

Theater owners behind on 3-D projectors

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Ashley Burdi, front left, her brother Isaac, front right, and parents Sarah, back left, and Louis, watch the 3-D movie *Monsters and Aliens* at the Cinemagic movie complex, Friday, May 22, 2009, in Saco, Maine. While movie studios have new and improved 3-D film-making technology, many movie-goers are frustrated to find that the vast majority of movie theaters don't yet have the ability to show 3-D movies. (AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty)

(AP) -- To hear the folks in Hollywood talk about it, improved 3-D technology and the quality films that are quickly lining up behind it represent nothing short of a moviegoing revolution. Tell that to the folks who still live hours from the nearest 3-D-equipped theater.

For them, all the extradimensional summer offerings and slick marketing campaigns amount to nothing more than a big, frustrating tease.

For them, the movie world is still flat.

Because of the credit crunch and high cost of upgrading equipment, the vast majority of theaters don't yet have the ability to show 3-D movies, a situation that affects the nation's furthest-flung areas most. In Maine, you can count on one hand the number of theaters that showed Pixar Animation's "Up" in 3-D when it opened late last week.

Those who haven't made the costly transition run the risk of losing customers who're willing to travel to see it elsewhere in 3-D, said Bob Collins, marketing director of Zycorp Entertainment's Cinemagic, which has been offering 3-D at its Saco theater for more than a year.

"A chain that doesn't have the 3-D technology, they're going to be in a very tough situation because they're basically going to be turning away customers," he said.

As it stands, 26 percent of 5,756 cinemas across the country have one or more screens capable of showing 3-D movies, but that number is expected to grow as financing becomes available later in the summer, said Patrick Corcoran from the National Association of Theater Owners.

All told, there were only 2,385 3-D screens out of a total of 38,853 screens nationwide at the end of May, according to the theater group.

Northern New England is among the places where 3-D is scarce. RealD and Dolby Digital, which are aggressively deploying 3-D in theaters, say they have equipped six cinemas in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont, so far. Other rural states face similar 3-D shortages.

There would be thousands more screens converted to the format if not for the recession. Two separate financing deals that would've brought 3-D to more than 20,000 movie screens across the country collapsed because of the economic meltdown, Corcoran said.

And the technology doesn't come cheap.

It costs about \$70,000 for a movie theater to upgrade from film to a digital projector, and the 3-D add-on costs another \$30,000. That \$100,000 total compares to the cost of \$15,000 to \$20,000 for a traditional 35 mm projector that has been the industry standard.

Upgrading all movie screens to the digital technology would cost billions, and the slow progress has created tension between studios and cinemas.

At last month's Cannes Film Festival, Dick Cook, Disney studio chairman, made a friendly jab at cinema owners when he noted that Disney was able to have a makeshift theater up and running in three days. The company set up the screen at a Cannes hotel to show reporters 3-D footage of its new version of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," starring Jim Carrey and due in theaters late this year.

"It just dawned on me, this theater that you're in today, it's digital, it's 3-D, and we built it in three days," Cook said. "Now I was just thinking to all the exhibitors that are here, it only took us three days. So let's pick up the pace a little bit."

The first movie theater to take the leap in Maine was Zyacorp Entertainment's Cinemagic, a regional chain that has used digital projectors since its inception a decade ago.

In the projector booth, 35 mm projectors with giant film spools seem quaint next to the whirring black digital projectors running on autopilot. Giant silver venting tubes that dissipate heat and laptop computers residing atop them lend the appearance of something out of a science fiction movie.

Customers are eager for 3-D movies and willing to travel to see them,

said Donna Spencer, manager of the 13-screen Cinemagic in Saco. One family traveled from Bangor - a distance of about 140 miles - to see the "Jonas Brothers: The 3-D Concert Experience," she said.

Spencer said she has yet to see a customer leave a 3-D movie disappointed. And there have been no complaints over the \$3 ticket premium for 3-D movies, she said.

Parents especially enjoy bringing their kids to 3-D movies. DreamWorks Animation and Disney Pixar Animation say all future movies will be released in 3-D.

"The kids loved the 3-D," said Kim Marcotte, of Falmouth, who watched "Monsters vs. Aliens" with her 7-year-old daughter Sophie. "They were reaching out for the objects in front of their faces, and the audience would gasp. They all clapped at the end."

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