

## 'Furious 7' film shows off sharp new Imax laser technology

April 1 2015, by Ryan Nakashima

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This Tuesday, March 31, 2015 photo shows the Imax laser projector at the TCL Chinese Theater on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles. The Chinese Theatre, one of the largest Imax theaters in the world, is one of more than a dozen locations that Imax expects to outfit with laser projection this year. (AP Photo/Nick Ut)

Deeper blacks, brighter whites, even bigger screens and better sound. When the high-speed action sequel "Furious 7" debuts this weekend, audiences at Hollywood's famous TCL Chinese Theatre will see every

tire skid and fistfight in Imax's brand-new laser format.

Lasers are supposed to be able to heighten contrast. In laser-projected trailer footage of "Furious 7" shown exclusively to The Associated Press, details were noticeably crisper than images shown in a standard-sized auditorium with a regular digital projector. Deep blacks, one of the touted benefits of laser projection, stood out boldly, particularly in actress Michelle Rodriguez's eyes and hair, a suit worn by actor Jason Statham, Vin Diesel's tank top, black car paint and shadows in the grooves of tire treads.

"Furious 7" will mark the first time a film is being premiered in laser. Imax's first laser projector just started operating in Toronto's Scotiabank Theatre in December. The Chinese Theatre, one of the largest Imax theaters in the world, is one of more than a dozen locations that Imax expects to outfit with laser projection this year. Others include the AMC Loews Lincoln Square 13 in Manhattan and Empire Cinemas' Leicester Square in London. Tickets for laser-illuminated shows will be the same price as those shown in Imax's standard format.

Laser projection is more than contrast, though. The technology will allow more movies to be screened in giant theaters, says Imax Corp. CEO Rich Gelfond. Until now, digital projectors haven't been able to use all the real estate of the largest screens because industry-standard xenon bulbs weren't bright enough. And the high cost of Imax film prints, which show more brightly than digital files, meant that only about eight big-budget blockbusters a year could be shown on giant screens.

Lasers change all that. Screens should be able to extend to 140 feet wide and utilize more of the screen at the top and bottom, Gelfond says. The Chinese Theatre can now show Imax movies at a width of 96 feet, compared to 86 feet in the past, says theater president Alwyn Hight Kushner.

Larger screens means being able to fill bigger theaters with more seats and build even larger auditoriums from scratch, says Gelfond. He hopes the better visual experience and 12-channel audio that Imax is rolling out with the laser upgrade will drive more moviegoers to want to see films in Imax, which typically cost a few dollars more than standard movie tickets. The laser system is expected to boost gross profits by around \$1 million this year, Gelfond told investors in October.



This photo provided by Universal Pictures shows Paul Walker as Brian in a scene from "Furious 7." When the high-speed action sequel "Furious 7" debuts this weekend, audiences at Hollywood's famous TCL Chinese Theatre will see every tire skid and fist fight in Imax's brand-new laser format. (AP Photo/Universal Pictures)

"I think over time, this will be the next big thing," Gelfond said in an interview Tuesday with The AP. "It's not going to change the world in a day. It's going to happen a pair of eyeballs at a time."

Imax joins a host of other companies shifting to lasers, such as projector maker Christie, which has its own offering and a partnership with Dolby Laboratories Inc. Barco Inc. supplies its own projectors and provides

them for Imax. There are about 25 screens worldwide outfitted with laser projectors and about half are Barco's, according to Barco vice president of digital cinema, Patrick Lee. Dolby is set to announce a rollout in the next several months; Christie says it has a half-dozen laser projectors installed.

Imax plans to use lasers only on its biggest screens—80-feet-wide and above—and at institutions such as the Smithsonian, which has ordered three for all its Imax theaters. Imax has contracts with over 71 theaters to install its laser system so far.

Art Seago, the CEO of family-owned Santikos Theatres, said customers felt they had a better experience after the Santikos Palladium IMAX in San Antonio installed a Barco laser system in December. Seago plans to convert all of the company's big screens to laser projection.

"They know there is something different without us telling them it's laser," he says. "We think it's the new standard for what a guest should expect."



In this Tuesday, March 31, 2015 photo, Imax CEO Richard Gelfond speaks during an interview at the TCL Chinese Theater on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles. Laser-beamed movie technology gets another boost Wednesday, April 1, 2015 as Imax shows off its first U.S.-installment of the technology with the global debut of the high-speed action sequel "Furious 7." (AP Photo/Nick Ut)

One drawback of the format is its hefty cost. Today's digital projectors cost tens of thousands of dollars apiece. Barco's Lee says its laser offering costs about four to five times that, a figure echoed by Christie spokesman Dave Paolini. Gelfond says the Imax system will cost only 50 percent more at first, and decrease over time.

Because of the cost, it remains to be seen how far the laser rollout will spread, says Keith Watanabe, director of business development for Miami-based Cinema Equipment and Supplies.

"Everyone that begins to see films like this will prefer it," he says. "The question is, will people come up with the capital to make this investment

a reality?"

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