

The GSTA Conference in Review

World events made for a somewhat somber and subdued conference, but members of the giant screen industry proved there is therapy in getting back to work, doing what we do and doing it well. **By Kelly Germain**

With the reality of the events of September 11 still sinking in, giant screen industry professionals from around the world boarded planes, trains and automobiles to converge in Chicago for the annual Giant Screen Theater Association conference.

The GSTA executive committee issued a statement on September 14 stating the conference would continue as planned, prompting a number of responses to the GSTA offices, most supportive of the committee's decision. With travelers enduring flight delays, long queues at security checkpoints and customs, or even opting for alternate modes of travel, delegates from 31 countries assembled for the industry event of the year. In the end, only 15 percent of the registered delegates cancelled their reservations.

A WHIRLWIND OF ACTIVITY

The 2001 conference, held September 20–25, featured the fifth annual GSTA Achievement Awards dinner, comprised of the Film and MAC Awards, and more workshops, panel discussions, new films, films-in-progress and films-in-development than ever. The sold-out trade show included 62 booths representing 41 exhibitors, roundtable discussions, entertainment, prizes and refreshments, as well as the opportunity to browse through the MAC Award submissions, marketing library and conference photos.

Professional development is always a focus of the conference, and this year was no exception. In a session on "Marketing Trends," Cheryl Berman, chair and chief creative officer of Leo Burnett, USA, encouraged marketers to leverage the experience of viewing a giant screen film. She suggested primary marketing should target and cater to the core audience, or "unbridled enthusiast," with separate campaigns targeting secondary audiences and "intenders"—those who intend to go to a giant screen film. She also encouraged on-line advertising, unusual placement of unusual ads, and creating longer format advertising pieces to market films to school audiences, stressing that teachers want the

full story, not the hype.

In perhaps the most controversial session, Marty Shindler of The Shindler Perspective presented the results of the GSTA Economic Impact Study®. His presentation was met with a wide array of sentiments, a further indication of the rifts within the industry. A number of debates, including those over giant screen film subject matter and 15 perf/70mm vs. 8/70 vs. digital, continue to elicit passionate responses from all sectors of the industry.

Shindler stressed that one must read the entire report to truly grasp the depth of its contents and recommendations.

"Many attendees indicated that the GSTA Economic Impact Study put into words what the industry has been thinking for years," said Shindler. "There is still concern amongst significant industry segments that there are many who either do not see the big picture or fully understand the economics from all points of view."

GSTA has formed a task force to address the recommendations outlined in Shindler's report and create an action plan. See page ?? for further details on the task force.

"The real debate needs to happen now that the conversation has started," stated Goulam Amarsy, president of Primesco. "Many interesting ideas were proposed by Marty and others in Chicago, but if we do not hammer them, the whole thing could be another one of these studies that leads to nothing. GSTA is a viable and credible body that could tackle the rejuvenation of the industry."

"The study offered the opportunity for important members of the giant screen industry to give frank comments on the problems they see and possible solutions," said Bob Grimm, Tech Museum of Innovation. "The challenge now is for the task force and the GSTA board to take these recommendations and plan steps that will improve the industry. We are

optimistic that there will be mutual benefit.”

During a panel discussion entitled “How to Keep Your Theater in the Black,” moderated by Canadian political talk-show host Avi Lewis, panelists offered their insight on how to keep a theater profitable. Ann Dowdy, Museum of Science and Industry, Tampa, Florida, suggested generating buzz by finding a local relevance to films and trend shopping—determining how to tie film marketing to current cultural trends—to gather clues and generate ideas.

Brian Hall, IMAX Corporation, emphasized building relationships by creating strong and abiding ties with the community, media, schools, businesses and politicians. Alison Roden, The Science Museum London and the BFI London IMAX Cinema, advocated sharing best practices and working as a group; signing pre-leases; considering the use of on-screen advertising; and screening special event 35mm films, with giant screen films screened during the special event as well.

The final day of the conference included the lively session “Sharing Best Practices with a Focus on Combining the Film Experience with Lifelong Learning Tools.” Alex Patrick, education officer at The Science Museum in London and the BFI London IMAX Cinema, lead the group, offering her expertise in attracting school groups. Since theaters compete with other organizations for school audiences, Patrick suggested sending regular mailings to schools, providing free film screenings for teachers and their families, inviting relevant scientists and guest speakers to introduce films and answer questions, creating partnerships with other institutions and providing in-service training to assist teachers in formulating lesson plans related to the films.

Greg MacGillivray shared some of the extensive research MacGillivray Freeman Films (MFF) has conducted on profiling the typical giant screen film audience member. MacGillivray also outlined the process MFF goes through to ensure each film it produces includes entertainment and education, as well as exciting moments with an original concept. Using science advisors on location, engaging audiences by portraying characters who are role models, and expanding the educational aspect through marketing, such as developing family film guides and speaker series, all enhance the educational aspect of films.

Jennifer Ernise, director of exhibit and group programs at Exploris in Raleigh, North Carolina, presented ideas for integrating institutional programming with giant screen films, such as what the Tech Museum of Innovation in San Jose, California, did when it scheduled the film *Mexico* for the month celebrating Mexican Independence Day. Ernise also stressed establishing community partnerships. For example, in exchange for an educational presentation on the film currently on the museum’s schedule, the Raleigh city library

prominently displays Exploris theater promotional materials.

Patricia Woodside, Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, suggested hosting career days for professions portrayed in giant screen films. She also said that research has found that students learn more when asked to write about a film after viewing it than when given a list of questions to answer while watching the film.

The conference also included a developing members workshop coordinated by Diane Carlson of the Pacific Science Center, marketing focus groups and technical sessions featuring the latest giant screen technological advances. A digital technology update was presented by Stacey Spiegel, president and CEO Immersion Studios; Steve Thorburn, Thorburn Associates; Sean Phillips, filmmaker; Bob Sullivan, associate director for public programming, Smithsonian Natural History Museum; and Jeff Fraser, director sales and marketing, USA, Immersion Cinema.

A STRONG SLATE OF FILMS

Despite the current industry economic turmoil, dozens of filmmakers continue to leap into the fray. Fifteen new films and 19 films-in-progress were screened during the conference and 16 films-in-development were presented, making it clear that given the slate of films available in the next few years, exhibitors will have to make tough choices on which films to add to their schedules.

New films screened included *All Access*, *Bears*, *China: The Panda Adventure*, *Haunted Castle*, *The Human Body*, *Journey Into Amazing Caves*, *Lost Worlds: Life in the Balance*, *Majestic White Horses*, **NSync: Bigger Than Live*, *OceanMen*, *Origins of Life*, *Shackleton’s Antarctic Adventure*, and three shorts, including *Pittsburgh’s Big Picture*, *The Princess and the Pea* and *Spirit of Silicon Valley*.

Films-in-progress included *Australia: Land Beyond Time*, *Bugs!*, *Coral Reef Adventure*, *Courage*, *Dinosaurs: Face to Face*, *Horses: The Story of Equus*, *Forces of Nature: Natural Disasters*, *India: Kingdom of the Tiger*, *Kilimanjaro: To the Roof of Africa*, *Lewis & Clark: Great Journey West*, *Manatee: The Forgotten Mermaid*, *Pulse: A Stomp Odyssey*, *Santa vs. the Snowman*, *The Science of Speed*, *Search for Infinity*, *Space Journey*, *Space Station*, *Straight Up! Adventures in Vertical Flight* and *Virtual Actors Featuring the Boxer*.

Giant screen filmmakers seem to be testing the waters with film topics. *All Access* and **NSync: Bigger Than Live* offer concert footage. *Pulse: A Stomp Odyssey* brings the most successful off-

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Broadway show in history to the giant screen. *Search for Infinity* is a science-based fictional film which introduces fractals (the visual "geometry of nature") and features Sir Arthur C. Clarke, renowned scientist and author of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. *Straight Up! Adventures in Vertical Flight* offers the drama of military chases and disaster rescues. *Virtual Actors Featuring The Boxer* introduces Slim, a virtual boxer. The 3D animated *Santa vs. the Snowman* features battle scenes reminiscent of *Star Wars*.

Even some of the more traditional giant screen documentary-style fare is stretching its limits with *Shackleton's Antarctic Adventure*, *China: The Panda Adventure*, *India: Kingdom of the Tiger* and *Lewis & Clark: Great Journey West* venturing into docu-drama territory by including re-creation scenes of historical figures.

Perhaps the most highly anticipated film-in-progress was IMAX's *Space Station*, due for release May 2002. Featuring footage shot by astronauts, the film will be available in 3D and 2D, giving earth-bound viewers a stunning documentation of life aboard the International Space Station.

THE FUTURE OF IMAX

Although the entire industry is experiencing economic challenges, perhaps the hardest hit has been IMAX Corporation, which lost \$25.2 million in the first two quarters of 2001.

ECONOMIC IMPACT STUDY TASK FORCE

In response to the Economic Impact Study report, GSTA has formed a task force to develop an action plan to improve the industry economics "to the extent the financial model is not working adequately for all concerned," as was stated in the original study proposal. Using the recommendations outlined in the study as the basis, the group will focus its efforts on recommendations that will have a positive effect on the industry overall and have real viability for implementation.

The task force consists of Peter Giles and Bob Grimm, Tech Museum of Innovation; Dave Duszynski, Cincinnati Museum Center; Greg MacGillivray, MacGillivray Freeman Films; Susanne Simpson, NOVA/WGBH; Mark Katz, nWave Pictures; Diane Carlson, Pacific Science Center; Alison Roden, The Science Museum London and BFI London IMAX Cinema; Truett Latimer, Houston Museum of Natural Science; and task force chair Mike Day, Science Museum of Minnesota.

"The task force brings more than 150 years of experience to this process," said Day. "Most importantly, at some point most of the task force members have supported the three-legged stool in each capacity—as film producer, film distributor and film exhibitor."

Day continued, "The task force wants to put the GSTA and the broadest base of its membership in a position to succeed. Given the experience of the task force members, they know the challenges to develop action steps that will support industry-wide success. That is why we are reviewing the recommendations in terms of their impact and feasibility of implementation."

Prior to the mid-winter meeting in Valencia, Spain, in March 2002, the task force will report to members on the process and progress of their efforts via the GSTA e-newsletter, with a full written report outlining a communication and implementation plan to be presented in Valencia.

Speaking via phone at the theater members meeting during the Chicago conference, IMAX co-chief executive and co-chair Richard Gelfond admitted that the bankruptcy of a number of commercial giant screen theaters had severely impacted IMAX. He also said the company was caught by surprise by the speed of the meltdown of that segment of the industry.

Gelfond listed a number of steps the company has taken to meet its financial challenges: a company reorganization has resulted in a lowering of the cost structure, nearly \$50 million in debt has been retired, Greg Foster has been brought in as president of filmed entertainment, Brian Hall has been moved to North America as senior vice president of theater operations, and film marketing has been combined with brand marketing under Mary Pat Ryan. Gelfond says he feels "for the first time the team is in place to restore IMAX to stability and move forward."

IMAX pegs its hopes on a slate of films in production, including *Beauty and the Beast*, *Space Station*, *The Lion King*, *Santa vs. the Snowman*, *Race to the Pole*, *The Young Black Stallion*, and *Ultimate X*.

After Gelfond's phone presentation, Greg Foster added, "Our brand is our core asset. Everything has to feed into our core values of brand. I think we may have lost sight of that, but we're coming back to that now. Nobody wakes up and says, 'Let's go to an MGM movie today.' But people all over the world say, 'Let's go see an IMAX movie.'"

"I don't know if we've reached out in the past and been good listeners as we should have been," Foster said to the audience of theater members. "If you're successful, we're successful."

2002 GSTA MILESTONE

The Giant Screen Theater Association marks a major milestone in 2002, celebrating its 25th year as an association. Next year's conference, which will be held September 30–October 4, 2002, goes "back to where it all began"—Toronto, Ontario, Canada, and will be hosted by the Ontario Science Centre.

"This year's conference in Chicago was a huge success. The industry really pulled together after the events of September 11," said Mary Ann Henker, GSTA executive director. "I'm looking forward to building on the success of this conference to make our 25th anniversary conference in Toronto a productive, memorable and meaningful event."

Derval Whelen of Sony Pictures Classics, Large Format in New York City, sent a heartfelt message after the conference: "At a time when things were so uncertain and the basic freedoms we hold dear were being compromised, it was really wonderful and comforting to see so many familiar faces and to feel the solidarity of our industry." ■

Kelly Germain is editor of *The Big Frame*.