

... and now to Greenwich



Mark Trompeteler reports on the launch of IMAX Digital® at the Odeon Greenwich

I was extremely pleased, curious and, I have to confess, rather excited, to attend the official press screening and launch of one of the first two European installations of Digital Imax. Like many cinema enthusiasts and members of the general public, I have been smitten by the incredible quality, stunning and immersive experience of "traditional" Imax in its especially built and designed venues. Together with so many such cinema enthusiasts, I had been disappointed by the still limited way in which many mainstream films had embraced, or could embrace, the Imax experience in their distribution and exhibition. I was really curious as to how Digital Imax in more conventional auditoria would compare and perhaps change the prevalent situation in Europe. In the first half of this feature, and in the previous issue, we have covered the technicalities of Digital Imax and the auditorium conversion process, so I will not repeat this here.

actual auditorium. No opportunity had been overlooked to remind the public that this Odeon cinema was clearly associated with the high quality experience that the public no doubt knew or suspected was associated with the Imax name, despite the fact that only one of the 18 screens was an Imax screen.

On entering screen 15, the 239 seat venue of the Imax presentation, the first thing that occurred to me was that this in no way resembled the very steep rake and huge very high screen auditoria we normally associate with specially built traditional Imax venues. This was a typical good size multiplex auditorium with a fairly steep rake in the



Approaching the Odeon Greenwich, I could not help notice that no opportunity had been missed to highlight the Imax® brand name to the local cinema going public. The Imax name was on street furniture approaching the car park, was very prominent on the outside of the building, was the subject of a significant and large foyer display and proudly displayed at the entrance to the

seating. The second very significant feature was that the screen was to all intents and purposes close to the 16:9 ratio, not the tall ratio we associate with Imax and as we have come to know it up to now. The screen at 15.5m x 7.76m was big and did fill the wall from top to bottom and side to side, but such a filling of the wall with the screen I am sure I have more or less experienced in other multiplex auditoria – so I did not experience that feeling of awe when I normally enter a traditional Imax venue. The screen here has two emergency exit doors and foyers in the side walls very close to and adjacent to the large screen, but did not have them in the same wall as the Imax screen in Wimbledon, as Jim reports. The silver screen was impressive, filling the wall, and it had a quite subtle curvature that might possibly contribute to an immersive experience. Also as Jim reports the first few rows of seating had been removed and a precision custom designed speaker system had been installed.

Quite a gathering

Members of the press gathered in the auditorium and included, as well as myself for Cinema Technology, reporters and correspondents from national newspapers such as The Times, The Independent and The Guardian; magazines such as Time Out and The Guide; local newspaper reporters; correspondents from our industry publications such as Screen International, Cinema Business, The Hollywood Reporter, as well as online cinema and technology correspondents and bloggers. I sat next to Dan Whitworth, Technology reporter for BBC Radio One, and with him was a panel of three or four typical Radio One listeners who were going to tell him about their reaction to Digital Imax.

We were able to meet and briefly talk to Rupert Gavin, CEO of Odeon, and Larry O'Reilly of Imax prior to their brief launch speeches just before the on-screen presentation of the new Imax system. I briefly chatted to Larry about the switch in aspect ratio from the traditional tall Imax aspect ratio to something more or less 16:9, and how for many years widescreen and 70mm enthusiasts such as myself pondered on Imax's approach of going against mainstream cinema's direction of going wide rather than tall. He reminded me that the human field of vision favours what is directly in front as well as above and below far more than what is at either side, and it is traditional Imax's exploitation of that in the design of the format and the special auditoria that has given traditional Imax its stunning immersive capability as compared to traditional widescreen in traditional auditoria. He outlined that by switching close to 16:9 a much wider range of mainstream cinema releases could now be enhanced by Imax's DMR technology and be far more widely exhibited in high quality Digital Imax auditoria. I asked him how he thought the immersive experience compared to that of traditional Imax and he said that's why we were here, for us to see. Knowing that Rupert Gavin was about to address us about Imax, I took this opportunity of chatting to him about Odeon and a couple of slightly non Imax related issues. I asked him what he and the Odeon board's position was on foreseeing the day when Odeon in the UK would be an entirely digital cinema chain. He replied that it was inevitable, that the commercial, quality and operational arguments to go entirely digital were irrefutable and it was only the high cost of capital investment that dictated a slower pace of change than might be desired.

The business case

Prior to the screening of a range of material in Digital Imax, Rupert Gavin gave a short presentation on Odeon and its commitment to this initial trial installation of Digital Imax. His presentation focused on Odeon developing its cinema offer and its growing commitment to offering the public a high



Larry O'Reilly (L) and Rupert Gavin

quality cinema experience both in content, e.g. by increasing its commitment to high quality alternative content such as showing ballet, opera, formula one racing, etc., and high quality presentation technology, such as Imax. He informed us that Odeon felt positive towards this initial trial launch of two Digital Imax screens, and dependent on box office success, will be considering the possibility of a "roll out" of further Imax screens across its chain of cinemas. Rupert outlined that the reason these two screens had been chosen was because of the very competitive cinema locations in which the Odeons were situated. At Greenwich there is the nearby Vue complex at the O2, as well as a third multiple screen cinema in Greenwich town centre. At Wimbledon there is also a rival cinema multiplex nearby. It was Odeon's belief that the addition of an Imax screen in these two initial cinemas would give them a competitive edge in these particular locations.

Larry's presentation focused on how Imax's DMR technology enhances the image and sound quality of films given the Digital Imax treatment. Also how mutually identified and agreed appropriate auditoria that meet both the requirements of the exhibitor and Imax are converted. Larry also gave a very impressive presentation of statistics that clearly demonstrate that in many territories where the same film is shown in an Imax auditorium and also in a nearby similar non Imax auditorium, the box office takings at the Imax venue are spectacularly better; his statistics showed this in a number of different countries and locations and with a number of different films. Larry also outlined how many of the world's leading film directors were being drawn increasingly towards film production using Imax equipment and the advantage of their audiences having access to a much improved viewing experience.

Seeing for myself

At this press launch the organisers were very insistent that we all sat in the first four rows of seats. Even in the fourth row this was not exactly my choice of favourite position, being so close to a 15.5m x 7.76m screen. When the screening of the range of material filling the big screen started, I was a little concerned that these chosen positions were not doing this press screening of Digital Imax justice. I found that so close to the screen the images were too overpowering and I have to say visually uncomfortable. The sharpness and brightness of the images was truly impressive but almost added to the uncomfortable and overpowering feeling at such



Top to bottom:
Screen 15 projection room at Greenwich
Through the portholes
Odeon staff preparing the 3D glasses
A close up of the silver screen on which everything depends.

close quarters. Viewing at such close quarters, I was disappointed in the grainy feel of the film shot at a Wembley Rolling Stones concert. The sound in these front rows was also quite overpowering. I wonder if for the press screening the organisers were trying to re-create the close immersive experience that you get with traditional Imax? I didn't really get any true appreciation of the quality of Digital Imax until I left my fourth row place and watched the screening in a number of different, more distant, locations in the auditorium. Dan, the Radio One reporter, and I compared notes over the phone the next day and both he and his listeners' panel confirmed that they also found watching this screening of Digital Imax so close to the screen to be distinctly uncomfortable, and it wasn't anything to do with successful immersion.

During the screening, sitting further back in the auditorium, I felt I could make a far better personal assessment. The experience was very much more comfortable and very impressive. What I was seeing were incredibly crisp, sharp, bright images on a fabulously sized screen, both rich in detail in the deep shadows with bright detailed highlights. The bright crisp vibrant images packed a real punch across every part of the screen. There was no evidence of the pixel structure of the image even when I sat at the front and certainly the material shown gave no op-

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portunity to observe digital noise, but I have to admit I may not have quite the trained eye that I know many other colleagues may have. What I was also seeing was digital projection better than any digital projection at a comparable size that I had ever seen to date. (I have yet to experience 4K projection). The graininess in the Rolling Stones footage was no longer noticeable. The immaculate nature of the images would be, I might suggest, very difficult for 35mm to compete with when you consider that after hundreds of passes through a projector the 35mm print would show signs of imperfection that the digital file would not. I was seeing a very high quality multiplex visual experience but to my mind it was not close to the immersive visual experience associated with Imax up to now – even when sitting in the first four rows! As Jim reports in his article on Wimbledon, the 3D images were brilliant and the brightest I've seen.

However, what really impressed and did surprise me was the quality of the sound in the numerous further back different positions I tried. It was fantastic! If the word immersive was to be used then I think on the strength of this demonstration I would say sound was for me possibly the more significant contributor to immersion. The number of "sweet spots" where you could seem to sit in the auditorium and clearly identify the separation and exact location of sound sources in relation to what was happening on the screen, and their clarity and incredible depth and width of position throughout and beyond the auditorium was incredible.

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What was also particularly noticeable was the amazing ferocity of the bass when needed. As a spaceship "flew" overhead and above the audience seats the sheer power of the blast of its engines literally shook and vibrated the seats of the auditorium with the acoustic intensity. I can't remember ever hearing such amazingly good surround sound in a multiplex auditorium.

At the sharp end

After the screening I was able to go up to the projection box and chat with the Chief Projectionist Nik Blair who had run the show for the press screening. In chatting he told me how easy the Digital Imax projectors were to operate and manage. He praised the simplicity of the free standing touch screen control panel. He talked about how operator friendly and how self diagnosing, self aligning and self



Nik operating the IMAX control panel



IMAX amps producing the 'fantastic' sound

adjusting the system appears to be. He was particularly pleased to hear how impressed I was with the quality and clarity of the surround sound, not least how ferocious the bass could be. I'm not quite sure if I detected a slight wry smile or not when he told that there was a cinema managers' office immediately beneath screen 15 and he had heard early reports of how the office rattles noticeably during some sequences of Imax. What also impressed me was that Nik sounded a professional to the core in his positive response to Digital Imax being added to his 18 screen Odeon. Nevertheless, surrounded by all this state of the art audio visual technology – placed strategically in a central place in "the box", on a table top, was a clockwork wind up torch – he was obviously ready for any eventuality that technology might throw at him. The final observation as my visit to the launch of this impressive system came to an end was him showing me the small hard drive on which the Imax presentation was recorded – printed on it was an Imax related company name DKP 70mm. Inc. – Seeing 70mm printed onto a hard drive seemed vaguely ironic or prophetic to me!





Chief Projectionist Nik Blair with the twin IMAX Digital projectors

Final Thoughts

My own personal conclusions after seeing Digital Imax for the first time went far more in the direction of thinking about the future of cinema rather than engaging in detailed technical comparisons about how it compared with 2K or the superb screenings of 70mm I had attended earlier this year, and of course 35mm. There was no question, as I said above, that I had been very favourably impressed by what I had seen and heard, but my thoughts were also now centring on such issues as:

So many cinemas are increasingly becoming centres of entertainment where drinks, alcohol and a growing variety of food can be served on the premises or delivered to your seat, where meals if not available in the cinema, are probably available next door, and cinemas are now offering an increasing diversity of seating, comfort, service, events, programming *and technologies*.

Even with the current world economic situation the day when a cinema chain like Odeon is entirely digital is probably far closer than I imagined.

The time is fast approaching when a "venue technician" will be able to comfortably operate state of the art digital projection equipment without ever having been trained on film or even possibly knowing anything about ideas of "the golden age of cinema" that once existed.

As Digital Imax is establishing itself in North America and the first screens are appearing in Europe what is the future of traditional 70mm Imax film as a projection format and its venues?

Increasingly, high definition projection systems like Digital Imax and 4k are likely to

soon become a reality in a growing number of venues, whilst 65mm/70mm film might clearly have a place in the production of "high definition" films, isn't the idea of it ever coming back as a high definition "road show" film viewing experience getting very unrealistic?

The whole experience of this press launch left me feeling that for mainstream cinema exhibition the future may not be exclusively Imax, but I'm sure it may be almost entirely digital much sooner than a lot of us think, and also very exciting.

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