



a conversation with ben stassen of nwave pictures

new directions in 3D media production
and special venue cinema

by Judith Rubin

nWave Pictures, headquartered in Belgium and with offices in Los Angeles, is a pioneering producer/distributor of 3D digital cinema content, primarily animated, with many industry firsts to its credit.

The company began as a producer of ride films such as "Devil's Mine Ride," "Secrets of the Lost Temple," "Superstition," "Journey Through The Center of The Earth," and many more which helped build and capture more than 90% of the ride film market for motion theaters and went on to become a leader in giant-screen film production with titles such as "3D Mania," "Haunted Castle," and "Wild Safari." nWave recently brought its innovative ways to the world of independent 3D feature films with the 2008 "Fly Me to the Moon," and the forthcoming release "Around the World in 50 Years."

Blooloo's Judith Rubin interviewed nWave founder and CEO Ben Stassen at the Giant Screen Cinema Association (GSCA) film expo that was held March 17-19 in Los Angeles.

Judith Rubin: Before we get into speaking about "Around the World in 50 Years" and "Fly Me to the Moon," I'd like to discuss one of your earlier films, "Haunted Castle," which has become an international cult film since its release in 2001.

Ben Stassen: "Haunted Castle" has grossed \$40 million. It's popular as a midnight movie. It's as immersive as it gets with the user space, and has been successful everywhere it played. It was, at the time of its release, a very different film for Imax, but people like variety.

JR: I remember that "Haunted Castle" was initially quite controversial and that Imax tried to discourage operators from booking it.

BS: Imax's effort only stimulated backlash from exhibitors, and was actually the best thing for the film. It became "the film Imax doesn't want you to see," and both the LA Times and New York Times ran half-page stories on it. In the end Imax added the film to its own library. A reviewer in the Financial Times [London]

wrote, "It's no 'Citizen Kane,' but again, maybe it is."

JR: Not long afterward, Imax started to convert edgy films such as "Matrix" for 1570 exhibition, but when "Haunted Castle" came out there wasn't anything like it for the giant screen.

BS: If "Haunted Castle" were released today, no one would raise an eyebrow.

JR: Getting to "Around the World in 50 Years," an entertaining and educational movie that tells the story of two sea turtles traveling the globe, in a sort of buddy/road movie, but with an underwater setting, why the 50 years (other than that it's catchy)?

BS: There are seven species of sea turtles and they have a very long maturing process. Some live over 100 years, and they reproduce between age 30 and 50.

JR: Between "Fly Me to the Moon," which has been very successful as a feature and

as an attraction film - a different kind of breakthrough from "Haunted Castle" - and "Around the World in 50 Years," what kind of transition has there been?

BS: As a full-length 3D animated feature, we knew "Fly Me" would be unique, but when we were making the movie we didn't know what the face of 3D cinema would be. Today's network of commercial 3D theaters didn't exist yet, and it was designed for the language of the giant screen. In making "Around the World," we're using more gimmicky 3D effects, because the audience wants those or is disappointed.

JR: We're now seeing a significant rollout of commercial 3D theaters, and 3D films from major studios.

BS: Hollywood is making 2-1/2 D films, just using space to create a little depth. It's half-baked - the most timid form of 3D. They're not using 3D as a revolutionary language. They're not going far enough. We didn't go

far enough with "Fly," but we conceived that it would have its major release on the giant screen. Now the giant screen release is ancillary and you have to focus on the multiplex feature. "Around the World" will have a 90-minute version for the multiplex, a 40-minute version for giant screen theaters and two 13-minute attraction films for 4D theaters with physical effects, in special venues. One of the attraction films is already out, under the title "TurtleVision." It opens this spring at Europa Park in Germany and the National Marine Aquarium in the UK, and several other aquariums, zoos and science centers worldwide over the summer.

JR: In the growing world of commercial 3D film exhibition, with major studios in the game, was it something of a challenge to release your own film independently?

BS: Because of the low number of 3D films and because our title was in the family film genre, the press and audience perceived it as a large studio film, when in fact we are a little independent film company. We were usually compared to the big studio films. And in fact, compared to other independents, our box office numbers were very good, especially in

light of how very few 3D theaters there were. And we had not planned on distributing our film internationally, but it worked out very well since box office internationally has outperformed US domestic almost 2:1.

JR: How do you differentiate the attraction film from the longer versions?

BS: We create some new scenes and give it a new title in order not to create confusion. It's part of the business plan to conceive the whole package, including the ride film, the 4D film, the Imax film and the feature film. I keep saying "film" but I think it actually looks better in digital.

JR: You're also creating fulldome versions of your films, for digital dome projection in planetariums.

BS: Yes, working with Evans & Sutherland we created a 17-minute version of "Fly" that has played in three venues with an increasing interest this summer since it is the 40th anniversary of Apollo 11.

JR: Tell us more about "Around the World in 50 Years."

BS: In the course of the story, the two turtles

go from pre-teen to older and evolve a lot physically. The main character is a grandpa turtle recounting his life story, starting in 1959 and going to 2009. It's a story of friendship and coming of age, and it also teaches about the natural world and ecology. Being set in the oceans gives us an unusual vantage point to witness some of the major changes wrought by human beings on planet Earth during that time span. The projected release date is September 2009.

JR: What's in the future for nWave? Will you be producing only feature films now?

BS: Absolutely not! Right now, we are in development on some projects for new feature films and large format films, as well as working on new ride films and 3D/4D digital attractions. As the feature film world continues to grow in 3D, the institutional market as well as amusement parks must keep raising the bar in 3D digital content.

*Fly Me To The Moon has generated over \$38,000,000 in Box Office receipts which does not include its recent successful opening in Japan and several other international territories. It is available on PPV, VOD and DVD. www.nwave.com. www.flymetothemoonthemovie.com **ipm***

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