

Polish Multiplex Marvel where 'Atmosphere' is the most important thing

On holiday in Poland, Mark Trompeteler had some fascinating discussions with the staff of the ARS Krakow Central Cinema, a very different 5-screen multiplex.

It was the second week of a family holiday in Poland, and we were in Krakow. We had visited so many beautiful places, museums and churches, and so when very heavy showers arrived one weekday afternoon, we felt as though we needed a change in rainy weather recreation. We remembered an unusual looking cinema a few streets away and quickly made our way back.

On entering the foyer, we noticed that ironically, amidst all the torrents of water in the street outside, *Poseidon* was due to start in 15 minutes. I went to the box office, the young woman there spoke English, and this is how the conversation went:-

Mark: Please may I have three seats together, to see the next showing of *Poseidon*?

Lady in Box Office: There is a slight problem, I do not have three seats together in the back row.

Mark: Why is that a problem?

Lady in Box Office: It is in the back row that you get the best view of the screen. But I can give you three seats together in the middle row.

Mark: Will we be able to see the screen OK in the middle row?

Lady in Box Office: Yes, but you will just have to look up a little more, but it will be OK.

Mark: I will have the three seats together in the middle row – thank you. Could you also please tell me how many rows are there?

Lady in Box Office: There are three rows.

Mark: How many seats are there in a row?

Lady in Box Office: Six.

Mark: How many tickets have you sold now for the next show of *Poseidon*?

Lady in Box Office: Nine.

Mark: So the film will be shown on video?

Lady in Box Office: Of course not – all our five screens have dedicated 35mm. projection.

Mark: Thank you for your help.

So for me, what started was a most amazing, enjoyable and satisfying cinema experience. It was the first of what was to become three visits to what must be one of the slightly more challenging film projection operations in Europe.

The ARS Krakow Central Cinema Multiplex is just off the hugely impressive market square in central Krakow. Situated in an old building, on the corner of Jana and Tomaszka streets, it is a five screen multiplex of unique design and character. It has five separate projection areas, each servicing their own screen, spread across a mini-labyrinth of two floors.

None of the boxes are large enough to take "platters" – so four of the screens operate on traditional reel changes, and one screen splices the feature into two halves and has to have an intermission mid feature. To make life even a little more interesting for the projection team, prints of a feature film are sometimes shared with a smaller "sister" cinema situated on the other side of the very large market square. Shared prints are transported across the market square, between screenings, on a sack trolley. It is totally and refreshingly opposite to our usual ideas of multiplex operation.

Each of the five auditoria have incredibly different characters and are all given a different name. One consists of 18 modern armchairs and is lit by domestic living room side lamps and a tall standard lamp. One has a very strict smoking and



drinking policy, the look, layout and feel of a café, with the projector immediately behind the bar. Another utilises a very grand room formerly used for chamber music recitals in the nineteenth century. This cinema is not the kind of cinema you associate with the word multiplex.

The Krakow ARS Multiplex is part of the Europa Cinemas distribution chain which is also part funded by the European Community's Media programme. Not unsurprisingly, the cinema has a mission of screening a significant proportion of European language and European produced films alongside American ones. As well as its changing weekly programme, the cinema also hosts regular film seasons, film retrospectives, local and national premieres and celebrity appearances. These events have included German, Austrian, Russian, Hungarian, Dutch film seasons, photography exhibitions and a recent premiere of the film *Jan Pawell II* with its star Jon Voight attending. The cinema chain has a media partner in the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*. The weekly programme changes on Fridays, and just as elsewhere, the same film can be shown on different

screens either during a single day or at varying times in the week. The cinema has a policy of screening films at slightly softer volumes than at the more usual major multiplex cinemas.

As mentioned before each of the five screens has a distinctive name and uses a distinctive typographic letter symbol in the multiplex literature and décor. To me this is far warmer and better than the conventional and colder method of denoting screen 1,2,3,4 or 5.

Sztuka with its 237 seats is the largest auditorium. Of the five screens, it is the one that most resembles the interior of a modern multiplex. The projection equipment consists of two Prexer AP 62 projectors and sound is delivered by Dolby Digital Surround EX CP 500 equipment.



Reduta was a hall used for piano and chamber music recitals in the nineteenth century and seats 171 people. Its superb acoustic for chamber music

mostly because the gallery is in poor repair. Reduta is the main premiere and special events venue of the complex. It is a beautiful space complemented

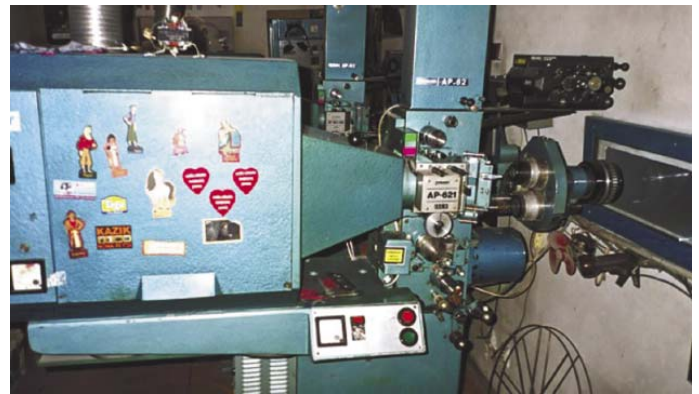


has had to be modified for the requirements of feature film surround sound. Large acoustic dampening panels have had to be used in strategic places around the auditorium. Reduta still features a standing room gallery around the top of the auditorium used by lower admission price patrons and latecomers for concerts over a century ago. Sadly this useful feature is not applied to current patrons,

by modern lights produced in an art deco style.

The projection equipment (bottom left) again consists of Prexer AP 62 projectors with a Dolby Digital Surround EX CP 500 system.

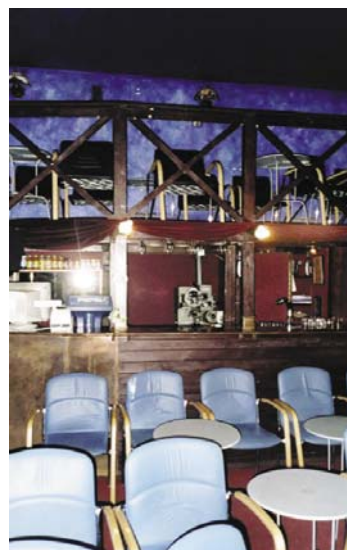
Aneks is the smaller of the more conventional auditoria and seats 50 people. It has the ambience of a small art house cinema. The



projection equipment (above) yet again consists of Prexer AP 62 projectors with Dolby Stereo SR CP 65 sound equipment.

A single Prexer AP 621 HW projector is installed utilising Dolby Stereo Stereo sound.

Kiniarnia is the café / bar style auditorium and it seats only 30 people. In view of its strict smoking and drinking policy, it has seating arranged around café tables both on the auditorium floor, and reached via a small spiral staircase, also on a small terrace / balcony above the bar. Like in Salon, the screen size is small, and here the single projector behind the bar, and the adjacent beer pump, dictates that there has to be an intermission.





Salon (above) was definitely my favourite because it was just a small step up from my own living room cinema. It seats just 18 people in modern armchairs and is lit with side lamps and a domestic standard lamp, which the projectionist just switches off and on from the tiny projection box at the rear. It has the feel of an art deco living room with a screen on a rig high above the door that is used to enter the salon. Two Prexer AP 621 HW projectors are situated in the box with Dolby Stereo sound being used.

I wonder if this is the smallest commercial cinema auditorium, open to the general public, with a dedicated 35mm. projection box, in Europe, or the World ?

I asked the cinema's manager, Andrzej Kucharczyk, about the ARS multiplex.

Mark: The ARS is an unusual multiplex in an old building. When did the building start to be used as a cinema and how did it develop into its current five screen form?

Andrzej: It has been 90 years since Kino Sztuka (Art in English) started to operate as a regular cinema. At the moment we are preparing official celebrations of the anniversary. After World War II, the cinema, as most of the buildings in our country, was nationalized. It was run by a state owned company which had many name changes, many times, like almost everything else in a country trying to be a paradise for all the working people. Sztuka was lucky be-

cause as it was a cinema of only an average standard it was not forced to show as many Soviet movies as other, bigger and more modern cinemas in Krakow were obliged to show. It was supposed to present movies for people looking for something more than pure action and fun.

During the 60s and 70s it was considered as one of the most ambitious screen complexes in Poland. After the 1956 riots in Poznan many interesting titles started to become available to cinemas. It was called a golden era for Polish film clubs. You could easily see the movies of Fellini, Visconti, Bergman, Bunuel, Truffaut, Kurosawa and other acclaimed masters. As the political situation started to change again, it became worse and worse, with the supply of foreign titles beginning to disappear. From 1981 we had a period when marshal law was imposed on the country, and western, especially American, films were almost banned in Poland. Then 1989 brought us freedom and the kind of normal film distribution you were used

to in the western world. Private owners managed to regain control of the cinema buildings.

Mark: How old is the building? Is it of historic interest? What constraints or limitations did that impose on it being developing as a cinema?

Andrzej: The building started to serve as a hotel in the 1830s. At that time Krakow was under Austrian occupation. Part of the building was established as a Cinema in 1916 with the Sztuka being the first auditorium. It was when the cinema was run by the state owned cinema company that the idea of a Krakow multi – screen Cinema Centre occurred.

Mark: You are a part of Europa Cinemas? Is that just a national Polish distribution chain or does the chain also operate in other European countries as well?

Andrzej: It is a chain of over 1000 cinemas across the whole of Europe.



Mark: I saw *Poseidon* in Salon and *The Da Vinci Code* in Sztuka on weekdays – the audience for both films was very small. Is the cinema profitable? If it operates on a subsidy – where does this money come from?

Andrzej: The cinema is a 100% private initiative. We managed to create it on our own without any public money or sponsors. If you visited multiplexes in Poland (and in any other places all over the world I think) during the weekdays you would see the same situation. We have been a member of Europa Cinemas for two years and we get some money from that organization, supported by the EU programme MEDIA.

Mark: Many of our readers are film projectionists - I would like to ask you some questions about this particular aspect of ARS. With all five projection boxes in very different locations across two floors working on reel changes, and you sometimes sharing prints with another nearby cinema – the programming of films must be extremely complex to achieve, monitor and keep on time. Could you explain to us a little how this is done?

Andrzej: It takes a lot of time to prepare a programme for each week. We are trying to fight for the prints. That's why we strictly collaborate with the other cinema situated on the main square in Krakow and we share the prints. It's another problem but on the other hand it is the only way to supply prints for 5 screens. We also emphasize the importance of internet activity in our publicity and operation. We have our own box office computer system (working in conjunction with another 50 cinemas in the country as well). Our internet booking system is very convenient and simple for users.

Mark: With so many reel changes going on all at the same time, how many projectionists would work in a box for one show? How many projectionists would work on an average day? How many full-time and part-time projectionists does the cinema employ?



Andrzej: There are always four projectionists working in the cinema at the same time. Only Aneks and Kiniarnia share one projectionist, the projector in Kiniarnia is very close to the projection box of Aneks. We have over 20 screenings per day. These old historic interiors which weren't built originally as a cinema are protected by Polish law and we have to operate under some restrictions designed to protect old historic buildings – we cannot create a new projection box to serve more than one screen – so this does not help us to keep our operating costs low. We have to employ more people than a typical multiplex.

Mark: Do you have different grades of projectionist? Do you have a chief projectionist? What are the duties of the different grades?

Andrzej: There used to be three distinct grades of projectionist in Poland. Nowadays nobody knows what regulations or grades are still active, if at all. We have got an experienced senior or chief projectionist here. In case of staffing or other problems we call in additional help from retired ex senior projectionists.

Mark: How do film projectionists get their training and career development in Poland?

Andrzej: It is not easy to find a training course for a young person. Most training for young people is 'on the job', working alongside experienced older senior projectionists.

Mark: What arrangements are made for the servicing of your

projectors and sound equipment?

Andrzej: For sound equipment we call Dolby service for help. For projectors we rely on our chief projectionist. We often ask for help in sourcing spare projector parts from retired workers of the former specialised state service company that existed in previous years.

Mark: You screen films at lower sound volumes than other multiplexes. Could you explain how this policy came about? Do you consider this policy to be successful?

Andrzej: Our audience is a little bit different from that of the usual multiplexes. They do not like us to provide them with high volume. They look for a slightly different cinema experience. Atmosphere is the key word for us. Our guests both from Poland and abroad appreciate the spirit of Krakow and our cinema. Just to mention the best known celebrities: Morgan Freeman, Jon Voight (shown below at the premier of John Paul II), and Kevin Reynolds.



There used to be a church here in medieval times. In the nineteenth century it was a concert hall with Liszt, Brahms, and Paderewski performing here. Immediately after World War II, a theatre company for kids operated here, with a young Roman Polanski on stage. This building has atmosphere – it is not like a normal multiplex.

Mark: Finally how would you describe the aims or mission of your cinema and to what audiences are you trying to appeal?

Andrzej: I like my job. I am trying to make it as interesting as possible. Also I'm trying to pro-

vide our customers with maximum satisfaction. Our audience is mostly students, as Krakow is a



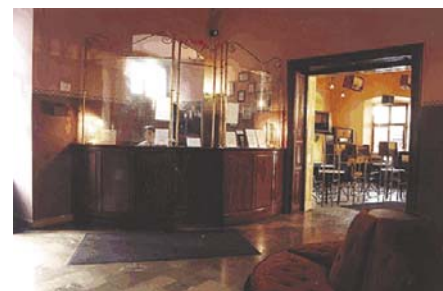
students' city. But we also pay a lot of attention to senior citizens who do not like multiplexes very much because of the noise, popcorn and the loud behaviour of a younger public.

Mark: Thank you Andrzej to you and your staff for making my brief visit to your cinema so enjoyable. As a point of current interest I understand that almost half a million Polish people have arrived in the UK over the past couple of years. I suspect that the projection of Polish language films may be something that may be becoming more common in the UK.

The ARS Krakow multiplex is really worth a visit. The sheer variety of the five screens to me is the outstanding feature of this multiplex and this together with the paradoxical cohesion of the total experience of making a visit, makes it a remarkable place. Even if its standards of presentation, at times, do not meet the very high standards of other more corporate modern multiplexes, it is a multiplex that just oozes with character, atmosphere and a total commitment to a pure love of cinema.

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Related Websites:
www.ars.pl
www.europa-cinemas.com



The box-office