

Never forget the love affair

Throughout the history of entertainment, there has been a love affair between the production and the audience, says **DENNIS BAXTER**.



From the carnival to the cinema, from radio to television and now computers, the human race has had a love affair with entertainment. In fact, this obsession has never faded. Even in times of economic recession, people still spend to escape to the excitement and enchantment of entertainment.

It's interesting that much of the sound/picture evolution — if not all — has been driven by the audience's love affair with entertainment. A good example is the history of the 'talkies'. Up until the late 1920s, motion pictures were silent — with theatres providing live orchestras to accompany the picture. All that changed in 1926 when Warner Brothers, in conjunction with Western Electric, introduced a new sound-on-disc system in which sound effects and music were recorded on a wax record that would later be synchronised with the film projector. Live orchestras were suddenly obsolete. Pre-recorded audio, sound effects and music were suddenly in.

Audiences were amazed with this sound technology which premiered with the landmark film *The Jazz Singer* in New York City in October 1927. Box office sales sky-rocketed as audiences fell in love with the talkies. As a result, the rush to produce sound pictures revolutionised the film industry around the world — illustrating the impact the audience factor has on innovation.

And innovation continued at a rapid pace through the 1930s and 1940s: television was invented and brought to market, directional microphones were invented which increased the frequency range of film recording, reduced ground noise and extended the volume range, technological advances that opened up creative possibilities for increasing the quality of sound recording. In the 50s and 60s we saw the migration from black and white television to colour and mono sound to stereo sound. Video brought instantaneous capture and playback — not possible with film. The invention of the personal computer in the 80s and 90s brought another medium to audiences and entire industries were (and are) born to fill the audience demand for content — software, electronic gaming, web

conferencing, telephony, social networking. So much has changed over the decades and yet so much hasn't.

From a sound man's perspective, the transition over the last 20 years from analogue to digital allows higher level of broadcast quality in both sound and picture, although this too is subject to debate because of compression schemes. But the technology was designed to enhance the viewing — and listening — experience.

Looking at the today's broadcast sound/picture landscape, I see another innovation: high definition television. Once again, it was designed to bring a higher level of quality to the audience — and it is bringing an evolutionary visual improvement to audiences — but unbelievably, high definition is broadcasted in stereo sound, even though we already have the technological advance of surround sound to match the high definition picture.

So why the disconnect? Tight budgets, low production values, pissy producers, and a complete disregard for the love affair.

So what does high definition television mean to the audience? Well, there are a couple of different video scan rates, although all the pictures have a 16 x 9 aspect ratio so you get wide screen, while standard definition has the boxier 4 x 3 aspect ratio. A wider screen expands the viewing real estate — so now you get to have crawling graphics and split screens to distract us from the content. I've even seen sporting events split the screen with the commercial.

The case for high definition is that it 'enhances the viewing experience'. An enhanced viewing experience should be as much about the sound as the scene. And I don't mean yappy commentators telling us what we just saw I'm talking about the visceral excitement of an event that we love to experience — and nothing captures it better than sound. By definition, high definition television has 5.1 sound minimum. So why aren't we broadcasting high definition in surround sound?

There are a couple of things that drive the answer: commercials, archives, production value, television management and audience expectations. Commercials often lead the curve in production value and most commercials are produced in surround. Multichannel sound is here to stay and future value will be enhanced with surround.

Interestingly enough, producers are not even considering that older home satellite and cable systems deliver two-channel analogue stereo audio, which, if you run your TV sound through your home stereo with Pro Logic II or DTS will give you surround. Your sound is already being upmixed, downmixed and crossmixed with unpredictable results.

Notably, that even with all of the technological innovations that have taken place since film first began enchanting audiences with its beauty, creativity and clarity, the filmmaking industry has survived. Why? They have never forgotten the audience love affair factor. Filmmakers use their celluloid creativity to push their art form to higher levels and take pride in doing so. Sound producers for film look for new ways to enchant, to excite, to entertain.

There's a lesson for broadcasters here: if producers allow the sound/picture quality and entertainment value of their broadcasts to be diminished, audiences will go elsewhere. The love affair will be over. ■