



Mark Trompeteler Reports

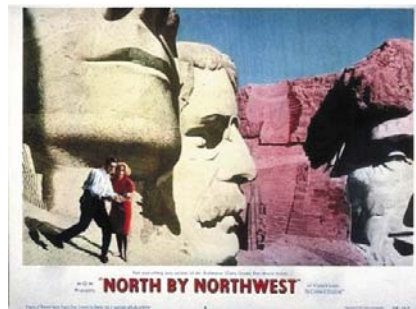
Lazy year's long hot summer days and nights in London all seem a distant memory. It was on one of those evenings in late July (25th.) that the projection team and management of the National Film Theatre hosted a Forum on technical issues for NFT members. "Getting Technical at the NFT" focused on the challenges, developments and satisfactions of projecting films at one of the world's premier film culture centres. Introduced by Justin Johnson, Head of Operations at the NFT, and then hosted by Brian Robinson, Communications Manager for the British Film Institute, the evening took the form of a presentation of the projection challenges at the NFT followed by a question and answer session.

The presentation followed a brief history of the cinema as the structure on which to base its content and to sequence its excellent use of film clips and slides. As an example of just how good film projection can look and sound the team opened with a 70 mm print clip of the spaceship ballet / Blue Danube sequence from "2001 - A Space Odyssey". Brian explained how challenging an environment for projectionists the NFT was – with over 2000 different films being screened in a year, with as many as 5, 6 or 7 different films being screened to widely different and discerning audiences across three different projection boxes in a day, that can be from any period in film history, and involving a myriad of different formats, aspect ratios, sound systems, print types and incredibly tight turnaround times – the projection team of 12 are never short of daily and hourly challenges.

NFT programmers often source 2 or 3 prints of a particular film in order to try and assess which is the best. Films arrive into a vault at the NFT and are initially checked to see if they have the right language version, that all the reels have arrived etc. and a "Steenbeck" is often used at this stage to assist with this task. On arrival in the box, projectionists check every foot of film by hand, before projection, to check for tears, damage and poor

joins. The silent cinema presents basic challenges. The variable speed of some of the projectors was demonstrated, to compensate for the varying frame rates of hand cranked silent film cameras and the need to present movement at a natural looking speed.

The NFT is one of a very few cinemas in the world which is licensed to show nitrate prints to the general public – thanks to its adapted projectors, boxes and safety measures – see below. An excerpt from a nitrate print of the colour film "The Harvey Girls" was shown. This fully demonstrated the characteristic beautiful golden warm mellow tones of a nitrate colour print. Screen masking and projector aperture plates were mentioned as the presentation highlighted the development of different aspect ratios with the advent of sound. Incorrect use of aperture gates and masking was demonstrated by showing us all the scaffolding photographed "in shot" used to suspend the Mount Rushmore backdrop in "North by North West".



The advent of Cinemascope and the huge improvement in sound facilitated by the introduction of magnetic stripe sound was demonstrated by the screening of a 4 mag track clip from "Carousel". Developing the theme of sound issues, Brian talked about how good the sound in NFT1 can be, with a seven speaker array behind the screen, four speakers on each side and ten at the rear.

The introduction of red LED readers has meant that soundtracks from some earlier

film prints cannot be reproduced satisfactorily – but the NFT has projectors that can comfortably switch between white and red excitors. The problem was demonstrated by screening a clip from "Genevieve" using the two different type of exciter. The significant number of foreign language films screened has meant that translation has always been a big issue. If a print has English language sub-titles printed onto it - that's fine. In the past many prints that did not have subtitles, or had subtitles in another language, had to be augmented by a live English language translation that the audience listened to via "bakelite" headsets stored in the arm of each seat. However, the NFT had gone on to develop a "soft-titling" system where subtitles could be prepared in advance of the screening and projected live, dialogue line by dialogue line, via a video projector onto the lower part of the projected film image. Mark Wagner, one of the NFT team that had developed their soft titling system, very ably and amusingly demonstrated the system using an excerpt from Visconti's "White Nights".

Inevitably the presentation ended with a brief mention of digital projection. The projection power and quality of the Christie DLP projector was very well demonstrated by showing the audience an advance teaser trailer for Disney's computer animated feature "Ratatouille" – not due for release until Summer 2007. The sound and picture, in my opinion, were breathtaking. There was mention of the digital test bed based in NFT 3 and the Skillset funded course in digital projection for projectionists that the NFT will be running. The presentation closed with the screening of an excerpt from the digitally restored "Casablanca" – again the quality of image of the screen, given the age of the film, was stunning. Brian also concluded with the statement that as we all enter the digital age, the NFT will maintain its firm commitment to the projection of film.

The question and answer session was chaired by Justin Johnson, who together with Richard Boyd, Head of Technical Services, and Simon Allen, Chief Projectionist, answered questions from the audience. Clearly the audience included many discerning film viewers and part of the audience had concerns regarding aspect ratio and masking issues during some screenings at the NFT. The team were going to review some of these highlighted issues but as previously mentioned, the challenges that this team face daily are not inconsiderable. In the box that night screening the clips were Steve Gray, John Hoskins, Chloe Stewart, Ed Maurger and Pete Bell. A feature presentation, with the audience already beginning to arrive outside, was due to follow almost immediately.

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