

Digital Movies at The New Rheem Theatre

It all sounds good

By Cathy Dausman



Digital sound equipment at the Rheem.

Photos Cathy Dausman

The first movie Eric Dausman saw at Moraga's Rheem Theatre was, in his own words, "awesome" but certainly not for its digital technology. "Thunderball," the James Bond thriller was released in 1965, when the Rheem Theatre screened a single movie in one auditorium.

Movie technology of the 1960s consisted of showing 35 mm prints using a sound system of one speaker positioned above the screen. The audio was most likely optically encoded as a single channel on the reel itself, Dausman said. Dausman is a lifelong audiophile and decades-long member of the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers, which provides hundreds of technical standards for theaters, projectors and sound systems (full disclosure: he is also this writer's husband).

Returning to the Rheem when it became the New Rheem Theatre, Dausman found it "a nice surprise to see a fully updated, 'dam good' quality sound-and-picture format available in Moraga."

The theater uses Dolby technology, and "Dolby will only license technology if it is appropriately tested," Dausman said. By his estimate, nearly 75 percent of U.S. theaters are currently showing movies in the digital format.

"Digital projection has all but replaced film projection," he said. "Audiences now view a nearly perfectly projected presentation every time – no clicks, no pops, no [film] scratches, no [picture] 'weaving' in the gate," said Dausman. "A multi-channel surround system is built to envelop the audience, handling the sound range from subtle voices to big bangs."

Bay Area Cinema Products installed the most recent Rheem upgrade. BACP owner and president Sam Chavez said, "Rheem originally opened with a monaural optical sound

system and was quickly upgraded to 35 mm magnetic sound." The Rheem's original projection and sound equipment was removed during one of its many turnovers in ownership, he added.

At one point the theater was a live venue. Approximately 40 years after the Rheem first opened (late 1950s) it was converted into a four-plex, said Casey Foster, who managed the theater in the mid-1990s. More recently, the Rheem screen used a film-based sound commonly known as Dolby Digital 5.1 (or SR.D). Chavez explained the audio data for that system was stored between the sprocket holes – "in blocks very similar to the barcodes you see today that can be read by Smart Phones." Because it had to fit into the physical space available on 35 mm film, "the sound was excellent but it was compressed."

In May, Chavez and BACP installed a digital projector and server and upgraded the sound to uncompressed Dolby Digital 7.1. Speakers are positioned at left, center, and right, as well as left wall, right wall, left back, right back and subwoofer. Chavez's company also upgraded the Orinda Theatre, making both Lamorinda theaters state of the art at the moment.

"The use of uncompressed audio data makes the sound much more nuanced and detailed," Chavez explained. It worked for the movie Dausman saw at Rheem, "2 Guns." The buddy movie/action flick covered the full range of sound setups from whispered conversations to loud gunfire, explosions and oncoming trains.

Rheem Theatre's digital projection and multi-channel sound makes the movie experience "just as good as the area's major metroplexes," Dausman concluded, adding, "and the popcorn was good, too!"





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