



▲ A specially engineered version of *Star Trek Beyond* was released in 30 Barco Escape-enabled theatres globally.

THRICE AS NICE

The *Maze Runner* and *Star Trek Beyond* were selectively mastered in the Barco Escape tri-screen canvas technology to make them more immersive and entertaining. Vinita Bhatia finds out whether this will draw audiences back to the halls in huge numbers

Time was when Indian households planned their schedules around big-draw movies releasing every weekend. That was when entertainment avenues were limited and films took centerstage when it came to leisure.

However, times have changed. Today, while movie-going is still a much looked-forward-to activity, audiences have several other options for entertainment. For starters, consumers now have smart TVs and home theatres, which have dimmed the allure of watching a movie on the big screen. Additionally, the emergence of over-the-top

providers, like Netflix internationally and other domestic sites, has impacted individual consumption habits since content is streamed to their digital devices and they can watch movies on demand. Why would they then want to go to a cinema hall?

While the smarter theatre owners have read the writing on the wall and upgraded their halls to surround sound to offer viewers an immersive experience, some facilities seemed to be caught in a time warp. Companies in the media and entertainment space knew that they had to constantly innovate to keep the consumer engaged. And that explains why the Barco Escape format came into being.

AN AMBITIOUS FORMAT

Defining the concept's vision, Ted Schilowitz, chief creative officer of Barco Escape stated it is what you get when you reconsider why should the moviegoing experience be on a single plane of viewing, especially when the home viewing experience is getting more cinematic. "It is a question of what will compel the audience to come and watch a movie in the theatre than at home," he added.

Vivekanand, country director-sales, Barco India, added, "Barco Escape is a new multi-screen, panoramic movie theatre experience. It utilizes three cinema projectors and two additional cinemascope screens, allowing filmmakers to create for a much larger canvas." The first movie to be released in this format was *Maze Runner* in 2014, when Barco partnered with 20th Century Fox in the US and Belgium for select theatres. Certain action parts of the movie allowed the audience to feel that they were actually in the maze.

Vivekanand stated, "We are seeing creators taking advantage of the Barco Escape format in different ways. Some are choosing to expand certain key moments in the film across three screens in post production and through visual effects, as is the case with *Star Trek Beyond*, which is a great use of the format. Others are looking to shoot entire features in the format, which requires planning at the outset of filming."

THE WORKFLOW

Earlier this year, a specially engineered version of *Star Trek Beyond* was released in around 30 theatres throughout the world that supported the Barco Escape format. Around 20 minutes of the movie was formatted to fit the wraparound format, most of this reengineering was done in the last two months of post-production.

Of these, majority of the live action shots was managed by JJ Abrams' Bad Robot, while some agencies managed the CG texturing for left and right screens that would complement the centre screen. Prime Focus-owned Double Negative did the heavy VFX shots for the movie later, while Prime Focus World augmented that role by creating characters and imagery from scratch for parallel screens as well.

However, creating that imagery took a lot of imagination because the content of the center screen drove the context of the adjacent canvas. "The centre screen was a live action shot and not all CG, which meant that we were building on it for the other two screens," said Merzin Tavaría, chief creative director and co-founder of Prime Focus World.



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But their biggest challenge was to produce the Escape version for *Star Trek Beyond* within two months, without having any experience on this format. Tavaría hired over 50 people for the project and finally had a team of 120 working on this project and spent one whole month researching the elements and nuances that could be included into the frames. This included understanding how to get three streams of video playing in sync, the kinds of cameras and lens to be used for the parallel screens since they had to match what was used for the centre screen, etc.

"Ideally, if you use wide lens for the center screen, you use the same lens for the left and right. But if you use a wide-angle lens for a wide field of view, you start looking backwards instead of to the side, and get a

distorted view. So we came up with a solution - to use an extra wide angle lens for the left and right screens," he revealed.

His team also trained in using a new render program called Clarisse for complex VFX shots for *Star Trek Beyond*, while Tavaría also broke the system into solution-centric processes to save time. Additionally, the systems were upgraded to 32GB and 64GB RAM as was the render farm because the entire team of 120 people were accessing and rendering files simultaneously. Since everything was getting backed up continually, the files would queue up on a small render farm. "If I put in the data today, it won't come out for the next two or even three days, on my earlier render farm, because some of the shots and layers were very complex," Tavaría explained.

Another big investment that Prime Focus World made for the project was to increase its storage system. Since the main VFX was being done by its London office, all the files transferred by them would have to be stored and then worked upon for the left and right screen and sent back - amounting to almost several petabytes of storage!

AN IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE

In *Star Trek Beyond*, the mastered scenes do have an immersive quality, sweeping the viewer into the grandeur of the Starship Enterprise, giving one the illusion of being within the ship. In yet another scene, there is a shot of stars and swamp ships whizzing by at dizzying speeds. This begs the question - is the Barco Escape format ideal only for action-oriented movies?

The answer to this question seems to be in the affirmative, because Vivekanand stated that the company is quickly growing its content slate by working hand in hand with Hollywood studios and filmmakers and is excited to have some amazing projects coming to Escape very soon. Director Scott Waugh recently announced that he is directing the first feature shot entirely for Barco Escape. A sci-fi film called *The Recall* from Minds Eye Entertainment and another film called *24 Hours to Live* from Fundamental Films are also being shot for Escape.

While the content pipeline is being built up, Barco is also trying to beef up the exhibition side of the business to ensure that more audiences have access to this new viewing experience, especially in India.



"BARCO ESCAPE IS A MULTI-SCREEN, PANORAMIC MOVIE THEATRE EXPERIENCE THAT UTILIZES THREE CINEMA PROJECTORS AND TWO ADDITIONAL CINEMASCOPE SCREENS."

Vivekanand, country director-sales, Barco India

"Internationally, we have theatres in prominent cities like Los Angeles, Mexico City and rural cities too, where we have found success. We are also talking to some Indian exhibition partners about installing Escape and they are certainly willing to invest in innovation that enriches the cinema going experience for their customers. The movie market dynamics are obviously different in India compared to, say, the USA so we need to find the right business model for Escape in India together with our partners. It is too early to say when this will be, but we hope it will be soon," Vivekanand noted.

Ultimately, when the lights in the theatre are dimmed, the audience needs to feel that they are being transported to a different world. Any technology that will help make that happen, will find favour.

Moreover, content reigns supreme and if it is engrossing enough, then irrespective of the canvas, the audience will watch it. We can only hope that a concept like a tri-screen display will add to the immersive experience of its story telling; and not distract the viewers from the movie-watching experience. ■



▲ A view of a theatre fitted with the Barco Escape ultra-wide, multi-screen movie format.