mac, Hyperdeck, Blu-ray player, DVD player

and Digibeta and CineIPM to switch formats. (Will change shortly, with another ImageProll to bring it into line with NFT1 and 3. )

➡ **ANALOGUE FILM:** 2 x 35mm Cinemeccanica Vic 8s. NFT2 is setup for nitrate too. 2x Phillips FP16s and a Magnatech sound follower.

➡ **Basic 8 channel lighting setup. JBL Speakers. Separate PA installed.**

### 3 NFT3 134 seats with 8.2m x 3.5m Screen & JBL Speakers.

➡ **D-CINEMA:** Christie CP4230 and ShowVault for 4K and HFR. Also ImagePROII installed for Mac, Hyperdeck, Blu-ray, DVD and Digibeta playback.

➡ **ANALOGUE FILM:** 2x Cinemeccanica Vic 8s for dual 35/70mm. No nitrate capability but can screen 35mm interlock 3D.

➡ **THE STUDIO:** 38 seats with 7m x 3m Screen & JBL Speakers.

➡ **DIGITAL ONLY:** Christie CP2000S, a Doremi DCP2000 and same kind of video formats as the other boxes. Rarely staffed for screenings.

