

DOMINIC SIMMONS

A cinema exhibition challenge and then some!

Each day, the Technical Services Team at BFI's London venue, project films from all eras of cinema across four different auditoria. How do they cope?



PART 2

Mark Trompeteler continues with the second part of his two part interview with Dominic Simmons, Head of Technical Services at BFI Southbank.

MARK TROMPETELER (MT): Do you have any specialist areas or workrooms? How are the digital files ingested and routed?

DOMINIC SIMMONS (DS): The Vaults area is where all titles are initially processed. We have a Steenbeck for checking prints and there are two Vaults used for analogue prints and temporary storage of nitrate. This is where we keep our TMS, and all Technical areas are networked from here on a mix of fibre and Cat6. The Vaults are stuck into a difficult part of the building and are pretty cramped, so hardly ideal, but that is one of the compromises you have to make when your venue is under a bridge.

All the projection boxes have areas for make up so in that respect we are similar to other cinemas. One area that could be considered more specialist is our Content Production Suite, tucked away in what used to be the Digital Test Bed. We have built a DCP production and QC area with a fully calibrated 2K, 5.1 D-Cinema installation. We increasingly produce our own DCPs for screenings and this is where Russ Would, our Content Supervisor, is based. He's recently produced nine DCPs of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's work for a national release under an agreement with Arrow Films so we have a pretty comprehensive setup. We also use this area for building

DCPs for clip shows, trailers and other screenings. It sees a lot of work during the BFI London Film Festival as we only show films on DCP in the Festival — anything that turns up on other formats is converted.

MT: What extra work do festivals mean?

DS: We run a few over the year, the BFI London Film Festival (LFF) of course, but also BFI Flare, the London LGBT Film Festival, BFI Future Film Festival and BFI and *Radio Times* Television Festival as well as smaller weekend festivals such as LOCO, The London Comedy Film Festival, The London Indian Film Festival and Kinoteka Polish Film Festival. A lot of the extra work comes from the increase in digital content coming through the building and the intensity of events and screenings. We ramp up the number of technicians on shift and often work longer shifts. For BFI Flare and the BFI LFF the Festivals team take on additional screening coordination staff to ensure all films are in the right place.

MT: The BFI LFF must be huge for you — BFI co-ordinates with other cinemas around London during that. Is that mainly a programming co-ordination issue or do you get involved with other aspects?

DS: The BFI LFF is the busiest period of the year for us as BFI Southbank becomes the hub for the Festival. All screening material passes through the Vaults. With nearly 250 features and over 150 shorts, the cinemas operate at capacity with all screens running four or five screenings a day. We partner with 17 venues and assist where necessary.

Our partner venues are obviously capable of running DCP screenings, but we often help out hiring additional equipment for Q&As and sorting DCP issues. I like to meet the teams involved in advance to ensure they are happy with the information that we give them and processes involved.

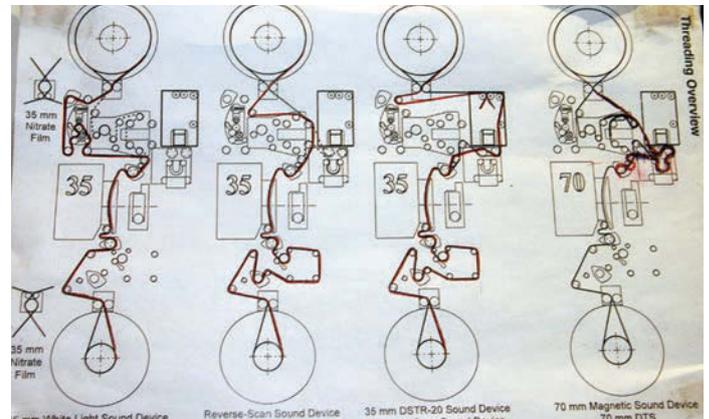
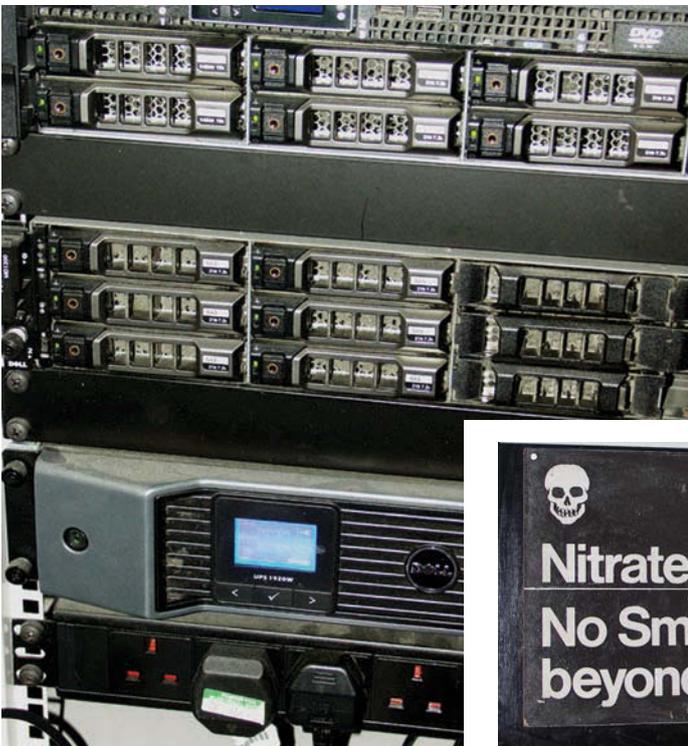
The key aspect of the LFF, and this is true for every festival, is the volume of data that passes through the venue. We store a copy of all DCP titles in-house before sending them to the venues, so there is a huge amount of ingest and storage required. The advantage of DCP is the reliability of the screenings. Even though we had over a thousand screenings in the LFF in 2016, we didn't lose a single one.

The LFF last year saw a huge uptake in the amount of work for Technical Services with the construction of the Embankment Garden Cinema in Victoria Embankment Gardens. An 800-seat cinema with a 16-metre matt white screen was built from nothing in 11 days, and for the duration of the Festival was the second largest cinema in London. This was an exciting project to be involved in and technicians from BFI Southbank operated the venue over the 45 screenings. The project was popular with filmmakers and audiences alike.

MT: Private hire is a growing area for you. Can you tell us about that and other types of exhibition work you get involved with?

DS: Although the BFI is part-funded by Government Grant in Aid, budgetary pressures are a fact of life for all Arms-Length Public Bodies. In order to support

▼ Below left, the 80TB storage is regularly used at BFI as the content changes daily basis; below right, alternative film threads for customised Kineton FP75E projectors; bottom, handle with care



our programme and serve our core purpose of promoting the broadest range of film culture for everyone, we increasingly look for creative, commercial ways to fund our operation. Corporate hire is a key element of this. To do this, we've made improvements to conferencing facilities and have found ways of working smoothly with external events companies. It's a competitive market — we need to offer the flexibility companies require for their conferences, events and awards shows. With the equipment we have installed, events production companies can be sure when they turn up they'll be able to get content and presentations on screen easily. Our technicians are as comfortable running corporate events as they are 35mm.

We are increasingly broadcasting live on-stage Q&As to other venues, a good example being Ian McKellen's *Richard III* last year. This involves facilitating the film crews and broadcast engineers' needs but also ensuring that the paying audience has a good experience. We've recently televised various "In Conversation" events on stage in NFT1. A recent example was the Martin Scorsese screen talk where we worked with the BBC which was reproduced for TX on BBC2. NFT1 has been set up to allow a lot of flexibility in terms of lighting, video and audio, so we can service the needs of broadcasters as well as the public. We regularly run screenings with live music accompaniment as part of our Sonic Cinema

strand too, so are used to large PAs being installed. Our job is to make essentially a 70-year old cinema meet the requirement of contemporary audiences and formats.

MT: Are there any "extremes" of cinema exhibition you still regularly undertake?

DS: One of the pleasures of working here is the variety of formats we run. Around 40% of titles are screened on analogue film and included in that is 70mm, nitrate and 16mm on both optical and separate magnetic sound. We screen 70mm fairly regularly, perhaps 10 times a year, the last screening being a 50-year-old Todd AO print of *Dr Doolittle*. It sounded great — the focus was sharp; the picture was a little pink though!

We recently screened a nitrate reel of *Brighton Rock* for an internal presentation; it looked fantastic on screen. We rarely screen nitrate so ensuring all the safety equipment is functioning correctly is vital, as well as making sure processes are in place to avoid any disasters. That is one of the enjoyable challenges here; 4K DCP, broadcast and live music one week, nitrate the next!

We also show a lot of "Expanded Cinema" in NFT3. Artists Film and Video is a key part of the programme. We will often screen from dual 16mm projection and occasionally Super8, as well as the more common contemporary digital formats

MT: You and the team must find your work

challenging — but what are the greatest satisfactions in your work that you get?

DS: Working in such a varied film environment. The programme here means we never do the same thing from one week to the next. This brings its own challenges: we have a huge amount of legacy equipment to keep in operation. One of my major projects at the moment is sourcing and purchasing enough analogue projection spares to keep us running analogue film for the foreseeable future. I will be installing some reconditioned Cinemecanica Victoria 8s in NFT2 this summer. Another challenge is keeping in-house training up to date, to ensure the technicians are comfortable operating such a wide range of kit.

We also need to keep abreast of what is coming next technology-wise. I'm keen to explore immersive audio and RGB laser in NFT1, and we're trying to overcome the challenges of funding this but it's a challenge I am looking forward to. **CT**

BFI BIG NEWS!

The BFI announced last summer that it is a step closer to realising its ambition to build a new Film Centre on London's Southbank, opening its doors to the public in 2022. This new cultural venue will be a flagship national home for this diverse, evolving art-form and it reflects the UK's worldwide reputation for creativity and achievement in film, TV and moving image. It will give visitors — from schoolchildren to award-winning creatives — new experiences whilst providing a hub for filmmakers, professionals and artists to meet, exchange ideas, showcase work and develop skills.