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Theaters to enter high-def, digital age February 04, 2007

McClatchy Newspapers

SANTA BARBARA, Calif. - The Santa Barbara International Film Festival showcases some of the best films Hollywood has to offer before the Oscars are handed out. And one would think that in the high-definition-TV-in-every-living room age, movie theaters here would be showcasing those films in the same crystal-clear image quality filmgoers can now get at home. However, that has not been the case on a large scale.

But hold on to your popcorn; good news is on the way, promises David Corwin, president of Metropolitan Theatres Corp., the company that operates most of the movie screens on the Central Coast.

Beyond obvious improvements such as upgrading existing theaters with stadium seating and entirely new facilities at Fairview Shopping Center, the Camino Real Marketplace and Paseo Nuevo, Corwin said the audience experience will be even more enhanced by what's going on behind the scenes in the projection booth.

And it's already starting to happen. Last July, the area's first digital projection system in a movie theater was installed at the Arlington Theatre on State Street, the company's flagship venue. Despite some minor glitches, the debut went smoothly, said Karen Killingsworth, the theater's manager.



"We load a hard drive that is shipped to us and then build a playlist like you would with an iPod," she disclosed.

"There's no scratching or burning of the film. The first image of the run is just as good as the last screening."

Although the 2,011-seat Arlington Theatre remains the sole cinema in the area with digital capabilities, Metropolitan said its lower-capacity theaters will follow as the technology improves and more films are issued in digital. Because of the cost savings potential, the major studios and film distributors are wasting no time in making available as many titles as possible in both film and digital formats. A single film print can cost more than \$1,200 to produce, compared with a reusable hard drive that is returned to the distributor. Killingsworth said that in December, all the films shown at the Arlington were screened digitally, except for one.

Throughout the movie exhibitor industry, the pace of switching projection booths from analog to digital is picking up.

According to data supplied by the National Association of Theatre Owners, in 2005 there were a mere 192 digital projection systems in use. As of Jan. 10, there were 1,934 screens showing digital, according to Texas Instruments, developer of DLP technology, an all-digital chip used in virtually every commercial digital projection system sold. Nationally, there are approximately 38,400 screens, meaning that just over 5 percent of all screens are digital.

The average cost of upgrading to digital projection amounts to a one-time investment of approximately

\$120,000 per screen, said Rafe Cohen, CEO of Galaxy Theatres, LLC, a regional chain with eight locations. "The whole point of digital is to provide the audience with a better experience," he said. Half of Galaxy's 85 screens are now digital, and it expects to convert the rest by the end of February.

Veteran sound technician and television executive producer Richard Corwin (no relation to the Corwin family that owns Metropolitan Theatres), has been promoting digital film locally for years as executive director and co-founder of Santa Barbara's Digital Days festival.

"The main reason I've been so active in showcasing digital tools and content is that I saw its advantages and knew it was the future," Corwin said. As one of the first technicians in the industry to work on a digital workstation, Corwin won an Emmy Award for Sound Editing for the futuristic "Max Headroom" series in 1987.

Recently, he's been redirecting his passion for digital technology with an interactive kiosk company he founded. Using standard PC hardware and touchscreen flat panel monitors, Corwin's company, Vital-Signz, has installed digital display systems at three prominent area locations.

At the Santa Barbara Botanical Gardens, visitors can view an interactive map of the gardens and zero in on topics of interest simply by pointing at the map or menu. Professionally produced high-definition videos pop onto the screen, highlighting various plants and the terrain of the gardens. Users of the system can also see information about the Santa Barbara Maritime Museum and the Santa Barbara Region Chamber of Commerce, the other two Vital-Signz locations.

Vital-Signz



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In addition to the Arlington's new Kodak Digital Cinema system, Metropolitan also installed REAL D technology, an adaptor that projects films shot in a new 3D process. The first film screened with the new system was the animated children's flick "Monster House," followed by a special 3D re-release of "The Nightmare Before Christmas" in November.

Audiences were receptive and ticket sales strong, according to the theater chain.

To cover the cost of the giveaway glasses that provide the illusion of depth, ticket prices were boosted by \$2, with matinee showings priced at \$8 and prime-time performances at \$10.75.

Metropolitan officials said that to date, the Arlington is the only theater between Thousand Oaks and San Jose to feature the REAL D system.

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