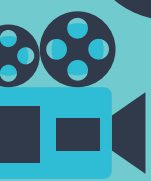




# FAITH, HOPE AND CHARIOTS

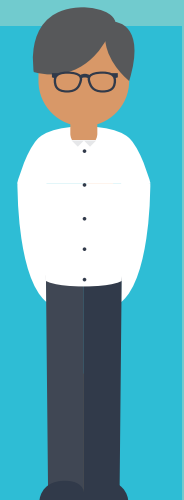


A personal review of Widescreen Weekend 2019.  
**Words by Mark Trompeteler**

## Professor Sir Christopher Frayling's riff on the bible quote above is the place to start >

When Sir Christopher introduced the 1959 version of "Ben Hur" at the 2019 Widescreen Weekend at the Science and Media Museum last October, his comment "Faith, Hope and Chariots" neatly summed up the challenges and opportunities of programming this annual celebration of wide format film. For the past 23 years cinema enthusiasts, cinema exhibition professionals, film critics, authors, and academics have travelled from all over, including the US and Australia, to attend an event that

reveres the spectacle, technology, legacy and culture of large format and widescreen cinema. The projection equipment in the three-screen complex at the UK's National Science & Media Museum, in Bradford, allows delegates to enjoy films in 35mm. and 70mm. analogue film, 2K and 4K digital, digital Imax, and three-strip Cinerama. It really is a rare and special cinema exhibition complex, and delegates travel to view films in all these formats in the space of three to four days.



**T**HE WORD **CHARIOTS** indicates how the programmers continue to include epics, the old roadshow movies and the more modern large-scale tentpole movies as part of the programme. These showcase the advantages a plethora of premium large formats that cinema culture has given us over the years, as well as giving the audience's existing demographic the kind of classic and modern films they like to see. This element of the programming might also possibly draw in a new audience to see such movies as they were intended to be seen on both a flat and a curved screen.

Last year, the weekend was bookended by two such films, the screening of a 70mm film print of "Ready Player One" on

the flat screen on opening night, with the 1959 epic "Ben Hur" in a 4K DCP version on the curved screen on the closing night. In between came "The Sound of Music" and "West Side Story" both on 70mm film on the curve, with Kenneth Branagh's "Murder On The Orient Express," filmed on modern 70mm film emulsion and projected in 70mm. Perhaps not my favourite version of the story, but the print looked immaculate and pristine on the flat screen. Also screened was a digital presentation of "Ice Station Zebra." In the smaller Broccoli cinema, 35mm film prints featured in screenings of "Barabbas" and "Gladiator." Imax screenings included the interesting pairing of "First Man" and the documentary "Apollo 11" which features newly discovered immaculate 70mm footage that raises the impact and veracity of the well-known footage. It

does this to the extent that it launches this documentary way above the others that cover the subject. Presented in IMAX, it is a powerful feature.

## Preserving the past

If ever there was a brilliant demonstration of the immense value of the preservation work that Dave Strohmaier and his team have completed in saving the three-strip Cinerama travelogues from decaying into oblivion, this weekend featured it. As many know, it was the 1952 three-strip Cinerama process that was the catalyst that sparked the widescreen cinema revolution. For the cinema public today it's a largely forgotten format, but Dave, has made it his mission to save this legacy.

A screening of the first half of the museum's three-strip celluloid archive print of "South Seas Adventure" in its faded condition, followed, after the intermission, by a screening of the second half of the digitally restored version, demonstrated how successful and valuable restoration work can be, and was a tribute to Strohmaier and his team's work. A work of faith!

Programming can also be key to building new audiences and driving ticket sales. For the past few years, programming new strands into the weekend indicates a hope to build up a new, younger and more diverse audience. Interesting developments include the embedding of the strand "Celluloid Saturday" – an idea that sits well in the traditional weekend fare. Every film screened across the cinemas on Saturday is an analogue celluloid print. The addition of a day-pass to attend just this day provides an opportunity for cinemagoers who have only heard of film and traditional projectors to dovetail into the existing and more committed audience. In this strand, this year, were such films as "Forrest Gump," "Carmen Jones," and "Pulp Fiction" which featured with other celluloid prints mentioned.

Thematic strands across this year's weekend criss-crossed the screening schedules in abundance. To two of the above titles a 35mm, print of the film "The Haunting" was presented making a mini retrospective of Robert Wise within the weekend. Fitting in with the potential interests of more contemporary audiences the massive recent hit of "Black Panther" was programmed to contrast against an earlier superhero fantasy film "Blade."

Development across the industry to reflect and promote women's contribution to cinema and women's issues in society also resonated within the programming. Penny Marshall's "A League of Their Own" was screened and the film "Effie Gray" highlighted how women struggled in Victorian society. Clio Barnard chatted on stage by way of an introduction to her film "The Selfish Giant," this helped cement a Bradford



> **The National Science and Media Museum, Bradford**

> **Sir Christopher Frayling on site**

**“Programming new strands into the festival indicates a hope to build up a younger and more diverse audience”**



link to the programme, where parts of the film were shot, supported also by a walking tour of Bradford filming locations, which was on offer.

The contribution of Doris Day to cinema was represented by the showing of two of her films—and modern interpretations acknowledge the importance of the characters she played in later films which give far more modern representations of working women than had previously featured in popular cinema. One session I attended, "Girls On Film – Live", was the transmission of a live podcast, hosted by the film critic and commentator Anna Smith. The analysis and critique of gender representation and related contextual issues in some classic musical sequences was contemporary, forthright and highly relevant. This was followed by refreshing audience discussion and debate and was well worth attending.

It is good to see The Student Widescreen Film of the Year Competition and Award embedded as part of the weekend now, too. It was a pleasure to meet with and talk to the student team from the University of Roehampton who won in the category for the best British entry.

## Plenty of choice, or not enough focus?

The weekend quite sensibly now frequently offers alternative titles screening in different auditoria, so delegates can have alternatives to films that they may have seen a number of times before or that for some reason they dislike. This coupled with the multiple programming strands across the schedule might lead some to think the offer could appear as a little confusing at times.

As the themes, content and issues raised by the films overtake the interest in the process and the format issues of the films, some may wonder if there is a danger of any focus of the weekend being lost. With such an abundance of choice within the programme, it does allow delegates to tailor their experience, which is a strong advantage. At one point I was able to attend the introductory talk to "Barabbas," then I walked over to hear the extended introduction and talk about



Doris Day, and – as soon as the house lights went down there – I went on to the IMAX for the introductory talk for “Apollo 11” and its screening. The key issue is how does the Widescreen Weekend maintain a core identity and a common experience for the whole audience, whilst giving opportunities for individualisation and alternatives, without seeming a little confused or over- complex. Some felt that the weekend is not the same as it used to be, and it is different from other similar weekend festivals. Surely nothing is ever likely to stay the same for over nearly a quarter of a century. Isn't it the point that each film festival should be a little different?

The challenges for the projection team at places like BFI Southbank and The National Science and Media Museum at events like this are immense – a rapid succession of films in different formats, ratios, and from different periods projected over a concentrated short period of time, and some requiring individualised tweaks in projection. All this in front of a highly knowledgeable audience can result in any technical snags or exhibition faults being quickly noted by some. Inevitably there was such an instance or two during this weekend. However long gone, it seems, are the former technical breakdowns that used to occur that not infrequently pushed the days' schedule further and further back often resulting in limited breaks. One of the main joys of this weekend is to spend time sharing drinks, meals and conversations with fellow enthusiasts or industry professionals when films are not being screened.

Even if at first glance audience numbers might not appear to be rising in a spectacular chariot race manner, then if the audience for this niche event is being maintained at a steady level, with people still travelling from abroad, then in these days of competing entertainment and work schedules, after 23 years, that is a major achievement. The history, the legacy and the developments associated with this event should ensure that it reaches its 25th anniversary and I hope it goes well beyond that and more. **CT**

[www.scienceandmediamuseum.org.uk](http://www.scienceandmediamuseum.org.uk)


[www.cinematotech.today](http://www.cinematotech.today)



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