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Plenty of work to do before 3-D saves day

By Sheigh Crabtree

Cost and quality issues associated with 3-D -- whether it be stereoscopic live-action production, the cost of re-mastering 2-D films to 3-D in postproduction or sustained 3-D projector brightness -- were among topics discussed Thursday during a panel at the Entertainment Technology Center's Digital Cinema Lab in Hollywood.

Whether 3-D projection will be a key driver in the conversion to digital cinema remains to be seen. But in the meantime, 3-D is being looked at as a man of the hour for a lagging boxoffice.

In an opening presentation, moderator Marty Shindler cited collapsing DVD windows, lame movies, pricey tickets, incessant in-theater ads and competing forms of media as reasons for theatrical exhibition's downturn.

In the face of the decline, however, 3-D has shown real promise, panelists said. One of the bright spots on the exhibition landscape in recent months was the boxoffice performance of "The Polar Express" in Imax 3-D.

Combine public interest with recent advances in digital cinema and 3-D technologies, add filmmaker and studio interest, and you've got fertile ground for 3-D exhibition, panelists said.

Exhibition was not represented at the event, so such ongoing behind-the-scenes issues as heated negotiations over costly and long-term contracts between theater owners and equipment vendors, pricey and time-consuming projection booth rebuilds, silver screen installation and the accessories needed for 3-D viewing went largely unaddressed.

However, a few other interesting wrinkles in the conversion to 3-D were raised. In-Three president and CEO Michael Kaye, Real D co-founder and CEO Joshua Greer and Cobalt Entertainment founder Steve Schklair discussed the rapid evolution of auto-stereoscopic televisions for the home that do not require 3-D glasses.

Attendees at IBC in Amsterdam last month witnessed the first live broadcast of auto-stereoscopic content. 3-D systems for the home could be in stores as soon as Christmas 2006, but, as with HD displays, there might not be much original 3-D content available for the screens.

Peter Anderson, an Academy governor and expert in specialized cinematography, had

photographed much of the material displayed at the lab Thursday. He argued that the material being shown was not even close to what he had originally shot, saying the severe color loss, overcompression of files and dimly lit material raise all kinds of questions about the sustainability of quality 3-D in theaters. He wondered what will happen when 3-D material ends up on screens not as well nursed by tech experts at the d-cinema lab.

Panelists had varied explanations for the degraded 3-D images. Texas Instruments' Glenn Kennel explained that the ETC screen was too big at 50-plus feet and that 3-D ideally should be presented on screens ranging from 35-40 feet -- a fact that the Walt Disney Co. is well aware of with the rollout of "Chicken Little" on 85 screens next month.

"No matter how you do 3-D, you lose light," said Real D's Greer, noting that ideally 3-D would be projected with 14-foot lamberts, though at the lab people were only seeing three lamberts worth of brightness. Because of 3-D projection lenses and polarization, which darken the image, in addition to the long throw to the screen, many 3-D projections are too dark and show severe color space distortions.

As distributors and exhibitors prepare for wider 3-D releasing, these are issues that need to be recognized and dealt with if the format is to live up to its promise as the savior of theatrical exhibition.