



By Robert E. Tevis

“In the Picture”

The Return of Cinerama

Star Wars: The Force Awakens broke box office records in its opening weekend when it opened in over 4000 theaters. It was a producer's dream and a clear moneymaker. With that in mind, why would anyone make a film that could only be seen in less than 3 theaters in the entire world?

That is a question that many people may ask Stanley Livingston who was one of the producers of *In the Picture*. Stanley, you may already know, played the part of Richard “Chip” Douglas on the popular *My Three Sons* television series. He and Fred MacMurray were the only two actors who appeared in the entire series which ran from 1960 to 1972.

When we met at last year's Mid-Atlantic Nostalgia Convention, he told me that he had recently been one of the producers on a film made in the three film-strip Cinerama process. No small feat when you consider that the process hadn't been used for over 50 years. Still he held a strong passion for Cinerama since he had appeared in the final scenes, of the very last Hollywood feature film ever shot using the three-strip Cinerama process, *How the West Was Won* (*HTWWW*) (1962).

“David Strohmaier, who knows everything about Cinerama on the



The logo that the exhibitors used to celebrate the 60th Anniversary Celebration of Cinerama

molecular level, and John Sittig, of the ArcLight's Cinerama Dome Theater in Hollywood, hatched a plan and approached me about becoming one of the producers and also act in their Cinerama film,” according to Stanley. They used a restored camera that was actually used to film Stanley's scene in *HTWWW*, “That was why they wanted me involved.”

Even those of us who claim to have seen a Cinerama film in the '60s would be surprised to know that only two Hollywood feature films were actually shot using the original three-strip Cinerama process. Famous sixties films like, *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), *The Battle of the Bulge* (1965), even *2001: A Space Odyssey* were shown in Cinerama theaters but were all filmed in a camera that used a single strip of 70mm film. One of the latest films to use one of these wide-



The *In the Picture* crew behind Cinerama Camera #3

screen processes is Quentin Tarantino's *The Hateful Eight* (2015) which was filmed in Ultra Panavision 70. This is a version of Panavision that is filmed with anamorphic lenses to increase the width of the image.

The majority of true three-strip Cinerama films were travelogues which took us to places that few could get to or see. “Travel in the fifties was really for the very rich. These films brought the world to the theater,” says Stanley.

The real magic of three-strip Cinerama is due to the fact that when the three distinct film panels are projected together, the viewing screen approximates the field of human vision, 146 degrees wide by 55 degrees high. The resulting image would not only present the straight-ahead viewing experience, but also add on the perspective change which occurs on our outer periphery as we are moving forward—something akin to the effect that we see when driving in a car. The road ahead appears stable, but the scene to our left and right out the windows appears to be moving faster.

The first Cinerama presentation was a rare sighting event as well. On September 30, 1952, hundreds of invited guests gathered at the Broadway Theater in New York City

to see the first theatrical presentation of *This Is Cinerama*. Even at its peak in the early '60s, only about 230 theaters world-wide were fully equipped with not only the proper screen, but the sophisticated interlocked three projector and multi-channel sound systems required for the full cinematic experience.

Unfortunately, the expense and the difficulty of filming in Cinerama as well as the special exhibition equipment ended its run. Fast forward to 2011.

David Strohmaier and John Sittig decided to develop a film to celebrate the 60th anniversary of Cinerama for showing at the ArcLight Cinerama Dome. Developed upon the concept of the travelogue *Cinerama Holiday* (1954), they would follow a couple, Stanley Livingston and his wife Paula Drake on a trip through Los Angeles. They would show the town's high-points to another couple (Matthew Brewbaker and Elizabeth Dominguez). They used the actual camera, Cinerama Camera #3, which was used to film both *Cinerama Holiday* (1954) and *HTWWW* (1962).

The film starts at Mulholland Drive, then takes you in Stanley's mini-van down the hill. You experience a merry-go-round ride, the Griffith Observatory, and The Angel's Flight

funicular. The LA freeways never looked so good—or so free of traffic. The real gem in the film is the sail in San Pedro harbor. The water views are spectacular. After a quick pass of other Los Angeles sites, the tourists and their guides go to the Cinerama Dome where Stanley and his wife meet up with Debbie Reynolds—who played Stanley's Aunt Lilith in *HTWWW*. It ends with the cast watching themselves on the screen. When they presented the film at the Cinerama Dome for the anniversary festival, the cast of *In the Picture* were in the same seats and wardrobe in which they appeared in the film for quite a unique theatrical experience.

Stanley was concerned about his acting as he hadn't been in front of a camera for a while. "On one occasion, I blew a line, which I was hoping not to do because every time you pull the trigger on the



Prescott Rawlings (Stanley Livingston) from *How the West Was Won* reunites with his Aunt Lilith (Debbie Reynolds) in *In The Picture*.

Cinerama camera—even for few seconds—that's 500 bucks because you just wasted three strips of 35mm film. It's not like video where you can just do it over."

ing horribly difficult, reported David, "You only have one set of lenses, so no zooms, etc. You would need to move the camera around or dolly in for closer shots."

That was not the only issue. Speaking to David Strohmaier, the producer and director of *In The Picture*, the effort to make this short 26-minute film was substantial. The camera was large, unwieldy, and noisy. "The film was shot at 26 frames a second, which is exactly what they used to do, to produce slightly less flicker and slightly less grain on the screen, but it made edit-

Sound presented additional issues. "You could only average the sync out as the camera would change speed slightly on and off. Every line of dialog had to be blocked, and have some kind of a noise, or consonant hit in the voice, so we could sync up every line separately," he said, "There was no crystal sync between the recorder and the camera—there was in the day a method, but not today. It's been lost to history. Everything had to be matched up visually."

Let's not forget that he also had to edit three separate strips of film each time there was a cut. It's not unfair to say that it was one of the most complicated, short film editing projects in modern times.

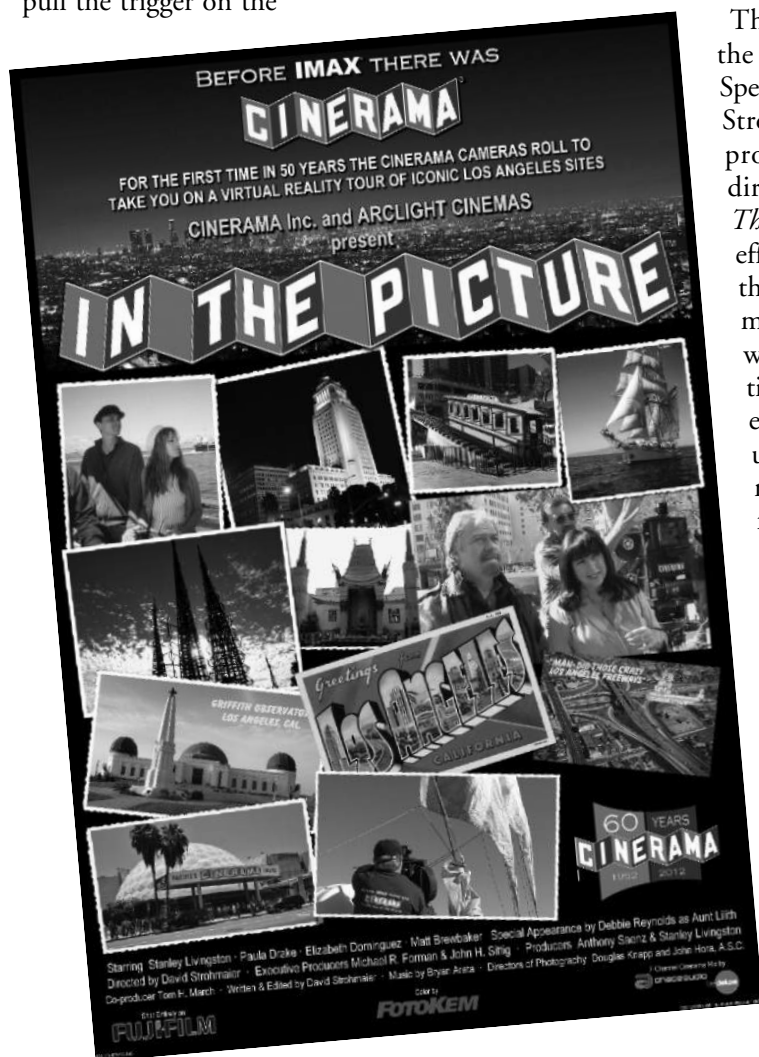
So why would anyone make such a film? Well, Kurt Wahlner, a producer and director in his own right, said it best in his interview for the Fall/Winter 2012 issue of "Camera Operator" magazine. He replied to the many people who asked, while he was working as an assistant cameraman on *In the Picture*, "What are you making this for? To show people." Why else, indeed.

As this article goes to press, the only known widescreen festival that is planned for 2016 will be at the National Media Museum in Bradford, U.K. Their annual "Widescreen Weekend" festival will be held this year but they have not yet set the dates or the program yet. Their history suggests, however, that they will show at least one Cinerama film this year.

For the time being, the only place to see *In the Picture* right now is on the Flicker Alley, Blu-Ray DVD set for *Search for Paradise*. This is how I saw it. The feature film, *Search for Paradise* made in 1957, is a travelogue narrated by Lowell Thomas of a trip through the sub montane areas of the Himalayas. It was directed by Otto Lang and has been reconstructed and remastered by David Strohmaier. All the Cinerama prints on the DVDs are presented in the Smilebox Curved Screen Simulation. Even on a large flat panel TV, the jeep ride along mountains on the way to Hunza is a dizzying experience—not quite as safe as Stanley's minivan in *In The Picture*.

The set has a wealth of extras that will make you an expert in Cinerama and prepare you for that rare wide-screen festival when it next comes around.

There are two short documentaries on YouTube where you can learn more about the filming of *In the Picture*. One, called "The Last Days of Cinerama" by Mike Celestino and Robert Garren is at http://youtu.be/O5BKZZ_59IQ. The other called "Cinerama 2012" by Michael J. Cahill at (Part one) www.youtube.com/watch?v=2p8OALI74h0 and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udtQB_i-JyE (Part Two). You can also learn more about Stanley Livingston and his work at www.stanleylivingston.com.



The movie poster for *In The Picture*.



The Cinerama shot of the ship in San Pedro harbor in Smilebox format



The cast enters the Arclight theater.



The cast appeared in the premiere performance in the seats and wardrobe as they appeared on the screen in this Cinerama shot. (Photos provided by David Strohmaier and Cinerama Inc.)

CINERAMA
IN THE PICTURE



Stanley and Dave with Cinerama camera #3 (Photo by Michael J. Cahill)