



WIDESCREEN WEEKEND

Quality and Quantity as well as width -
Widescreen Weekend was better than ever

Report by Mark Trompeteler

This year's 2008 Widescreen Weekend, based at the National Museum of Media in Bradford, attracted its best ever number of core delegates from around the world.

Based in the 330 seat wonderfully equipped Pictureville Cinema, the 110 delegates had travelled from as far away as Australia, Canada, America, Denmark, Sweden and Norway, as well as from closer European countries and within the UK. The cinema is one of the few remaining facilities in the world that is equipped to show original three strip Cinerama films on a deeply curved louvred screen, using three separate projection boxes. In early March delegates were able to enjoy a fantastic four days of screenings, events, talks, and lectures around the widescreen cinema theme. The cinema was full to capacity on several occasions when local people bought individual "one off" tickets for various of the screenings and talks. This was only the second time I had attended, but to me the whole museum seemed busier, the widescreen weekend programme seemed fuller, more varied and better attended than when I attended in 2006. One thing that this 2008 weekend brought

inevitably to my consciousness more than ever before, was the current and future impact of digital cinema presentation. Ironical that this should happen to me at such a film based event.

The weekend started with a showing of "This is Cinerama" on the Friday morning, about which much has been written before.

After lunch delegates were treated to a UK premiere presentation of a film that they had all probably already seen quite a few times. The afternoon screening of the 1963 film "The Great Escape" was the UK premiere of its digital presentation from hard disk. The screening was introduced by John Leyton, who was coming to terms with the fact that this was the second premiere of the film he was attending some 45 years after the first. John Leyton, one time sixties pop star and film actor, played a major role in the film cast as Willie "The Tunnel King". After the screening he talked about the six month shoot, based in Germany, and recounted a number of amusing anecdotes about working alongside some of the biggest names in Hollywood at the time. However,

I found this digital presentation of the film disappointing. There were varying contrast and softness problems with the image on the screen and the digital noise (granularity in the image) was at times quite noticeable. This was not a good example of what 2K digital presentation is capable of achieving.

A very full Friday evening session began with Dion Hanson delivering a presentation on the history of film sound, which many projectionist colleagues may have seen as part of training days in recent years – but it was an unfamiliar presentation to many delegates of the weekend. At the end of his presentation Dion sprung a surprise on a certain unsuspecting delegate in the audience, one Nigel Wolland MBE. Nigel was presented with the freedom of the museum's cinemas by the museum's Head of Film and co-organiser of the weekend, Bill Lawrence (pictured below). Nigel's surprise was further enhanced when Dion projected various snaps from his career to the international audience.

The evening then continued with an excellent interview between the other co-organiser of the weekend, Thomas Hauerslev, and Jan Harlan, who was Stanley Kubrick's executive producer on many of his films, and now Kubrick's archivist and biographer. Many local people had obviously joined the weekend delegates and significantly filled the cinema for the talk and the subsequent screening. The interview covered various aspects of Kubrick's career and particularly his approach to his work. The interview concluded with discussion of the film "2001 - A Space Odyssey". A 70 mm print of the film was screened on the deeply curved screen in a way I haven't seen since I originally saw it at the Casino Cinerama in London. As always an amazingly impressive film which you understand better the more you see it. In 70mm it looked magnificent.

Saturday morning started at 10:00 am with a three strip Cinerama presentation of the Cinerama feature travelogue "Windjammer". This print was screened in 2006 and is sadly almost completely magenta. One wonders at just how magnificent a film it must have been when it

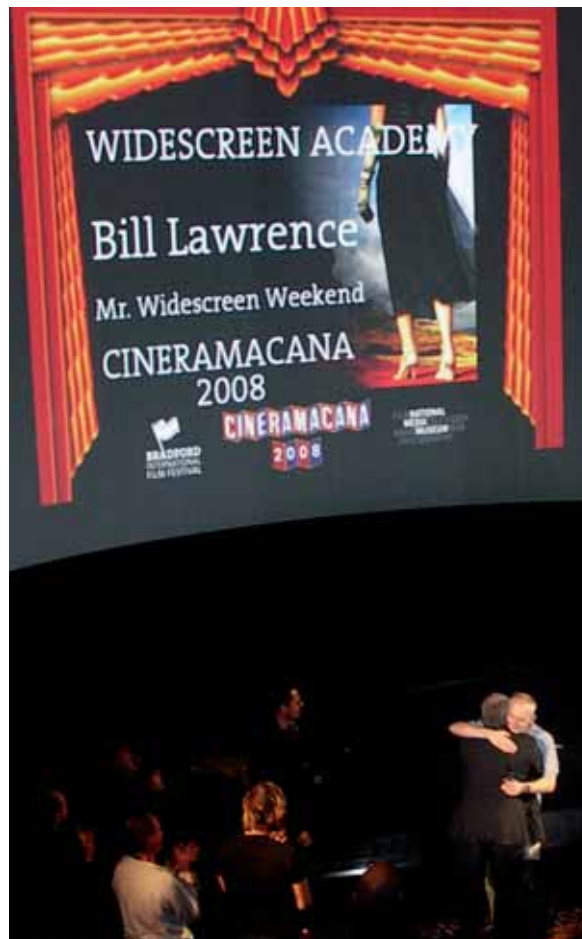


had its colour still intact 50 years ago. The idea of a feature travelogue doesn't sound that inspiring but this Cinerama film was a real discovery for me in 2006 and on a second viewing it still had real impact, ably assisted by a wonderful music score. The morning concluded with Dave Strohmaier and Randy Gitsch, two visitors from Los Angeles, showing "the breakdown reel" from the original "Windjammer" release and then an interesting "behind the scenes" video of the three museum projectionists all working together for a screening of "How the West Was Won".

Saturday afternoon featured another Steve McQueen film "The Sand Pebbles". This restoration executed on 4K digital was printed back onto a 35mm film print and was extremely well received by the audience.

Again another full evening on Saturday started with a superb talk by Dave Strohmaier and Randy Gitsch on the making of "How the West Was Won". Dave and Randy work in a number of roles in and around the film industry in LA and are working on a documentary on the making of the famous Cinerama western. They hope their documentary might become an "extra" if the film is released on DVD. At the beginning of their talk, they knew how to capture their audience's attention. The Pictureville curtains slowly swept back from the deeply curved screen and the audience was treated to the three strip theatrical trailer. The trailer used material printed from the original negatives, it was in good condition with good colour, and served as a timely reminder and insight into the true quality that Cinerama could achieve. The talk was fascinating and full of material and first hand sources, and they illustrated it with filmed interviews with original cast members. The story that they were telling was one of the production of what was probably the most expensive and complex film ever made up to that time. Their documentary, which is still in production, will certainly be a must for cinema enthusiasts when it is completed.

After Dave and Randy's excellent presentation there followed an equally fascinating talk by way of introduction to that evening's main 70mm presentation. Andrew Oran from PhotoChem Laboratories in Los Angeles gave a talk about his company's 65mm restoration work on such films as "My Fair Lady", "South Pacific", "West Side Story", "Oklahoma", "Carousel", etc.. He went through all the technical stages that a studio spend between a quarter and a half million dollars on, in restoring a major film prior to world wide re-issue on DVD. He also related his presentation to



his restoration work on the pre DVD release of the Robert Wise film "Star", starring Julie Andrews. After a short break, when members of the public took up available seats in the cinema, there was the main evening screening of "Star". Whatever one's critical point of view about the content and style of the film, what was shown was a beautifully restored print, vibrant and pristine, as good a print as you are likely to see representing the technical quality from the golden age of 70mm.

Sunday morning was wholly taken up by the traditional "Cineramacana" event when delegates and visitors to the weekend make short contributions and presentations to the audience, project interesting short items of film and video and generally contribute anything else on the widescreen theme, that shares and furthers knowledge and appreciation in this aspect of cinema. Items included a short

presentation by Paul Samuels, a delegate from a town near Washington DC, who described himself as a Cinerama-oholic. Paul has purpose built what he calls a Cinerama barn in the plot at the back of his house. In it he uses a three video projector set up and a curved louvred screen to re-create the Cinerama experience for himself, his family and friends. A visitor from Scotland outlined a new 3:1 widescreen format he and a group of colleagues were working on www.vistamorph.com [We reported on Vistamorph in Image Technology, June 2000 -Ed.]

However, if one thing stole the morning's Cineramacana session then it was the reliable team of Dave and Randy yet again. They had recently been undertaking extensive research into the Russian Cinerama process, KinoPanorama and its exhibition venues in the former Soviet Union. Delegates were treated to an incredibly rare widescreen viewing experience. Dave and Randy were able to arrange, with help of the projection team, the screening of a three strip excerpt from the KinoPanorama feature "Dangerous Curves" (picture top left), which was in excellent condition. The slightly double entendre title relates to a film about the exploits of a young female racing motorcyclist. The three strip projection worked extremely well and at times the picture joins were very faint. The condition of the print and colour was good and the film making style was incredibly refreshing and energetic given it was made in the three strip process. The editing was quick paced and there seemed to be a much wider variety of camera angles, and shot sizes changed in such a rapid and exciting way that I have never seen in a western Cinerama film.

The viewing of this excerpt was a revelation to all present.

The morning session ended with the awarding of the fellowship of the widescreen weekend academy to Bill Lawrence (picture bottom left). It was also announced that Bill would shortly be leaving the museum to take up a cinema management position in Sheffield. As Head of Film at the museum he has secured and co-organised these wonderful weekends for many years, which clearly delegates appreciated. On the presentation to him, all the delegates rose to their feet and gave this very popular head of film a hearty, rousing and long ovation. Bill was visibly moved during the presentation by the warmth shown towards him by everyone.

After Sunday lunch delegates returned to a packed cinema to hear Kenneth Branagh in conversation on stage with Bradford Film Festival artistic director Tony Earnshaw. The

interview covered his film career and Mr. Branagh spoke in depth about certain of his films, his screen roles and his approach towards them.

The conversation ended with discussion on his 70mm, four hour, full play text version of "Hamlet". The interview, which lasted well over an hour, also concluded with Kenneth Branagh being awarded the Fellowship of the Bradford Film Festival (pictured bottom right), of which the annual widescreen weekend is a part. Mr. Branagh gave a short but very eloquent thank you to the museum, the festival and the audience. Mention of "Cinema Technology" to the museum press office had successfully secured late access to the museum's "green room" for this CT reporter. Kenneth Branagh kindly sat for an exclusive CT widescreen weekend report portrait.



The screening of "Hamlet" (1996) that then followed displayed a modern 70mm print of fabulous quality. Shot more recently on film emulsions that would have used Tgrain emulsion technology, the increased image sharpness and almost disappearance of all grain in the projection to a large screen, gave a presentation of breathless quality. The improved projected image of 1996 70mm film could very clearly be seen when compared with the screening of the earlier "Star" (1968) the previous evening.



In a full Sunday programme the 1959 Michael Powell film "Honeymoon" was shown in the early evening. Filmed in Technirama and presented in the rare arc120 system in its day, this was not one of Michael Powell's better films but is of interest in tracing the development of widescreen presentation.

This weekend was a fantastic opportunity to compare alongside one another, on the same two screens, the very best that cinema technology has been able to achieve in the past and the present. The 2K digital presentation of "Blade Runner – The Final Cut" which followed, was extremely opportune. The cinema was again nearly full for the last screening of the day with many local Bradford people

attending. I was totally amazed at the superb quality of this 2K digital presentation. The "film" looked fabulous, and the full impact of how fabulous it looked was informed by the fact that only about three hours earlier I was watching the very best of what 70mm technology can achieve on exactly the same screen. As always people might say that the image on the screen looked clinical? cold? flat? (I don't agree), compared to the warmer? glossier? "look" of film. The two do have slightly different "looks" but to the cinema going public such moot finer differences did not stop them embracing the colder, clinical, digital sound of CDs, with all their very convenient advantages, over the warmer sometimes scratched

analogue sound of vinyl. This digital presentation of "Blade Runner" I thought looked fabulous, with only a little digital noise (granularity) evident in static mid tone areas, that is if you could spot any in the fast moving and impressive images.

On Monday there was a screening of a 35mm to 70mm blow up of "Edward Scissorhands" followed by the screening of a 70mm print of the not so frequently seen Douglas Trumbull film "Brainstorm".

As said previously, the widescreen weekend programme seemed fuller, more varied and better attended than when I first attended in 2006. The weekend turned out to be very good indeed with an amazing programme, and the highest calibre of contributors. I would urge anyone with an interest in cinema to attend a future weekend. Despite Bill Lawrence leaving the museum he has committed to carry on working alongside Thomas Hauerlev to co-organise future widescreen weekends.

In the December 2007 issue of CT, Thomas wrote that he expected that in a few years time digital projection could possibly exceed 70mm quality. Again, as said previously, it is ironic that in a weekend so totally devoted to the love of film, after my own personal comparison of the quality of the "Blade Runner" digital presentation with the quality of everything else I had seen that weekend, I left with the firm belief that I agreed with his assertion. The day is probably fast approaching when digital will equal or exceed 70mm quality. All the more reason to attend, support and relish such wonderful film based events.

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Next year's Widescreen Weekend at the Pictureville Cinema in Bradford, will be from 20-23



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