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INTERNATIONAL

Technology News

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Reliance MediaWorks: To restore and beyond

Company plunges past core restoration biz into 3D services

By TODD LONGWELL

In a darkened room on the second floor of a nondescript building tucked away in an industrial area near Bob Hope Airport, a dozen or so young men and women sit at computer workstations equipped with dual 32-inch monitors that are wired into a powerful 300-machine, 1.5-petabyte Linux processing system.

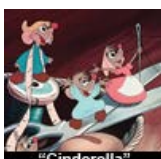
These are the members of Reliance MediaWorks Burbank's image processing team, and they're studying and manipulating individual frames of classic and not-so-classic movies such as Michael Powell's 1943 epic "The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp" and Brian De Palma's campy 1974 rock 'n' roll frightfest "Phantom of the Paradise."



India-based Reliance MediaWorks operates new soundstages in Mumbai.



Burbank facility restores such classics as "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," above, and has image-processed hundreds of films like the ones to the left.



"Just final checks on 'Cinderella,'?" says digital artist Alexis Ross-Gallaher as she scans her monitor, huddled in a parka. "We're almost done. Getting ready for the Blu-ray."



Founded as Lowry Digital in 1988, the company has left its mark on -- or, more accurately, removed unsightly marks and otherwise repaired and revitalized -- approximately 450 film and TV projects. They include several titles in Disney's Platinum Collection, 20 James Bond pics, three installments of "Star Wars" and some more esoteric efforts such as Akira Kurosawa's "Rashomon."



While it remains one of the premier restoration houses in the world, today that portion of its business is just the tip of the iceberg. Since being acquired in 2008 by Reliance MediaWorks, a division of Indian multimedia behemoth Reliance ADA Group, the company has made a concerted effort to market its image-processing expertise to studios for new releases such as "The A-Team," "Eat Pray Love" and "Yogi Bear," while also plunging headlong into 3D.



"The proprietary tools and the relationships Lowry had were very valuable to us," says Reliance MediaWorks CEO Anil Arjun of the rationale behind the acquisition. With the diversification of RMW Burbank, "we created a global technology center to fuel our business worldwide." That business includes the iLab postproduction and vfx house in London and a new 2D-to-3D conversion facility in Mumbai, launched in May, that is handling Lionsgate's "Conan the Barbarian" remake and several other major studio films due for release this year.



According to RMW Burbank COO Reid Burns, the recent emphasis on 3D is an

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evolutionary application of software originally developed for restorations, such as grain-removal tools.

"Using our proprietary processes to digitally remove the grain, increases the accuracy and expedites the rotoscoping, object separation and clean-plate paint work for 2D-to-3D conversions," Burns says. "We have also developed automated fixes for the polarization issues prevalent in stereo capture today. When photographing images that may have windows, chrome or other reflective surfaces, polarization issues are a common problem that we have been fixing for a number of stereo productions. As an example, we have recently been working with DreamWorks on 'Fright Night' remedying these type of issues."

RMW Burbank honed its 3D chops working with James Cameron on "Avatar" and, earlier, his 2003 documentary "Ghosts of the Abyss." It recently completed a restoration on the helmer's "Titanic" using an entirely 4K pipeline and it is now doing the same with his films "The Abyss" (1989) and "True Lies" (1994).

The facility has also been a frequent stop for director David Fincher, who made ample use of its proprietary noise management and image and detail enhancement tools on his last three films, "The Social Network," "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" and "Zodiac." He also used its software to enhance "Fight Club" and "Seven."

In addition to solid relationships with top filmmakers, RMW Burbank is also well known for its so-called 9/11 services -- repairing footage damaged by airport X-ray machines, streaky film processing or camera jitter.

Its 75-person staff also handles a small amount of vfx work, largely confined to rig, wire and object removal, leaving more complex CGI and compositing to sister facilities in India (where it employ approximately 1,200 digital artists), England and San Francisco. The latter, formerly Slash FX, collaborated with the Burbank unit on Relativity Media's upcoming "Shark Night 3D."

Burns thinks the biggest areas of future growth might be up-converting SD projects to HD, as the company has already done with the first three seasons of "The Simpsons" for Fox and a group of anime titles as part of a deal it has with Imagica Corp. in Japan.

"We're talking to a lot of different libraries and content holders about getting much, much deeper there," Burns says. "Some black-box solutions for that are OK, but we're trying to do something that's of higher quality."

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