

New wave attractions

Onboard cinemas and theatres are going through a purple patch. Guests are now being treated to the latest 3D blockbusters and theatre productions in surroundings that supersede many multiplexes and West End playhouses. Ross Davies caught up with Cunard's **Martin Lilly** and **Gennaro Parlato** of MSC Cruises to learn more about these latest trends.

In recent years, as cruise liners have sought to develop new and innovative amenities to keep guests entertained, cinemas, along with theatres, have become a box-office draw. Such is the lure of the big screen, some of the industry's major names, including the likes of Cunard, Royal Caribbean and Disney, have made considerable investments in installing 3D facilities in line with the format's resurgence.

Having worked alongside RealD, a market leader in developing technology for land-based cinemas, this April, Cunard installed its first 3D cinema on its current flagship *Queen Mary 2*, which also

doubles up as a planetarium. According to Martin Lilly, director of entertainment at Cunard, guest reaction to the venue, Illuminations, has been very positive.

"It has proven to be extremely popular," he says. "We now have more people watching 3D movies than standard 2D ones. The demographic ranges from children to adults, in line with our guest range, which is quite diverse. While kids can see films such as *Harry Potter*, *Toy Story* and all the latest 3D movies, we are currently showing a production of *Carmen*, a three-hour epic originally shot in 3D at the Royal Opera House, which fills seats every time."

The fourth dimension

In response to the increasing number of Hollywood blockbusters presented in 3D, some cruise ship operators have also revamped onboard cinemas to deliver passengers a 4D experience. Similar to Costa Cruises – which has installed a 4D cinema onboard the *Costa Deliziosa* – MSC Cruises has also developed cinemas on its *Fantasia*, *Splendida* and *Magnifica* ships, which use chair movements to enhance both the visual and sensory experience. According to Gennaro Parlato, MSC show technology coordinator, diversity is the name of the game in offering onboard amenities.

“Anybody can go to their local cinema and experience an excellent picture through 3D and good sound... as a result, guests are expecting the same quality of presentation onboard a ship.”

Moving seats add to the cinema experience on *MSC Fantasia*.

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"It serves as a great alternative to the theatre," he says. "Guests can participate whenever they want a state-of-the-art interactive 4D experience that takes the thrills of film to new heights."

In the past, an onboard cinema mainly consisted of a basic tiered space with a projector screen. However, with the growing popularity of HD and 3D, there has been a demand for cruise liners to follow the lead of land-based multiplexes in providing a genuinely engaging cinematic experience, as opposed to the ersatz offerings previously afforded to guests.

"These days, anybody can go to their local cinema and experience an excellent picture through 3D and good sound," says Lilly. "As a result, guests are expecting that same quality of presentation onboard a ship."

Production values

In terms of installation, what additional factors need to be taken into account when transferring cinematic equipment and screens onboard in comparison to the setup at your local IMAX?

"We installed the *Queen Mary 2* facility while the ship was in service," says Lilly. "The equipment required additional ventilation and there had to be a very special type of glass put in for the projection because we were adapting an existing facility to accommodate this. Trying to get the screen on the ship was an exciting experience to say the least!"

Onboard theatres have also become a popular source of entertainment. Once mocked as a graveyard for second-rate thespians, today, many cruise liner theatres rival some West End and Broadway playhouses, both in terms of grandeur and the standard of productions – the Royal Caribbean's productions of *Chicago* and *Hairspray* have received plaudits from critics and guests alike. The *MSC Splendida* has also focused much attention on developing its own 1,600-seat Strand Theatre.

"At night, the heart of the ship is certainly the theatre," says Parlato. "With its starlight ceiling, performances range from French illusionists, Italian tenors and popular opera to aerobatics and pop

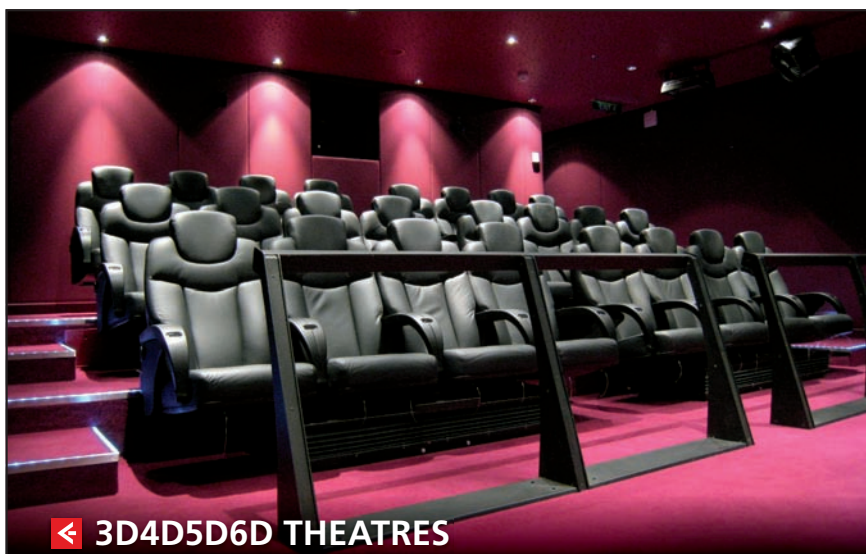


The stylish entrance to Cunard's Illuminations.

dance shows. We have really sought to meet the tastes of all ages."

Cunard's three-tier Royal Court theatre on the *Queen Victoria*, which pays homage to the liner's own vaudeville, Victorian heritage, has also been lauded for its freshness and imagination.

"Starting from a blank sheet of paper,



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we wanted to develop a theatre that was as close to a classic, land-based playhouse as you could get," he says. "The theatre is based on the work of Frank Matcham [the renowned Victorian theatrical architect], who developed the boxes and balconies that you see in many theatres in the West End. We took a lot of that imagery and then adapted it to the environment you find on a ship.

"In terms of space, we were very fortunate with the *Queen Victoria* in being able to construct a three-deck-high theatre. That height has a direct correlation to the sense of grandeur that you experience in some of the best, classic land-based theatres."

Variety show

Both Lilly and Parlato reiterate the importance of variety, in terms of aesthetics, technology and the range of films and productions shown. Some cruises are also looking to move the cinematic experience away from the traditional indoor setting to open-air spaces. P&O's *Azura* is one of the current crop of ships to show films out on deck; its 'SeaScreen' allows guests



The 1,600-seat Strand Theatre on *MSC Splendida* caters for all ages and tastes.

moonlit viewings under the stars. According to Parlato, it also might not be too long before guests are able to watch the latest blockbusters in the most advanced formats from the comfort of their cabins.

"Cruises continually offer more and more sophisticated in-room entertainment," he says. "Along these lines, the new addition to the MSC fleet, the *Divina*, expected for May 2012, will display HD TV screens in all cabins."

Lilly agrees that the development of

technology and cinematic formats is set to shape the interests and activities of entertainment departments for the foreseeable future.

"I don't think it will be long before everyone catches up with 3D," says Lilly. "The innovations we've made at Cunard this year – everybody will announce they're doing next year. This isn't because they are copying; it's simply a case of following the direction of the cinema industry, and meeting the demands of customers." ■



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