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he answer is always... YES!

Jim Slater visited the headquarters of Future Projections in South London to meet a small team who know all the answers.



Peter and Karen with a classic Ernemann 10 16/35mm projector (proper engineering!)

The cinema industry in the UK is very fortunate to have a handful of long-established cinema installation and service companies which have decades of experience, initially in film, and, in more recent times, in Digital Cinema. Probably the smallest of the group is Future Projections, based in South London - their publicity proudly proclaims them as the only cinema company in central London! I went along to talk with them and have a look at their facilities.

THE TEAM

Managing Director Peter Hall and his long-term partner Karen Pitman run the company, Karen being very obviously 'organiser-in-chief'! What her 'Director and financial controller' title doesn't tell you is that she has an MA in Film Studies and managed London cinemas including the Ritzy and Clapham Picture House, as well as doing training and programming work at City Screen. Karen looks after the financial and management side of Future Projections as well as leading the creative side of the business.

Peter has been working in the cinema industry since he was a lad. He is a qualified electrical engineer, worked on many cinema projects in his native New Zealand as well as working in engineering roles with companies including Konica, IBM and Panasonic. In the UK he worked with City Screen, project managing all of their early sites, and worked as a cinema engineer with several other companies, before deciding to found Future Projections in 1996.

Peter has a constantly hands on role but stresses that Engineering Manager James Tremayne is the key member of the engineering team. Peter says that he is currently trying to spend more time in the office designing interfaces and doing html programming.

There are also a small number of regular full-time and part-time engineers who get involved with installations. But Peter was keen to stress that in general 'everybody does everything - we are all flexible enough to cope with whatever tasks we get to do.'

THE BUILDING, THE BUSINESS

Based in a modern industrial estate just a few minutes from West Norwood station, they have a two storey building with a couple of reasonably tidy offices, the rest of the building consisting of storage and workshop space - every inch packed with all sorts of different equipment, sound, film, digital. My first impression of the office was how busy everything was - the telephone rarely stopped ringing, and I was fascinated to hear customers ringing up for advice on everything from pop-up cinemas to licences for open-air drive-ins! Unavoidably listening to the answers, I was impressed at the knowledge that was being so freely shared, everything from advice on the nature of the projection and sound equipment that would be required for a particular event to the need for various forms of local authority and OFCOM licences, as well as the all-important estimates of cost. Even here there was useful advice given that it might be possible for the organisers to obtain sponsorship for their events in order to keep ticket prices down!

Peter and Karen really do try to offer whatever equipment and services their customers might require, and are prepared to think 'out of the box' if they are asked to do something that is 'different' or outside the usual run of jobs. 'The answer is always yes' joked Karen, 'We then work out how we might do the impossible!'

Future Projections started off by building cinemas - from design through installation to complete fit outs. They have carried out hundreds of different projects from small low budget neighbourhood screens through to state of the art screening rooms - *Cinema Technology* looked at the superb cinema which they installed in London's Ham Yard hotel in the June 2014 issue. But the company does so much more, looking after some of the country's most prestigious venues as well as working in the independent cinema sector. They offer design services, including CAD and specification works - I was impressed to see some of the excellent CAD drawings hanging in the office, produced by a roll-fed giant inkjet printer. They offer consultancy work, sell and maintain digital and film projection equipment, being dealers for Barco and Christie, design sound systems and THX installations and provide full turnkey and commissioning of new sites as well as providing spare parts, service and support.

Portable packages - in a box

Below: One of FP's 'complete AV system in a box' solutions allowing for the projection of anything from laptop displays to DVDs and even Freeview TV. Ideal for any number of small venues from schools to village halls.



Engineering Manager James Tremayne and Trainee engineer Grant

MORE THAN CINEMA

The work isn't only cinema - although DCI systems probably account for 75% of their work, they have a substantial audio-visual business. Educational installations are a major part, and they work with schools and colleges, providing technology based solutions for the widest variety of image based solutions, including classrooms and lecture theatres.

HIRE

The hiring of various pieces of equipment is a major part of the work of Future Projections, and I was shown the range of hire kit for loads of different audio visual presentation tasks - everything from simple sound and lighting mixers to complete projection set-ups. Notable hire clients include the Royal Festival hall, Galleries including Hayward, Lisson, White cube and Anthony Reynolds, The Royal Household, The Sage Gateshead, Edinburgh festival, the Apollo theatre and many more.

I was interested to see that Peter and his team have put a lot of design effort into 'plug and play' kits that allow a hirer to run a complete audio video show from a large mobile 'tea trolley' which is completely kitted out with all the gear, fully wired and interconnected. Plug into the mains, connect to a sound system or speakers, and everything is ready to go. For smaller events there are compact boxed video installations that are ideal for everything from family parties to boardroom presentations.

This 'all in one' approach has reached its apotheosis in their complete Digital Cinema package which is regularly hired for all manner of pop-up cinema events, as well as forming FP's 'emergency cinema' kit.

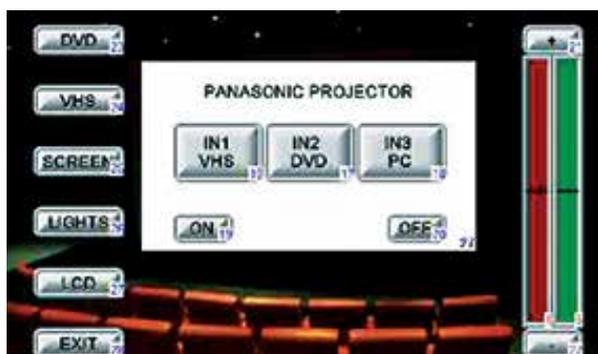
Left: FP's portable Digital Cinema package complete with Doremi server and full cinema sound equipment, ready to be wheeled in to provide a 'pop-up' cinema anywhere, or as an emergency kit to rescue any show.

If any cinema calls with a problem that can't be sorted out quickly enough by normal means, the 'fire brigade' goes into action, puts the complete digital cinema trolley unit into a van and delivers it to the cinema that is in trouble. It can then be placed in front of the projection room porthole, or if that is not practicable, even heaved into the back of the auditorium - the zoom lens is flexible enough to put a reasonable sized image on the screen. The kit has been designed to work from a single-phase mains supply, and can be connected into a cinema sound system or used with its own temporary speakers. Seems a great idea to me - and even if you might pay a couple of hundred pounds to hire the kit for a night, if it means that you save an important show it could be well worth it both financially and in terms of reputation.

REMOTE CONTROL AND THE FUTURE

Peter is a great advocate of 'remote' control of cinema installations - I first came across one of his pioneering 'tablet-operated' systems at HMV Wimbledon some five years ago, long before the idea caught

Typical remote-control projector app screen designed by Peter.



on more widely. I saw some of his latest work at Ham Yard recently - virtually everything can be controlled and monitored from a pad. Peter is a great advocate of interfaces using common standards rather than proprietary solutions, because of the flexibility this gives, and he is currently working on html programming solutions to achieve his aims. Already he has cinema systems in place with interfaces that allow a webcam to look at what is happening in a projection room (are the warning lights red or green? what does the LCD display show?) or even to see whether there is a picture on screen. Yes, IMAX can already do this if your pockets are deep enough, but FP's solution using standard HD webcams can cost less than a hundred pounds.

STILL KEEPING 35mm ROLLING

There is still plenty of film projection kit around the premises, and Peter says that they are probably the only remaining installer who is happy to put 35mm projectors into special venues for different events. Pop-up cinema is a growth area, and many of those wanting to put on such shows need the guidance and hand-holding that FP can provide. Everything from film and digital projectors to the blow-up screens that are the staple of the drive-in business can be provided and installed at short notice.

I came away from my visit impressed - I had previously perhaps wondered how the smallest company in the business could survive amongst its bigger brothers. The answers soon become clear - they are prepared to look at every AV or cinema-related project, no matter how niche, and will come up with a well-engineered solution at a good price, made possible by the flexibility of the staff and the tight ship that they run. A very good example of the advantages that a small business can bring.