

Widescreened and Wide-Eyed

Following Mike Taylor's report on the Bradford Film Festival 2006 in the previous issue, Mark Trompeteler here provides a very different personal diary of the weekend.

Who amongst us, at certain times, has not totally lost our heart, imagination or disbelief whilst at the cinema? Today there is a huge growth in alternative ways of viewing films at home, on the move and in smaller auditoria on smaller screens, so it's not surprising that some of us more mature folk are nostalgic for the bigger screens, great auditoria and the collective sense of occasion that once was cinema. Very many films benefit from being shot in larger film formats and being viewed in big screen auditoria. Like many other people, some of the most memorable experiences of my young, adolescent and young adult imagination were cinema related. For instance, when my mother persuaded an adult male stranger in a queue with his son, to take me, a 12 year old, in with him so I could to see "Ben-Hur" for the third time in a fortnight – because I still just couldn't believe what I was seeing. I remember too the collective gasps, shocks and screams that engulfed the capacity audience during the roller

coaster ride that was Hitchcock's "Psycho" and the inward gasps that I had as I realised the sheer scale that cinema could be when I saw my first CinemaScope, Cinerama, VistaVision, Todd-AO, 70 mm and Imax films. All of these were in huge auditoria and on huge screens compared to today's average multiplex experience.

As the French New Wave and many great film directors have showed us, the scale and size of a film is no guide to its artistic merit, and sadly, in many a big screen epic that has often been only too painfully obvious. However, for about the past ten years I have been reading about the annual Widescreen Weekend held at the unique location of the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television, and if anything sounds like a nostalgic and fascinating trip into the great days of cinema, that to me has always seemed the trip worth making. Where in the world can you stand in an entrance foyer and be less than a



minutes walk away from auditoria that can screen films in almost any 70 and 35mm widescreen and non widescreen format, IMAX, video, smaller gauges, and most impressively original three strip Cinerama using three separate projection boxes on a deeply curved louvred screen? Bradford of course - at the unique venue of the NMPFT.



Having the same joy and excitement as any respectable anorak-wearing enthusiast (often male) travelling some distance to see a steam railway, a rare bird, or a rally of old cars, I travelled, like a number of other enthusiasts, this year to Bradford, with a sense of anticipation and excitement at the prospect of immersing myself in how cinema used to be, and can sometimes still be.

The Widescreen Weekend is held annually in March as part of the longer annual Bradford Film Festival held at the NMPFT. It is held in the museum's three hundred seat Pictureville Cinema. This year's programme was more a very long weekend with the programme commencing with "Krakotoa - East of Java" screening at 2pm on Thursday and concluding with a screening of "Doctor Zhivago" on the Monday at 10:30am. It seems that a hardcore of delegates arrived for the first screening and stayed for the last, whilst other delegates arrived at varying times, with the peak attendance being from the Friday through to the Sunday evening.

On my arrival on Thursday evening I was amazed how short my trip was from London compared to the others. I was amazed that of the some 120 or so delegates, people had travelled



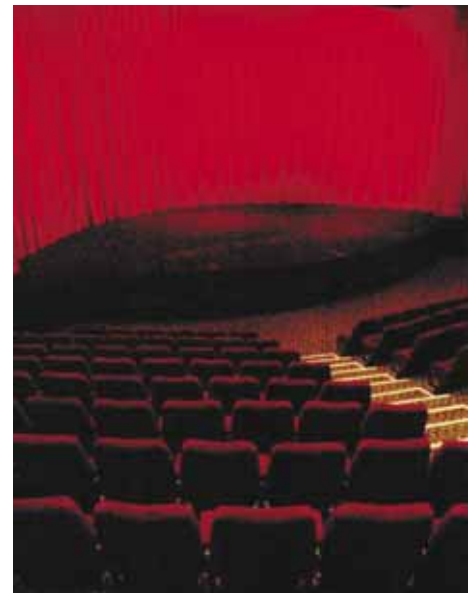
from all over the world and I almost immediately met delegates from the USA, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Australia. I was even further amazed that this was not the very first time people had travelled from as far as America and Australia to attend this event - many other delegates attending this weekend, had attended many times. I learned of one delegate who had made the trip from Germany particularly to see a screening in three-strip Cinerama of the film "Windjammer". He vividly remembered last seeing the film at the age of seven, and how big an impact it had made on him. Now in his mid to late fifties he was really excited at seeing the film a second time, again in Cinerama. How is that for cinematic nostalgia!

My Widescreen Weekend began with the wine reception at 4:30 pm on the Thursday amidst the superb collection of still cameras in the Kodak gallery on the lower ground floor of the museum. There I met a retired building company director from Kettering who had converted his garage into a small tiered nine seat cinema using salvaged cinema "tip-up" seats, exit signs, a significant proportion of an original ticket booth and an extremely reliable 14 year old Mitsubishi three CRT video projector. We both discussed the joys of home cinema and the respective merits of each of our home installations. We both attended that night's screening of "Batman Begins" in "blown up" 70mm. Imax. Given the degree of enlargement, the image was remarkably crisp and as always the six track digital sound was more than impressive. However, like many films shot for conventional cinema and subsequent DVD and TV viewing, the use of traditional close ups,



and action in close up, with actors very close to the camera, when enlarged for viewing on the massive Imax screen, made for some very uncomfortable viewing. Amongst many of the widescreen delegates, conversations after the screening included the bemoaning of the fact that the Imax process had opted for a taller aspect ratio. Obviously this group of enthusiasts are sold on the idea that wider is more realistic, and best.

On the Friday morning I deviated from the main weekend's programme which showed "Custer of the West" at 10 am and went to watch the National Geographic film "Mysteries of Egypt" shot in Imax. Imax obviously has a different approach of placing of actors in front of the Imax camera, and as always, Imax showed itself as a breathtaking technical experience. I also spent the morning exploring the contents of this excellent museum.



I was particularly looking forward to the afternoon screening of "How The West Was Won" in three-strip Cinerama, because like the "Windjammer" colleague, the only and last time I had ever seen a Cinerama film was when I was quite young - and it was this film. There was a sense of real excitement in the Pictureville prior to the start of "How The West Was Won" - and the experience did not disappoint. Seated in the excellent auditorium looking at the red plush curtains that covered the big deeply curved screen, listening to the overture to the film - that sense of occasion that cinema once was came flooding back to me. As the house lights dimmed and the curtains pulled back to reveal the massive screen and opening credits, all with the pounding theme music of Alfred Newman, I very effectively travelled back in time. The amazing visual composition opportunity that Cinerama gave to its





directors and directors of photography was evident throughout. In places the joins were remarkably invisible. Despite this vintage "print" looking "tired and dusty" in places, and that huge disadvantage of the obvious joins in the picture in very many places, seeing "How The West Won" in its original format again was a great experience.

On Friday evening, prior to that evening's main feature, Bill Lawrence (right), Head of Film at the NMPFT was on stage and in conversation with Tony Cutts (left).



Tony, the Senior Projectionist at NMPFT had recently celebrated the anniversary of having worked half a century as a projectionist. Tony recounted many amusing anecdotes of his life as a projectionist, his colleagues in the projection box projected an amusing home movie or two, and this was as much a celebration of all projectionists' invaluable contribution to the industry. At 7:30pm there followed a screening of a 70mm vintage print of "The Fall of the Roman Empire". Despite the extreme sadness of seeing a vintage print with largely only its magenta layer remaining, the sheer technical perfection of the 70mm. format beamed out. A beautifully crisp image, of high resolution, in focus from edge to edge, on a deeply curved screen, with none of the picture joins of Cinerama – a process that is sheer visual perfection. Despite seeing the film again in magenta monochrome, it still came across as a very effective and intelligent epic.

On the Saturday morning once again I felt

the need for daylight and fresh air and again strayed from the main weekend programme which was showing a real rarity "The Golden Head" in 70mm. I rejoined the weekend at midday for the showing of "Windjammer" in three-strip Cinerama (originally conceived and produced for the similar but very short lived Cinemiracle process). This vintage print which in various places was in poor condition was nevertheless extremely watchable and to me was a real discovery. Despite it again being a magenta monochrome print it was a real visual treat comparable to the full colour print of "How The West Was Won". Initially it played the trick of starting as a small 35mm. standard format looking print in the middle of the giant screen, then at one point, the curtains pulled back as it spectacularly converted to the visually stunning full Cinerama experience. It is a film that ostensibly starts as and appears to be a travelogue, but as it is about the voyage of a training ship for young men, it is a film also about character development and nurturing a spirit of adventure and a joy of life. At its conclusion we learn also it was the last voyage of its long serving captain.

The film includes a stunning visual poem to the beauty of Norway, as the Cinemiracle camera effortlessly travels transatlantic from an onboard concert of a Grieg piano concerto to breathtaking scenes of Norway. The film also has a striking experimental sequence in New York. Originally in full colour and with all its resonances to developing youth and character through hard work and adventure - no wonder this film made such a lasting impression on our fellow delegate when he was just seven years old! Sadly this was the last opportunity to see the film in Europe prior to the shipping of the print to America

Saturday afternoon continued with the screening of a brand new pristine 35mm print of "Zulu", loaned from the Paramount archive. Having viewed two consecutive prints in magenta monochrome, this print was absolutely stunning. Apart from being an excellent film, it also contained many fabulous visual compositions that showed off the creative possibilities and visual grammar of the widescreen format to striking effect. On Saturday night another fabulous brand new print, in 70mm. with DTS sound, was obtained from Twentieth Century Fox. "South Pacific" was shown to a full house, of many local people as well as the 120 or so widescreen delegates. Again the sense of occasion, with everyone listening to the overture prior to the film starting, seeing a brand new 70mm. Todd-AO print, complete with intermission, was clearly evident. Although the visual style of the film looks dated now, the superb pristine nature of its presentation again effectively made me travel back in time. It was another excellent experience.

On Sunday morning delegates assembled at 10am for a two hour event titled "Cineramacana". This interesting event consisted of delegates showing various prints that they had brought with them, that the projection team screened, the sharing of information about widescreen history and developments, amusing items, a quiz and other miscellaneous items, all very ably chaired by Thomas Hauerslev.





He is director of the Danish Film Museum, one of the principal organisers of the Widescreen Weekend, an international expert on 70mm film and the person behind the excellent website *in70mm.com*. To counterbalance the almost religious fervour that was becoming evident during the morning's "Cineramacana", the Sunday screening of "The Bible - in the beginning" that followed might have been considered somewhat apt. The print, again in magenta monochrome, from the BFI, was very badly faded for much of the beginning, and was, for me, disappointing.

In the second half of Sunday afternoon I was delighted to finally see a film that I had only read about in cinema history books and had never ever had the chance to see previously. You can now only see it and experience it in one of only about three remaining cinemas in the world, and to see it is a rare treat. The 1952 film "This Is Cinerama" is no more than a two hour demonstration film and is an absolute gem. It lacks no confidence or boldness in demonstrating what it thought was going to be the new film entertainment medium and the major force that would shape the future of the cinema. In fact it did – all the other modern widescreen formats followed

curtains pull back to reveal the huge screen and the start of the now famous roller coaster sequence.

The first half of the film concentrates on bringing a number of European audio visual treats to the audience; Venice, The Vienna Boys Choir, The Edinburgh Military Tattoo, bull fighting and folk dancing from Spain and opera from La Scala Milan. The second half, largely based in the Florida leisure park of Cypress Gardens, is an amazing piece of early fifties period Americana. Seeing this Cinerama film after having read about those first screenings of Cinerama for years, again was a rare and very real treat. Apparently the print that the NMPFT has was made for it in the 1990s, and despite regular showings at the museum, it is in remarkably good condition. The penultimate film of the weekend was a Sunday evening screening of a modern 70mm print of "Far and Away". Again I continued with another of my own variations from the main programme and did not attend that screening. Also mindful of my advancing years, I thought that the sight of Nicole Kidman, in 70 mm. wearing a turn of the century bodice, on a deeply curved screen, might be too much for my blood pressure to bear!

the film came across as the intelligent and well crafted epic that it always has been. On rushing to the station I came across a pair of German delegates pulling their suitcases along the pavement and going in a different direction. They recognised me, greeted me and passed by me with the shouts "Cinerama and 70mm. are the kings !! – see you next year!" – waving their hands as they disappeared around a corner.

For anyone who has an interest or even a slight infatuation with Cinema, I can thoroughly recommend that they at least once take the time to make the March pilgrimage to Bradford and experience this wonderful and almost unique annual event. I am so glad I did. The film world owes a real debt of thanks to Bill Lawrence and his colleagues at the NMPFT, to Thomas Hauerslev and other devotees, for keeping this important heritage and knowledge of this aspect of cinema technology so alive.

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Recommended Related Websites:

www.in70mm.com

www.widescreenmuseum.com

www.nmpft.org.uk

www.ppttrust.org

www.cinema-theatre.org.uk



on. It's just that Cinerama as a format did not last. The film starts with a prologue of a brief history of motion pictures, again screened using just a standard 35mm image in the central part of the huge screen – then at the appropriate moment the

Having to catch a return train to London on the Monday, that morning I could only stay for the first half of the screening of a vintage print of "Doctor Zhivago". Again, despite the vintage magenta monochrome,