Theater’s Front-Row Seat to Digital Future

The Pacific Hollywood, built to debut the breakthrough technology of its day – talkies – now has a new role: showcase and lab for the high-tech replacement of film at cinemas.

By Alex Pham
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It is said that the ghost of Sam Warner haunts the musty spaces of the Pacific Hollywood theater, snatching cellphones and pagers and Palm Pilots when their owners look away.

The forlorn movie palace, locked behind metal security gates in the heart of Hollywood, was Warner’s dream, the first theater built expressly for talking pictures. The second-youngest of the four Warner brothers died at 42, never to see what the Los Angeles Times called the theater’s “dazzling” opening in 1928 — or its long, slow slide into dereliction in the decades that followed.

Charles S. Swartz takes comfort in believing that Sam Warner’s spirit, at least, may be watching over the theater’s rebirth as a sophisticated test center for the next generation of movie technology.

“The idea that we are now on the cutting edge of giving movies their next life into the 21st century would absolutely thrill him,” said Swartz, executive director of USC’s Entertainment Technology Center, a research group backed by the major studios as they gird for the advent of digital cinema.

If cinema’s tomorrow is taking shape in a relic of its past, it’s happening without a lot of glitz. Unlike the other movie palaces along Hollywood Boulevard that have undergone costly face-lifts — notably the El Capitan — the theater is to most eyes not ready for its close-up.

Its now-dowdy Spanish Renaissance auditorium looks just as it did when the theater shut in 1994, with faux stars flickering in the ceiling, faded red velvet seat covers worn thin with age and garnet curtains framing the screen. It smells vaguely dusty and damp.

On the roof, though, is the future: a battery of satellite dishes. And along the back wall of the Hollywood’s projection booth, a bank of 12 powerful computer servers blink furiously. Peering out at the five-story screen are three projectors: A high-end model by Kinoton able to handle 35-millimeter and 70-millimeter film and two high-resolution digital projectors, all cooled with a dedicated air conditioning system.

Researchers: Paul Miller and Charles Swartz of USC’s Entertainment Technology Center at the theater.

Lost Luster: Pacific Theatres bought the Warner Hollywood in the 1970s. It was shut to the public in 1994 on safety concerns over the Northridge quake and subway tunneling.
The $1 million worth of equipment represents a fraction of the $1 billion the seven major studios believe they can save annually by embracing a future without film, when movies shown in theaters will be the result of streams of 0s and 1s flowing either from a high-speed Internet connection or from optical discs. With digital technology, studios can make exact copies of the highest-quality film possible against the digital version.

At times, the digital version seemed sharper. Other times the film version appeared better. One viewer turned to his neighbor mid-screening and whispered, “Which one’s digital?”

To the untrained eye, the shots would have been unremarkable — a tree swaying gently in the wind against a clear blue sky, confetti blowing out of a window, rain pelting cobblestone at night, a bride’s face. There was no sound, no dialogue and no plot.

He nearly missed his first shift because he was so enchanted “that I nearly forgot why I was there.”

Carol Burnett worked at the theater in the summer of 1951 as an 18-year-old usherette, dressed in an ill-fitting black satin outfit and a fez. She was fired from the 65-cent-an-hour job when she tried to persuade a couple against being seated during the last 10 minutes of “Strangers on a Train.”

“He had this terrific surprise ending, and seeing it would just ruin the movie for them,” Burnett said. “But the manager came along, and he fired me on the spot. So years later, when they asked me where I wanted my last day of work on Hollywood Boulevard, I said, ‘Right in front of the Warner theater!’” And that’s where it went.

Shortly after Burnett’s tenure, a curved Cinerama screen was installed. In the 1970s, new owner Pacific Theatres Corp. blocked off and divided the balcony to make the theater a triplex and replaced the Warner name with its own on the marquee. The theater was shut to the public after the Northridge earthquake and subway tunneling were blamed for making parts of the building unstable.

The event was sponsored by the Digital Cinema Initiative, or DCI, a consortium of seven movie studios: Walt Disney Co., 20th Century Fox, MGM, Paramount Pictures, Sony Pictures Entertainment, Universal Pictures and Warner Bros.

The studios formed DCI in 2002 to develop a common standard for distributing movies in digital form. Although the consortium is scheduled to release its minimum requirements this fall, it will be years before digital projection hits theaters. Converting film to digital projection would cost U.S. theater owners billions of dollars, depending on the technology used.

Among the companies whose technologies are being tested for the DCI project are Microsoft Corp., Texas Instruments Inc., Boeing Co., and Sony Corp. With so much money at stake, investing some of the heaviest hitters in film and technology, the DCI project is being closely followed.

Roy Wagner, cinematographer for the television show “CSI: Crime Scene Investigation,” is among those keenly interested in the digital distribution of entertainment. “CSI” is among the network television shows that broadcast in high-definition digital video.

Sitting in the theater, Wagner said he was feeling a wave of nostalgia: He had been a projectionist there decades ago. Wagner, 57, remembers the first day he worked at the theater in 1970. He came in two hours early to explore the nooks and crannies.

“I found that the ceiling had these beautiful clouds that looked like they were built to move and stars with little lights in them that could twinkle,” Wagner said. “It was a magnificent theater, and it really conveys what old Hollywood must have been like. You think of all the films and all the laughter, happiness and the tears shed by people in that theater. It’s a pretty organic environment.”