



Jan Niebuhr - Movie Fanatic # 1

Meet the chief

Thomas Hauerslev interviews Jan Niebuhr - Chief of the Bio City, Hillerød, Denmark

Today's interviewee, Mr. Jan Niebuhr (Born 1955), is the chief projectionist of BioCity in Hillerød, Denmark and the next "victim" of my series of interviews. I asked Jan a long time ago if he'd be interested in doing this interview and luckily he agreed. I've known Jan for 24 years and I consider him a true film fanatic and certainly one of Denmark's cinema "characters". He's always a pleasure to spend time with, and he has a wealth of movie knowledge. For years Jan has had his own home cinema, starting with 8mm and 16mm but he has obviously gone all the way with Betamax, VHS, LaserDisc and lately DVD. The interview will primarily focus on Jan's background and experience to understand why he's working as a

projectionist today. Secondly, but equally important, Jan will also give you a tour of his cinemas. This is not the typical MTC interview, which has an occasional tendency to be rather technical. So, please be prepared for an in-depth interview with Jan who recently celebrated his 25th anniversary as a projectionist. The city of Hillerød is 34 kilometres north west of Copenhagen, Denmark's capital and largest city. It's a considerable provincial city with more than 34.000 inhabitants. Hillerød even has it's own genuine royal castle (surrounded by a lake, naturally), a pedestrian street, several railway lines and a brand new 6-plex

cinema. The cinema, "BioCity" is owned and managed by Nordisk Film Biografer, the leading and largest Danish cinema chain. Cinemas are not new to Hillerød's inhabitants. Unfortunately, only the Slots Bio ("Cinema by the Castle") survived the 90s. For several years, Slots Bio has been the only cinema to serve the entire city. That situation changed August 3, 2001, when BioCity opened its doors.

Tell me about your background

My very first movie experience starts way back during my infancy. As far as I vaguely remember, my first encounter with moving images was some sort of Disneyland show on TV. I found that mysteriously interesting and later on I saw many series like "Laredo" and "The Fugitive" with David Janssen. It was that "movie thing" I was drawn into. My first screen was a made of a shoebox lid in which I'd cut a slit on each side and then pulled magazine cartoons through. One frame at a time. Needless to say, I had painted black masking to make it look like a screen. That was my first home theatre and I guess I was around 6 years old.

My first real cinema experience, I guess, was at the long gone "Valby Theatre". The film was most likely Laurel and Hardy's "Big Business" in which they destroy a complete house. I couldn't help notice the "magic beam" of light coming from the projection room. It was magic, it was great, and I was probably thinking "I'll be back".

The real breakthrough came when I bought a battery driven 8mm projector from a friend. In return he got some of my Beatles

singles. Now I could view 45 foot excerpts from real movies. I remember that the only place dark enough to see the movies on my shoebox screen was under our sofa. The first film I bought on 8mm was a 3½ minute version of "Doctor Cyclops". I've never seen the rest of the film. I also remember the rewinding of the reel took place with a regular rubber band. That was my first look into the movies. Cinema has been my second home ever since.

Upgrade to sound movies

I left school after the 9th grade. My favourite subject was English and I remember the teachers hated my "big fat" American accent which I got from all the movies I saw. Even in my school years I wanted to be a projectionist, but that wasn't considered a wise career move. At school everybody "booed" at me when I said I wanted to be a projectionist.

When I left school my life took a completely different direction - I joined the circus as an usher. Circus was my first taste of show business and soon I moved up to be a ring boy. It was very exciting meeting all those artists from all over the globe and I worked every night every summer for eight happy years.

About the same time as I had the job at the circus I



also managed to start a career with the postal service as a telegram messenger. In the late seventies and early eighties many cinemas closed and projecting movies was a very uncertain way of life, so my job at the post office, was a kind of financial security. I rode a motorcycle around in Copenhagen delivering telegrams. I ended my career after 14 years in a regular post office while still working nights and weekends as a projectionist. In those days a civil servant job was a guarantee for a life time of job opportunities. Those were the days.

During wintertime the circus was converted to a cinema called "World Cinema" with 1500+ seats. I tried to get into the projection room but it was

World Cinema as a PROJECTIONIST. In those days you had to practice 300 hours before you could attend projectionists school. My World Cinema teachers were great and I owe them everything. They taught me all about carbon arcs and changeovers as that was the standard in 1976. I graduated as a licensed projectionist from World Cinema. It was a real exam with a green table, questions and a practical problem to solve.

I sent my first application to Vanløse Bio in suburban Copenhagen. The manager asked me long forgotten questions for 10 minutes and he then hired me. My certificate was a big thing and it meant a lot in those days. Finally, I had my "own



impossible and they rejected all my attempts to get in. I felt exactly like Toto in "Cinema Paradiso" – I live the film, that film is me! The film was very close to my own life and I cannot see it without getting very emotional. I'd like to add that at Kinopalæet in Copenhagen, they had some gigantic windows displaying everything that went on in projection. I often found myself looking more toward the projectors rather than at the screen. In any case I kept coming back bugging them and they finally they gave in and I was brought into the

cinema" with 2 GK21s, carbons and changeovers. My dream had come true. I met a school friend, Mr. Rene Pfaff, who was an usher at the nearby Carlton Theatre. Rene was brought up at the Imperial and desperately needed a job as a projectionist. He was hired and we had a ball at Vanløse running the place on a day-to-day basis pretty much like we wanted to, with double midnights and Sunday matinees. Later management brought in "new technology" with automatic changeovers and remote controlled projectors.



The projectionist had to be the usher as well, remotely starting the performance from the auditorium. Without any hesitation I quit, as this was definitely not up my alley. I stayed at Vanløse for 6 months, and left for my first 7-week trip to the United States.

Like to Travel

In the States I finally encountered the American way of life. It was the country I had grown up with through the movies. I have a great interest in the American west. Both the actual history, and the way movies have depicted it. Since 1977 I've visited the States around 10 times. Always visiting cinemas and meeting many friendly and interesting people. I've made a lot of friends and always enjoy the feeling and atmosphere of the country which basically gave birth to the commercial movie industry. My latest visit included a visit to Skywalker Ranch, which was overwhelming.

Upon my return from my first US visit, I continued my projectionist career at several cinemas in and around Copenhagen. Among the cinemas I've worked in are Merry Bio, Amager Center Bio, ABCinema, Cinema 1-8, 3 Falke Bio, Imperial Bio, Kinopalæet and Bio Trio until

finally settling at Palladium in 1987. I was offered a full time occupation in 1988 and that became my "home" for the next 14 years. Palladium is a three screen cinema built in 1978 on the grounds of an older cinema by the same name; Palladium (1942 – 1977). I ran all previews, special screenings gala openings as well as maintaining the machines.

In 1999 my brother Tommy and I heard of a new cinema project in Hillerød, to be named BioCity. 6 brand new screens built from the ground up. It was to become the complex to outdo all other complexes in terms of the latest technology and comfort. Tommy and I went to the management of Nordisk Film because we felt our names should be on this project. I felt I had the

Daily maintenance - note the Cinemeccanica vector system in the background and the blue light

Centre left: a view of the foyer
Below: Jan and Tommy Niebuhr





Top: Posters and prints are kept in the projection room

Centre: Note the blue lighting in the projection room - very confusing at first but you get used to it.

Bottom: Moving a film from one platter to another is easily done with this truck

knowledge in the projection field to build the ultimate cinema and I have managed to leave my fingerprints on what I know best. I left Palladium in the summer of 2001 and I've haven't looked back since.

Tell me about your day to day business on a regular day at BioCity

On a regular normal "grey weekday", my day begins around one o'clock (13:00/1 pm). I start off by checking my e-mails from all levels of management in Copenhagen, suppliers, and so forth. And usually, I spend about 30 minutes answering those e-mails. And next I'll check out if everything has been running smoothly the day before and usually that correspondence goes through our daily log in our office. Should anything have arisen the day before, I immediately take care of technical issues and logistical problems pertaining to print arrivals and departures. I have complete responsibilities with the distribution companies regarding all prints arriving, sitting and departing from the premises.

Should a print, for various reasons fail to arrive, I have to work quickly, because the film depot (Filmlageret) is in Copenhagen, 40 km away. We rely on different freight firms so an urgent call to the film distributor is essential in order to locate the print. We have actually have had a few close calls when it comes to late arrival of a print, but through our excellent network of freight services we always manage, in the nick of time, to be ready for show time.

On the other end we have also experienced instances when our freight service was arriving in good time, expecting to collect a print

only to discover it was still sitting on the platter – the horror! – the horror! Oh well, no harm done.

When it comes to technical problems we don't have much projector malfunction. All our equipment is brand new so we are lucky not to have any major technical problems. Our most common fault is when our impulse or "cue" placed on the film itself fails (= silver foil that interacts with our computer system and activates change of format, light change in the auditorium, sound format change etc). And that's usually because it has become worn due to circulation of our prints among our 6 screens. The silver foil is placed on the base side of the film opposite the soundtrack and is usually measured out so it fits with the dimmer and format change. And the same thing is done at the end of the print, the foil is placed 3 meters (9ft) from the credits for light in the auditorium. And then another foil for dower down, and the last foil stops the projector.

If there's a problem with a piece of foil, I simply change the foil.

When the "paper work" is done, it's time to "do business". I turn on all projectors and make them "stretch" a quarter of an hour. Then I move down to the auditoriums to check that all lights and aisle light are on and EXIT signs are working, and if any bulbs in the ceiling need to be changed.

I return to the box/ projection room/booth and start lacing up the machines. If all 6 screens have to start at the same time I take my time lacing up. It takes about 20-30 minutes. We open the doors for our guests 30 minutes prior to the first

performance at 14:30 (2:30 pm). 4 of our screens have interlock possibilities and when it comes to lacing up, that takes even more time. We can run a print between auditoriums 1 & 5 and 4 & 5. Between screens #1 and #5 there's a time difference of 1 minute and 15 seconds. Usually the interlock is used when we have crowd pleasers like "Die Another Day", "Lord of the Rings" or selected programs for children.

Then the programs start and then you have to be on your toes. There's a considerable distance between the projectors in the box and it's always nice to be near one when you have format change etc. Even though all projectors are linked up to our VECTOR computer, I prefer to be at hand when it comes to focusing and framing and of course sound check.

When all performances have been launched successfully, it's time for coffee break.

My senior manager is responsible for budgets, staff, planning, etc. In my capacity of chief projectionist and second supervisor, it's Tommy's and my job to support him when he's not in his office in Hillerød. He's also regional manager for the Imperial, Palladium cinemas in CPH, and the BioCity in Taastrup. In my capacity as "second in command" I spend time on "the floor" among the staff and audience. It is a part of the job which I really enjoy. Spending time with the guests making sure they have a good time and of course make sure the staff are all right. I'm also the event coordinator of BioCity. I coordinate all our special events, screening, previews, participation of film crews, celebrity guests etc. In

January I had the opportunity to plan and coordinate our big "Bond 40th Anniversary Gala Event". Great fun which included big spotlight, show dancers before the film, drawing lots, competitions. During the event I served mainly as the toastmaster.

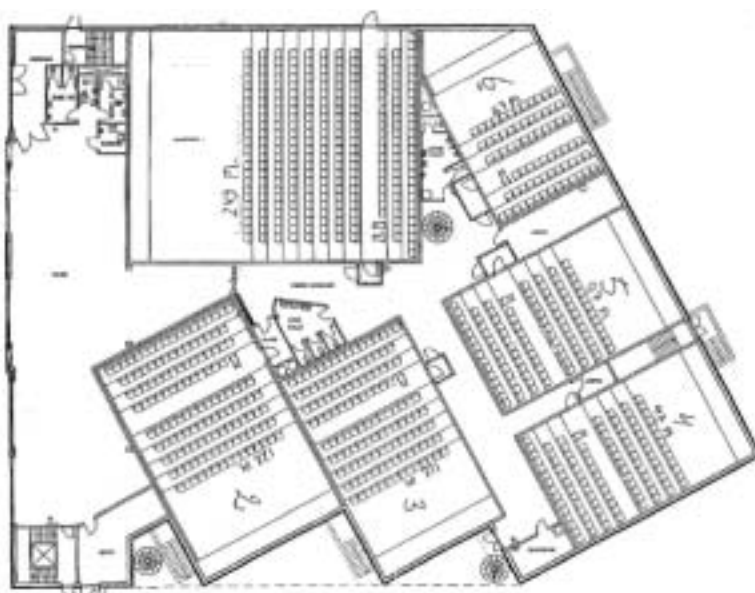
Tommy, my brother, is responsible for the café, concession and staff schedules on the floor.

Give me the basic layout of BioCity

All auditoriums are square shaped, built with stadium seating, straight rows and to THX specifications. Typical show times are at 16:15, 18:30 and 21:00, but they vary from film to film. Box office, café, toilets and concession are all in the foyer in ground level. Access for wheel chairs is trouble-free to all 6 screens. For all the juicy details, please have a look at the fact boxes.

Have you met some interesting movie people in your career?

During my time at the Palladium, at some of our special previews, quite a few years ago, we had several visits from several well-known celebrities, including William Friedkin, Rene Russo and even Phil Collins, and of course I have also met several of our own native celebrities who often visited our cinemas. Usually in the Palladium days we tested all new productions on the way back from the very first work prints to the final release prints. And during that time frame we had a lot of interesting discussions with directors, cinematographers, producers and actors. That was during the days at Palladium. In Hillerød it is a very different matter, even though several Danish celebrities have paid us a visit during the openings of Danish movies. Our big



Top: The BioCity floorplan
Centre and Bottom: views of Screen One



Above: The concession area - note the lovely Danish draught beer and the Irish Whiskey on the wall - and Jan pictured outside the BioCity.

Opposite: Jan, very concentrated during the start of the performance

Below left: A view of the hallway leading to the cinemas

opening gala night was attended by the two leading actors Sofie Lassen-Kahlke and Robert Hansen who in person cut the ribbon (in the form of 35mm film stretched across the stage in screen #1) and officially opened the cinema with their new movie called "Anja and Victor – Love at First Hiccup 2".

In the early eighties, 1983, to be exact, I went to the Graumans Chinese Theatre for the premiere of "Flashdance". Those kind of movies were quite hot in the early 1980s. In late summer the same year Ms. Jennifer

Beals went on a promotion tour in Europe and made a visit to Copenhagen. She came to a record store in the centre of Copenhagen where she was signing autographs to promote the soundtrack. I immediately took a few hours off from work and went down to meet her. At that time she wasn't known at all in Denmark, because the movie hadn't opened yet. I managed to have a talk with her and mentioned that I saw the movie a few months earlier in the States and it definitely would be a huge hit in Europe. And true enough, it sure was. Actually she was a bit excited to know that someone outside the States had seen it. We had a little conversation until we were interrupted.

Any regrets?

For some reason, so far I've never gotten married nor had any children. Looking in the rear mirror....I guess it would have been nice to have a family and children. But I'm very happy with my life, though. In many ways I feel very fortunate considering what I am doing now. It was actually a hobby to begin with and I am thankful that it became a way of life. No regrets.

Would you recommend young people on the floor to become projectionists?

Definitely if the interest is there. And by that I mean from my point of view there has to be something in the blood. I don't require any kind of "professor like" knowledge, but a genuine interest in the line of work is absolutely necessary. I want to avoid "push the projector button" types who just want to see free movies. If I feel the interest is there I would recommend it.

For many, being a projectionist the job can be very boring in some sense, but remember you have to deliver an exclusive presentation for every show. Whether there are just 4 people or a thousand people in the seats.

How do you imagine the future of cinema?

Very positive. When you think about it, I've experienced the so-called death-of-cinema in the early

1980s when this new word "Home Video" started to show it's ugly face. There were some really bad and sad years for the cinemas. I experienced first-hand how many Copenhagen cinema palaces closed down. I was probably the only projectionist ever, to close the same cinema TWICE! It was the Cinerama theatre, Kinopalæet, which closed in February 1981. It reopened a month later for a special one-week engagement, and then closed for good. Talk about fate. I was there both final nights.

With cutting edge technology for home cinema and the ability to download a bootleg copy of the latest blockbuster from the internet in minutes, audiences still prefer a huge 15 metre screen and the social experience of being with other people in a cinema, so cinema theatres will continue to exist.

I welcome the digital era. It will be an interesting issue



to follow. But I think it is still some years away before we see a fully digitized 10 plex. In my opinion digital live action has to look just as breathtaking as the original Todd-AO presentations, and we are not quite there yet.

My company slogan is still fully valid: "Movies must be seen in the cinema".

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Photographs by Thomas
Hauerslev

Just the facts

Screen	1	2	3	4	5	6
Seats	245	128	118	97	97	67
Rows	11	9	9	8	8	6
Screen size in meters (all flat)	14,8 x 7,4	10,3 x 5,5	8,9 x 4,9	8,6 x 4,7	8,6 x 4,7	7,5 x 4,1
Throw in meters	21	17	16,2	14,5	14,5	11,5
Xenon (horizontal)	5000	4000	3000	2500	2500	2500
Processor	CP500 + THX	CP650	CP650	CP650	CP650	CP650
DTS	X ES	-	-	-	-	-

Projectors I have worked with:

Bauer B14, B12, U4, U3
Gaumont Kalee 21
Victoria 8
Victoria 5
DP70
Ernemann X

Top 3 favourite films:

20.000 Leagues under the Sea; Cinema Paradiso
Where Eagles Dare

Top 3 favourite soundtracks:

Everything John Williams ; Legends of the Fall (Horner)
Under Fire (Goldsmith)

Top 3 favourite actors:

John Wayne ; James Stewart ; Tom Hanks

Top 3 favourite actresses:

Sandra Bullock ; Julie Andrews ; Elisabeth Shue

Top 3 favourite directors:

John Ford ; Steven Spielberg ; Anthony Mann

Top 3 favourite cinemas:

BioCity #1, Hillerød ; Imperial, Copenhagen
Palladium #1, Copenhagen

Top 3 favourite closed cinemas:

3 Falke Bio, Copenhagen ; Kinopalæet, Copenhagen
Atlantic, Copenhagen

All screens

Speakers	JBL
Amps	Electro Voice
Projectors (all Vector controlled)	Vic 5
Lenses	ISCO Optic - U-Star-HD Plus
Dolby	Dolby Digital EX
Colour scheme	Gray tones, blue taps and red seats
Screens	Harkness
Wheelchairs	2 in screen 1, 1 in rest of screens

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