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### Digital deadline: More classic movie houses make the transition

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-By Andreas Fuchs



Avon Theatre projectionist Chris Saxe weighs the transition from film to digital.

“Two years ago we began the preliminary discussions at the board level to assess what we needed to do and when,” Adam Birnbaum, director of film programming at the Avon Theatre Film Center in Stamford, Connecticut ([www.avontheatre.org](http://www.avontheatre.org)), says about the Avon’s approach to the new digital era. (As president of Nova Theatre Circuit, Birnbaum also buys and books film for some 30 independently owned and operated theatres “that are all going through the digital conversion.”) At that time, the consensus at the Avon was “to just sit tight and let things unfold a little bit longer until we got to a point where it would become a necessity.”

Just like it did for the equally classic movie houses that Film Journal International profiled last month (<http://bit.ly/fji0913dciordie>), that point has arrived. In the second part of our exclusive survey, we continue to look at various challenges in financing and technology implementation that these classic theatres are facing due to their unique building structures and market positioning.

Birnbaum gives credit to 20th Century Fox and Fox Searchlight for having made “cautionary announcements” about the possibility that they would no longer strike 35mm prints at some appropriate time in the future. “It was a very responsible step to alert theatres rather than leaving them in the dark. A lot of people didn’t know what was going on and weren’t able to get answers from any of the film companies. So this was the closest we ever got to a distributor taking some form of accountability for what was going to happen.”

There were two other indicators that helped Birnbaum determine the urgency of making the move. “Some of the smaller independent distributors that we do business with, due to economic circumstances, were going all-digital first.” That was towards the end of 2012, he recalls, before

bringing up the larger, industry-wide trends. “Secondly, the number of theatres that were converting continued to rise dramatically. That was a critical factor because, let’s face it, it is a numbers game. At some point, the rate of conversion will be such that the studios will be able to say, ‘We don’t care about the remaining 7%, 8% or 10%.’ It is already becoming increasingly expensive for them to strike prints. The labs that make them and depots that ship them are closing. And of the remaining theatres that have not converted, how many are really economically viable movie houses that produce enough revenue...to continue to play them?”

Of course, the Avon was never going to be one of those. And neither are any of the theatres in Birnbaum’s Nova booking service. “I was very proactive in keeping my theatre owners informed on a monthly or bi-monthly basis” on matters such as ongoing conversion rates and which distributors had stopped providing 35mm prints. “In that information process, most of my theatres have converted. And those two who have not yet have firm plans to do so in the near future.”

Another concern of Birnbaum’s was making sure the Avon didn’t get caught in the general conversion crunch. “Seeing how many theatres were in the process of going digital throughout the last few quarters, I didn’t want the Avon to be in a difficult position—either because the installer we were going to use was too busy to do the work based on our schedule and need, or because the equipment we wanted was on back order because of the many places that were trying to get it at the same time.” Although that latter problem did materialize somewhat and necessitated moving the February target date by a couple of weeks, “it was in good enough time anyway,” Birnbaum recalls. “That was another reason why we wanted to do this a step or two ahead of the curve rather than behind it.”

Making sure that the install itself stayed on track was Gary Engvold and the team at **Integrity Entertainment Systems**. “We were just absolutely thrilled with the work that they did,” Birnbaum enthuses. “Despite the fact that the Avon is a standalone, independent location with two screens, we received the same treatment and level of attention that they would afford to much larger customers. The Avon is such a unique building with distinct issues and site-specific problems that needed to be addressed in the process of switching to digital. We were afforded all the time that we needed and we are very appreciative of that.”

Birnbaum elaborates on one of those issues. “Our original 1939 projection booth is tiny and services both auditoriums simultaneously. So, unfortunately, we had to do away with the 35mm projection systems. We are now 100% DCP only and although we can bring in Blu-ray or Digi-Beta decks, to a certain extent that affects programming.” (For more about programming, please refer to our sidebar conversation below.) While the very sharp side angle of the old 35mm projection often caused a keystone effect on the screen, the image in the Avon’s rear auditorium was completely corrected. “The level of picture and presentation has been improved dramatically” in the larger auditorium as well. Birnbaum mentions brightness in particular, since the theatre has to contend with a throw distance of 125 feet (38 m) from the booth.

Along with two Christie 2210 projectors and GDC servers, the Avon received a Dolby Surround 5.1 upgrade in the process. The nonprofit, member-supported cinema was able to raise the funds privately and elected not to limit its art-house programming choices by entering VPF agreements.

Similarly, the **American Cinematheque**, as a “nonprofit organization exhibiting primarily repertory films” at its Hollywood (Egyptian Theatre) and Santa Monica (Aero Theatre) locations in California, “was not a candidate for any kind of VPF arrangement,” confirms chief projectionist Paul Rayton. The 1940 Aero Theatre was converted “via a process of persuasion as well as digging a bit deeper into our pockets. Having a top-of-the-line digital projector in situ, along with our fully operational set of [Norelco AAll] 35/70mm film projectors, was essential considering the trends in the field of exhibition. The various corporate participants knew of the mission of the American Cinematheque,” Rayton says, showing his appreciation. “Through the efforts of certain local industry contacts, they were agreeable to helping make it all happen at an affordable rate.”

NEC made their 4K projector available to the American Cinematheque at a promotional discount, the manufacturer confirms. “Just as NEC’s small-chip NC900 is a great fit for small-size art houses, the NC3240S covers the other end of the spectrum, with powerful brightness and high-resolution for large theatres—and the Aero’s 38-foot screen and 435-seat auditorium really do it justice.” Adds Jim Reisteter, general manager of digital cinema for NEC Display Solutions, in a personal note to our readers, “We are grateful to have contributed to the transformation of such a historic cinema house. Moviegoers will now experience a new ambience at the Aero as a result of digital cinema, yet the same

charm that they have grown accustomed to for decades.”

Peter Nicholas, the former d-cinema sales director at NEC, had approached [Moving iMage Technologies](#) in April 2012 about the Aero. The integration and installation experts, whose ten-year anniversary *FJI* will be honoring next month, gladly provided project management, setup expertise, and a custom movable pedestal. With a light output of 33,000 lumens, NEC’s projector complements the only Harkness Hall theatrical micro-perf screen installed in Los Angeles, the Cinematheque assures. Dolby delivered their 4K-capable server/IMB and their Dolby 3D system. While the sound systems “were already top-notch,” Rayton notes, “other than various interfaces and appropriate switching, very little had to be done in terms of upgrading the sound. Dolby 3D was chosen because it works on a regular, non-metallic screen, which insures that all the movies we screen from film [and in digital 2D] would not be compromised in the least.”

At the 1922 Egyptian, which uses a Series 1 NEC NC2500, the “cooperative arrangement” with [DMX Cinema Technology](#) was instrumental in going digital, Rayton goes on to explain. “Robert Weisgerber of DMX had the projector, which he was using for development of a proprietary high frame rate [HFR] display system, and needed a large screen to view materials that were being prepared for testing in his 48fps mode.” At the same time, “the projector remains completely compatible for conventional DCPs. So by allowing Mr. Weisgerber to occasionally use the screen during weekdays when we’re otherwise closed, the Cinematheque had access to a very fine d-cinema system and DMX had a place to evaluate his content on a large [53 by 27-foot] screen.”

In late 2008, “the first show that we presented in there was actually a classic movie.” You can feel Rayton’s excitement about showing *The Iron Horse*. “John Ford’s swirling western epic from 1924 had actually premiered at the Egyptian way back then.” Following this DCP premiere, many other—if not most—classics, festivals, tributes and special presentations have gone the way of digital. “We were initially content shifting any and all digital screenings to the Egyptian, but by early 2012 it was apparent that we’d have to add digital to the Aero because already certain titles were only available as DCPs.” (For more about formats, see our sidebar below.)

The difference that DCI and DLP Cinema have made is not limited to the United States, of course. Located in the small Belgian town of Lichtervelde, [Cinema De Keizer](#) saw the digital light as well (. On Dec. 18, the country’s longest-operating cinema reopened with a preview presentation of *Brasserie Romantiek* with director Joël Vanhoebrouck and a host of Flemish guests as well as Minister Hilde Crevits in attendance.

Established in 1924 by Gerard Debaillie, Cinema De Keizer has been hailed by d-cinema leader Barco as “a reference beacon in the Belgian cinema world and the lifework of Gerard’s daughter Agnes, a cinephile who personified the world of cinema to the citizens of her town.” After Agnes passed away, the cinema’s future seemed uncertain until the Flemish government declared De Keizer part of the cultural heritage and seven locals invested in the theatre. “I’d seen hundreds of movies at Cinema De Keizer,” one of them said. Hans Maertens, who leads the nonprofit organization that had dreamed of “installing a 21st-century theatre in the original 1920s décor, to bring back that ‘community feeling’ that the cinema inspires.”

Part of that 21st-century feeling is Barco’s new DP2K-10S d-cinema projector, which is specifically “designed for the special needs of smaller theatres, independent cinemas and art houses,” the company notes. “We did include technical assistance to set everything up,” Tom Bert, Barco’s product marketing manager, d-cinema, tells *FJI*. “More importantly, we provided some business guidance on how to make the most of going digital”—he mentions installing lobby digital signage and “bringing advertising into the mix.” While Barco’s technicians “did not have any specific problems due to the historic nature of the building,” upgrades to the sound system were not yet part of the digital picture, he confirms. “Like many older cinemas, Cinema De Keizer does not have surround sound” and a digital-to-analog D/A converter was added to its analog stereo (L/R/Center) system.

“It was a stroke of luck for us that Lichtervelde is close to the global digital-cinema market leader, and we couldn’t have found a better partner,” said Sofie Eeckeman, who continues to operate the cinema with a selection of current films on weekends and holidays. “I spent my childhood helping out Agnes... and am delighted to continue her dream... The new DP2K-10S digital-cinema projector is ideal for our needs and enables us to bring Cinema De Keizer into the future, while maintaining that old-era charm and character that is unique to our theatre.” With the addition of concerts, sports and special event programming, Eeckeman will be “gathering the local community around the big screen, like in the olden

days," Barco opined. "Agnes Debaillie would be proud."

### **Life Without 35mm: A Programmer's Perspective**

Despite a multiplicity of available formats for repertory titles that remain at his disposal ("VHS, that we won't do."), Adam Birnbaum, director of programming at the Avon Theatre Film Center in Stamford, Connecticut, has observed a "vacuum" being created for titles that may not warrant enough interest to be converted to DCPs.

"We've been impacted in two areas," he begins with the Avon's very popular series of Cult Classics. The 35mm pre-show that came as part of the fun package "enabled us to show the classic, pulp-movie trailers, not only of the films that we were going to show but also of other titles from the same time frame or similar genres," he says. "I was also able to work with a few private collectors on a semi-regular basis on certain films that fell out of the studio system. While they may not even have a rights-holder attached anymore, collectors still have 35mm prints, particularly from the '60s, '70s and '80s. While we can still show some of them because they are on DVD or Blu-ray discs, there was a certain aesthetic allure to the cult crowd of seeing them on 35mm. The scratches and green emulsion lines didn't matter as part of that experience and were actually part of the charm. And the trailers themselves were just terrific," he says with an audible sigh. "That is something that we are working on," Birnbaum promises.

"Another area where we are finding this void is in our French Cinematheque program. I usually go back and forth between a classic and a contemporary film each month." While the latter usually don't pose a problem as long as they have a U.S. distributor, many of the Avon's sources for classics do have them on 35mm but not in any other format.

"35mm was the way all of these films have been preserved, stored and shown all these years. This is a perfect example of an area of our business where the money just isn't there to convert these films immediately to a DCP or Blu-ray format, because the demand isn't necessarily there. This is something where I am stubbing my toe a bit, no longer able to find as much as I used to, now that the Avon no longer has 35mm."

So that the audience doesn't have to rub their eyes, Birnbaum continues to check out any available, non-DCP formats in advance to see how the transfer quality holds up once it's shown through the d-cinema projector. "We want to be confident that our audience will be satisfied with this presentation. While we don't want to compromise the image and the integrity of what we are showing at the theatre, we also want to have the opportunity to program many of these great movies."

Was it all worth it, then? "Losing out on a couple of programming opportunities by not having 35mm versus the necessity of going digital and everything that we still can do is certainly a worthwhile tradeoff for us. And the audience, by the way, loves the presentation... I think it was the right thing to do and the right time, based on all the variables out there. In a perfect world, I wish we could do additional facility upgrades and build a second projection booth that...is large enough to have side-by-side 35mm and d-cinema equipment. That's probably a pipe dream...on my wish list."

Programmers at the American Cinematheque in Los Angeles have had their wish list fulfilled. Announcing their inaugural line-up of "well-known classics from the various studios" to celebrate the installation of its NEC 4K projector at the Aero Theatre in Santa Monica, Calif., they promised a summer of "gorgeous DCP presentations as you've never seen them before."

But they are not giving up on 35mm. "In this time of rapid technological change within the film industry," the American Cinematheque says it remains "committed to the traditional beauty of film prints while also embracing the impressive developments being made in digital projection. We've always been dedicated to showcasing a variety of top-notch formats—from 70mm to six-track magnetic sound, to nitrate, to dye transfer—and the DCP [Digital Cinema Package] is no different. The DCP format is unique in various ways: uncompressed sound, zero generational degradations, and the ability to scan negatives at high rates (labeled as 2K, 4K and 8K). These elements allow for perfect detail and color while retaining film grain and, in some situations, recreating the look of Technicolor."

We leave the last word to the Avon's Birnbaum: "I have my own feelings about digital. It's not black and white in that I am a 35mm purist and hate digital. No, but I also do not think that digital is *always* better than 35mm."