



◀ Left, delegates trying out the VR experience; Below, projectionist John Cahill hard at work



## SCREENING CELLULOID

*The National Media Museum's Widescreen Weekend highlighted issues cinemas face*

**T**he Widescreen Weekend is a unique cinema exhibition event. Cinema exhibition professionals, academics, and cinema fans fly in from all over the world, to view what has been, up to now, mostly classic widescreen and large format films of the past. Delegates also attend lectures and presentations and exchange knowledge on cinema and its exhibition. Internationally, Bradford's National Media Museum (NMM) offers a unique exhibition facility, for both digital and analogue formats that only a national museum dedicated to the technology of the media could provide.

The programme for this year's 20th. annual event, from 13-16 October had significant elements of the traditional Weekend content. A classic roadshow movie of the past: *The Agony and the Ecstasy* in 70mm; two digital Cinerama restorations and a rare showing of three strip *This is Cinerama*. Also featured were revival screenings of the back catalogue of widescreen cinema history, including *Vertigo* in 70mm; *Aliens* in a 70mm blow up print; *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* in pristine 4K; and *The Innocents* in beautiful widescreen black and white. A number of interesting new elements of programming had been introduced this year.

As one who firmly believes this festival should be developing a younger, wider demographic, whilst not alienating its established more mature and loyal core audience, I realise that is easier said than

done. It is particularly difficult given the NMM's regional location and a climate of cost-cutting within the UK's cultural venues.

New this year were a whole student day to sit alongside the BKSTS/NMM Student Widescreen Film of the Year Competition and a student delegate pass price for the whole weekend, as well as a Sunday family event film *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. New technology and perspectives were included with demos of virtual reality available to delegates, a panel discussion on "VR and Cinema" and the screening of a related "art house" film "Notes on Blindness".

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CELLULOID

Widescreen Weekend sits right in the middle of a number of issues about the exhibition of the back catalogue of beautiful celluloid films of the past. Independent and arthouse cinemas globally attempt to make money by exhibiting classics, alongside other films. It is a niche but culturally important exhibition activity, recently underlined with showings of *The Hateful Eight*, still in cinemas on 70mm celluloid a year after its release to those same cinemas.

I asked Kathryn Penny, film business manager at the NMM, and director of the Widescreen Weekend festival, about her and the Museum's views on some of these issues, as they are reflected in the Weekend, and its development.

**MARK TROMPETELER (MT):** Kathryn, how important is it to continue to programme some past film classics in your cinemas? Is

this within the remit of your ongoing programme? Or does this mainly happen only within the Widescreen Weekend?

**KATHRYN PENNY (KP):** We're proud of the wide range of projection facilities in Pictureville cinema and offer a range of classic celluloid screenings throughout the year. We recently screened the 1943 *Jane Eyre* and *A Taste of Honey* on 35mm and, in partnership with Picturehouse Cinemas, we host Vintage Sunday screenings each week. These put classic films on the big screen where they belong. It's important that we offer this range of films and formats year round. The remit of the Widescreen Weekend is more niche — firstly the films have to be wide gauge and also we put a huge amount of effort into sourcing rare prints that the audience will get very few opportunities to see elsewhere.

**MT:** How can a venue like yours attract and maintain the usual older age demographic to pay to see such classic films? Presumably some of the developments in the Weekend this year were to attract a younger, wider demographic to attend. How did that succeed? What were the problems? How vital is it to maintaining the screening of classic films at the venue?

**KP:** We are living in the age of event cinema and this provides us with two potential audiences for WSW; those who remember roadshow films of the 50s and 60s and want to access nostalgia and those who want to see something different, something more than a standard cinema experience.



◀ Left, Sir Christopher Frayling showing BKSTS student film maker, Matt Jeffrey, celluloid IMAX; below left, this year's Widescreen Weekend event attracted a younger audience to see classics, including *Ghostbusters*, below



# CLASSICS IN THE DIGITAL AGE...

*projecting celluloid film in a digital world, Mark Trompeteler examines the realities*

This year, the WSW was expanded by a day. This allowed us to programme a day of events for students before opening night. A low-price student day pass was available for the first day. The programme was open to all delegates who could attend the student events or just come to opening night and attend the festival from there.

Audience feedback shows us there continues to be some resistance to the inclusion of student films in the programme, however, the Student Widescreen Film of the Year Competition is the only competition of its kind and is important in inspiring the next generation of widescreen filmmakers.

**MT:** At what technical/programming/curatorial tipping points do you take the decision not to screen a celluloid print of a celluloid classic and go for a DCP file version instead?

**KP:** If celluloid is available in a presentable quality we will almost always choose it over a digital file. However, if no film print is available or if we can't access the print and feel the film is right for the programme, then we will select to play from 4K DCP.

**MT:** Are there ever any factors, culturally or curatorially that dictate you should screen a celluloid print even if it is in poor condition or badly faded, for instance with three-strip?

**MT:** People may still remember the press coverage about the Museum's possible closure. Obviously it is good news that the decision was made not to close. Can you tell us about the Museum's future strategy and plans for Widescreen Weekend?

**KP:** The NMM has emerged from a challenging time with a clear vision and the same stands for the Widescreen Weekend. The decision to run the festival as a stand-alone event shows great confidence in the festival and its future. We are already planning for next year. We have to be agile though to ensure the continuation of the festival and will continue to incorporate new cinema technologies as well as celebrating the milestones of the past.

## "IF YOU RUN ONE OF ONLY THREE CINEMAS THAT CAN SHOW A SPECIAL PRINT, YOU HAVE RESPONSIBILITY TO LET THE PUBLIC SEE"

**MT:** With the embedding of digital exhibition, is acquiring good-quality, full-colour and clean celluloid prints of the classic films in both 35mm and 70mm getting more difficult or more expensive?

**KP:** Certainly. Archives are getting more and more reluctant to loan prints. The expense of shipping them is a known quantity and a significant part of the festival budget, but accessing prints is more of a challenge. We're looking at being able to run 70mm prints on changeovers next year as many archives will now not loan prints if they are to be plattered.

Should that happen and when?

**KP:** Absolutely. In 2012 and 2013 we showed *The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm* from an original three-strip print. This is over 50 years old and although it has maintained much of its glorious Technicolor, the first reels have shrunk, affecting the quality of the exhibition in the first 20 minutes. But when you have a special print and one of only three cinemas in the world that can show it, you have a responsibility to let the public see it. I'm confident the film will appear in future WSW programmes.

### RESPECT THE PAST, SECURE THE FUTURE

As cinema exhibition professionals and enthusiasts, we should support and lobby for continuance of all the film festivals, and independent, arthouse and cultural venues that screen celluloid classics either on film or DCPs — BKSTS was pleased to provide some financial sponsorship for Widescreen Weekend for the second year running.

One final irony was mentioned by delegates during meal breaks and late-night chats in the hotel bar. What if cinema history repeated itself? Just a fraction of the number of films made and exhibited in the silent era survive today. Wouldn't it be the final irony of cinema if, in 100 years' time, only a fraction of the films made in digital formats actually survived? All because no-one backed them up on celluloid. **CT**