
The GSTA 2002 Conference in Review

At the industry's premier conference, GSTA celebrated its 25th anniversary with a respectful nod to the past, spirited debate about the present and cautious expectation for the future. By Kelly Germain

It was only fitting that GSTA held its 25th anniversary conference in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, the birthplace of the giant screen industry and the home of IMAX Corporation, still one of the most influential organizations in the business. Thanks to GSTA staff and member volunteers, conference host Ontario Science Centre, and supporting theaters Famous Players Paramount and Ontario Place Cinesphere, delegates experienced a seamless and content-rich event. With 769 delegates from 30 countries in attendance, an exhibit hall packed with trade show booths and amenities, pithy professional development sessions and a record number of films screened, the GSTA 2002 conference provided something for everyone.

The conference was marked by moving tributes to the industry's pioneers, including the presentation of GSTA 25th anniversary honors to IMAX Corporation's co-founders—Graeme Ferguson, Robert Kerr, Roman Kroitor and Bill Shaw—a particularly bittersweet and emotional recognition given the death of Bill Shaw just weeks before. Mike Sullivan, theater pioneer and one of the founding members of GSTA, and filmmaker Greg MacGillivray also were recognized at the celebration for their vast contributions to the industry. GSTA also honored IMAX Corporation for its history of supporting the association.

During the anniversary celebration, attendees were treated to screenings of the first two large

format films ever produced—*Tiger Child*, a daring multi-image presentation produced by Roman Kroitor and Kiichi Ichikawa for Japan's Expo in 1970, and *North of Superior*, produced, directed and photographed by Graeme Ferguson for the opening of Ontario Place in 1971.

Anecdotes from the IMAX co-founders underscored the mettle and determination they possessed to embark upon the new venture that evolved into today's giant screen film industry.

FILMS GALORE

The 2002 conference saw a record number of films screened, including 17 feature-length films, five shorts and 15 films in progress, with 14 films showcased in the films-in-development area of the trade show.

New to the conference this year was an electronic audience response system. During the films-in-progress screenings, attendees designated as film buyers rated films via an electronic keypad, and producers received the results for their films after the conference. It has not been determined if and how filmmakers will use this information, but it is a first step toward GSTA's goal of providing forums for more honest communication from film buyers to film producers.

Perhaps the most controversial topic at the conference was IMAX's proprietary Digital Re-Mastering (DMR) technology, which the company is



GSTA honored IMAX Corporation's co-founders during the 25th anniversary celebration. Pictured here are incoming GSTA president David Mosen (Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago); Roman Kroitor; Graeme Ferguson; Robert Kerr; Bill Shaw's wife Barbara; and outgoing GSTA president Truett Latimer (Houston Museum of Natural Science).



(Above) The opening reception at Ontario Science Centre.

using to repurpose Hollywood films for giant screen theaters. *Apollo 13*, the first film reformatted with DMR, was released in September 2002 and screened at the conference, and *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* was released to giant screen theaters on November 1, 2002.

During an open house at IMAX Corporation just prior to the conference, co-CEOs and co-chairmen Bradley Wechsler and Richard Gelfond acknowledged that IMAX is aware of the anxiety surrounding the company's new direction but stated they consider DMR to be a logical evolution of the industry, not a revolution. Wechsler commented that the commercial arena, which seems to be the target market for the remastered films, has significant growth potential.

"Entering Hollywood is not the demise of the educational film," Wechsler said. Noting that there are more institutionally targeted films in production than ever before, Wechsler continued, "If a film isn't right for you, just say no."

Greg Foster, president of filmed entertainment at IMAX, said DMR is "content agnostic" and will work on documentaries as well as Hollywood films. The company's ultimate goal is day-and-date releases of 35mm and 15/70 films, and Foster believes



(Left) Truett Latimer and LeRoy London (National Air and Space Museum) at the 25th anniversary celebration. London's a cappella rendition of "Happy Birthday" brought the house down.

customers will choose the giant screen version over the 35mm version.

Foster also acknowledged the industry's concern over what films will be chosen for remastering, explaining that IMAX will choose only epic films that take advantage of the 15/70 format, are enhanced by remastering and fall into the IMAX brand.

Audience reaction to *Apollo 13* was mixed. While side-by-side comparisons of film frames pre- and post-DMR transfer were impressive, images still lack the immersive clarity of film originating in large format. It's also clear, perhaps only to giant screen professionals and enthusiasts, that shots were not framed for the giant screen.

Many arguments for and against IMAX's DMR plans were voiced at the conference. While some feel DMR could be the answer for commercial theater woes, the primary argument heard against DMR was the dilution of the brand leading to audience confusion as to what exactly constitutes a giant screen experience.



"State of the Giant Screen Industry" panelists: Moderator Emlyn Koster (Liberty Science Center); Hiroyuki Suzuki (Oh-Gata Japan) and translator Yuko Yasutake; and Tracey Guiry (IMAX Theatre At-Bristol).

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The topics for this year's professional development sessions were inspired by the GSTA strategic plan developed at the midwinter committee meeting in Valencia, Spain, in March 2002. The sessions offered in-depth, timely discussions lead by panels representing 12 countries, truly reflecting the association's goal to be a global forum.

"The State of the Giant Screen Industry," moderated by Emlyn Koster of Liberty Science Center, featured reports from theaters around the world and presented a somewhat sobering picture of an industry in transition.

Hiroyuki Suzuki of Oh-Gata Japan, Japan's Large Screen Movie Theater Network, reported that the industry in Japan peaked in 1995. Japan has seen little growth in audiences, and easy access to other forms of entertainment has eroded the audience even further. The IMAX brand remains little known in Japan, despite its 20-year presence in the country. The release of *Fantasia 2000* was considered a hit in Japan, but it wasn't enough to bolster the industry and keep a number of theaters from closing. (Coincidentally, the Fujitsu Dome Theater in Chiba City closed the same day the "State of the Giant Screen Industry" was held.) To make up the difference, theaters have begun to schedule special

events to attract audiences (see "The Japanese Giant Screen Market," *The Big Frame*, summer 2002, Vol. 19, No. 3).

Tracey Guiry, IMAX Theatre At-Bristol, noted that with eight theaters opening in the U.K. in three years, IMAX's presence in the U.K. is still too new to have established any brand value. Films focused on North American markets, film topics regarded as oversentimentalized, high ticket prices, weather and political unrest have fueled a 15- to 20-percent drop in attendance from last year. A growing awareness that the market is in trouble has forced the U.K. theaters to open communications and work together rather than compete with each other. U.K. theaters have been meeting every four to six weeks to discuss how to coordinate their activities, share marketing expenses and work as a national entity.

John Rochester, IMAX Theatres Australia, reflected that of the seven theaters that opened in Australia between September 1996 and December 2000, only two remain open (in Sydney and Melbourne). Rochester blamed a flawed business model, high ticket prices, other avenues for educational film content such as the Discovery Channel, adverse publicity from closed theaters and confusion about the industry's purpose based on the recent repurposing of 35mm titles. A strong film slate, especially 3D titles, and aggressive marketing, he predicts, could help the boost the industry.

Leanne Jefferies, IMAX Theatres South Africa, said the industry in South Africa peaked in 1998. Changes in theater ownership have been disruptive; decreased disposable income that competes with legalized gambling, the lotto and cell phone proliferation; high ticket prices and film quality have contributed to the decline in the South African market. The Cape Town theater, however, saw an 82-percent increase in attendance in August 2002 compared to August 2001



David Mosena and Truett Latimer honor Greg MacGillivray (MacGillivray Freeman Films) for his contributions to the industry.

based on the success of its launch of *Space Station* (see page 62). Jefferies also remarked that the South African theaters are eager to screen repurposed Hollywood films.

Europe has seen a 15- to 20-percent drop in attendance, noted Christian Oddos of La Geode in Paris, due in part to competition from other screens and the economic situation brought about by the introduction of the Euro and the events of 9/11. Oddos also noted that the pressure put on teachers who are liable for their students during field trips also has affected school group attendance.

Canada's giant screen theaters also have seen a decline in attendance with a few exceptions, said Glenn Shaver, Ontario Science Centre. Again, the competition for disposable income, film quality and a fragmented brand image, due in part to theaters screening 35mm films on the giant screen, were listed as reasons for the decline.

Exchange rates and increasing operating costs also were mentioned by many of the panel members. To help alleviate some of the industry's problems, panel members suggested further research, data sharing, collective marketing and that GSTA continue its leadership role.

In contrast, despite the rather dreary scenario presented in the "State of the Giant Screen Industry" session, there are success stories as evidenced in the session "Case Study: Successful Model of a Giant Screen Theater." Moderated by John Wickstrom of nWave Pictures and the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, the session featured another internationally diverse panel: Brian Hall of IMAX Corporation; Elizabeth Hoyas of the Maloka Science Centre in Bogota, Columbia; Wendy Grant of the Reuben H. Fleet Science Center in San Diego, California; Marinela Servijte of Magapantalla at the Museo Interactivo Infantil in Mexico City; Libby Lewis of Liberty Science Center in New Jersey; and Jane Eastwood of the Science Museum of Minnesota.

Hall suggested that in order to get the industry back on track, the industry should "stop blaming and start fixing" and work to find solutions to the current economic situation. He went on to say that the three problems consistently mentioned in the "State of the

Giant Screen Industry" session—lack of good films, lack of leadership from IMAX and poor theater practices—were not insurmountable. "There's no such thing as a bad IMAX film," Hall said, suggesting that the right marketing could sell any film. He also said that one of IMAX's goals was to open up dialogue and listen to the theater network better, since it's difficult for the organization to respond to what they see as fractionalized, indirect criticism.

Despite facing the worst economic situation in Colombia's history, Hoyas said the Maloka Science Centre has maintained its

profitability by engaging the mass media to obtain free advertising and raise public awareness of the Centre.

Grant said that attendance at the Reuben H. Fleet Science Center is down only 4% from last year, despite the dire economic landscape and the fact there is an Iwerks theater just 100 feet from their door. To combat the intense competition, the Center has revamped its audience test screenings, targeted markets such as seniors and singles to fill the theater during hours that are typically lightly attended, branded the theater as the only IMAX dome theater in town, implemented cross promotions with the other 13 cultural institutions that are literally steps away and reviewed the marketing plan weekly so adjustments can be made quickly.

Although South America has seen little economic growth, Magapantalla is one of the top five theaters in the world, the most successful theater in Latin America and the most successful theater in a children's museum setting. Servijte said that 2002 has been their best year so far with 70 percent theater occupancy at 11 shows per day. She credited the theater's location—a park that includes 10 other museums and is visited by 2 million people per week—and a strong relationship with the media as contributing factors. Ticket prices comparable to other cinemas has helped as well, with Servijte commenting that selling many

tickets at a lower price and filling the theater is better than selling fewer tickets at a higher price.

The Liberty Science Center, located across the Hudson River from lower Manhattan, was closed for two weeks after September 11, 2001. During that time, the facility served in various support roles for

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Kathy Sullivan (COSI Columbus) during the professional development session on giant screen educational materials.

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the media, security, victims' assistance and displaced corporations. Despite that, the theater has seen good attendance in 2002, due in part to upselling, according to Lewis. Strategies such as giving combination tickets new names like the Discovery Pass and Expedition Pass, and having box office staffers ask visitors *which* film they would like to see rather than *if* they would like to see a film, have been instrumental in increasing the theater's capture rate. Booking films that best meet the institution's mission also is credited with the theater's success.

Eastwood outlined the Science Museum of Minnesota's strategy of focusing on one product and supporting it as heavily as possible, which in 2002 brought the museum within 6 percent of the attendance achieved in its record 2001 figures.

"The Pleasure and Pitfalls of Film Production Corporate Partners" provided insight from both filmmakers and exhibitors on the benefits and potential conflicts of soliciting corporate sponsors for giant screen film production. Participating on the panel were Greg MacGillivray, MacGillivray Freeman Films; Susanne Simpson, NOVA/WGBH Boston; Jane Eastwood, Science Museum of Minnesota; and Berend Reijnhoudt, Omniversum, The Netherlands.

While the availability of corporate sponsorship funds can be a deciding factor as to whether or not a film gets produced, panelists pointed out the potential conflict

between the corporate sponsor's requirements and what the theater can promise on a local level based on their own regional sponsors. The GSTA has established a sponsorship work team to determine what industry and audience research is needed to support corporate sponsorship solicitation, conduct the research and create materials filmmakers can use to approach potential sponsors.

Tracey Guiry of the IMAX Theatre At-Bristol and Kathryn Sullivan of COSI Columbus hosted the session "Giant Screen Educational Materials: Crucial Element or Costly Charade?" Prior to the conference, they conducted a survey among GSTA theater members to determine how, or even if, educational materials provided with films are used in institutions and classrooms. Survey questions asked whether theaters use the materials provided, how they were used and whether theaters created their own materials in addition to what was provided.

Overall, 66 percent responded they do use the materials, with the figures breaking down into 82 percent of U.S. theaters and 50 percent of European theaters responding yes. All theaters in Europe and Australia responding to the survey said they produce their own materials to supplement those provided, while only 38 percent of U.S. theaters do so. Non-North American theaters cited the need to translate materials and differences in educational curriculum as the primary reasons for doing so.

Although the findings were based on a small sample of respondents, the anecdotal information is a starting point for determining the type of materials theaters are looking for to ensure that giant screen films fulfill institutional missions to promote lifelong learning.

Guiry and Sullivan suggested that further research is needed to determine solutions to the disparity in educational material effectiveness for different

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audiences. Possible action steps suggested included determining educator needs as well as filmmaker and distributor expectations, identifying content and design attributes that foster greater educational impact and defining the role GSTA should take in establishing educational material guidelines.

“Critiquing Giant Screen Films: Thinking About Excellence in Learning” was developed based on the GSTA strategic plan goal to stimulate discussion about the socially and environmentally responsible use of the giant screen

format. Presenter Jim Sims related the process the American Association of Museums has established to critique museum exhibitions, explaining “the more we understand what is excellent and what’s not could save time and money.” The session raised many questions, including at what point in the filmmaking process is criticism helpful as opposed to damaging to the film’s potential success.

THE STATE OF THE INDUSTRY?

Discussions at the conference proved the giant screen industry is



David Mosena and Truett Latimer present a 25th anniversary honor to Mike Sullivan (Gulf Coast Exploreum in Mobile, Alabama), theater pioneer and one of the founding members of the association.

still an industry in flux. While there seems to be little consensus at the moment on how to get the industry on more solid economic ground, lines of communication seem to be opening. The GSTA strategic plan has been put into action and will evolve to address changing industry concerns. The conference’s professional development sessions tackled timely issues. The global forum has been put into practice—open dialogue and information sharing on an international level should serve to keep the industry informed and cohesive. The GSTA continues its leadership role by conducting further research, and work teams devote countless volunteer hours to determine ways to meet challenges head on.

The industry has weathered many changes and challenges since Graeme Ferguson, Bill Shaw, Roman Kroiter and Robert Kerr built the first large format projector and began an industry that would eventually employ thousands and inspire millions of people around the world. If the industry works together to tackle the current challenges, we should survive these as well. ■

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