

HOLLYWOOD REVELATION

First Demonstration of Todd-AO Shows Process Is a Challenge to Cinerama

By THOMAS M. PEYOR

FIFTEEN months of speculation over whether the Todd-AO big-screen process, named after Michael Todd and the American Optical Company, could challenge the supremacy of Cinerama ended Tuesday afternoon. At a showing of experimental footage, projected on a huge, curved screen at the Grand Central station at the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio, it was demonstrated that Todd-AO matches Cinerama in its ability to achieve panoramic effects and to pull an audience into the screen. Moreover, it was clear that it also has technical and economic advantages.

Todd-AO uses only one strip of 65 mm. film; the screen is in one piece and the special all-purpose projector—it can handle 35 mm. film as well—is operated from the conventional booth at the back of the house. Thus, from the standpoint of practicality, it eliminates some of the costly disadvantages of Cinerama. That system uses a screen with three panels which receive images off three strips of film from separate projectors set up in booths in the orchestra. This reduces seating capacity.

Artistically the Todd-AO picture is superior because it is a smooth entity, unmarred by the separation which occurs frequently in Cinerama when, as a result of vibration and other causes, the side panels dance up and down.

Program

The demonstration showing offered some of the test footage directed by Fred Zinnemann for the Rodgers-Hammerstein musical, "Oklahoma!," the first picture to be made in Todd-AO, as well as sequences on a roller coaster, the bull ring in Madrid and the canals of Venice. These last were photographed by Mr. Todd to dramatize the similarity between the new method and Cinerama, which he also helped to bring before the public.

The Todd-AO roller coaster ride, like the one in the show called "This Is Cinerama," also was photographed at Playland in the Rockaways. The dips and turns taken head-on give the spectator the sensation of actually riding in the cars. However, the most important part of the demonstration in the minds of movie-makers was the showing of the "Oklahoma!" footage.

In dance numbers and a part of the show's smoke house sequence the new process demonstrated its adaptability for the projection of story drama. This had been the big reservation in the minds of dramatists and critics in regard to Cinerama. Moreover, a series of close-ups of the heads of girls brought them as close to the spectator as though they were being viewed under a microscope. The image was in no wise distorted.

Indeed, the remarkable thing about the system is that, notwithstanding the tremendous size of the picture, there is no noticeable distortion even when viewed from a distance of only one foot from the center of the screen or from the extreme side. In this respect, it has an advantage over even the normal size image.

Dr. Brian O'Brien, who developed the process for the American Optical Company at Mr.

Todd's suggestion, explained that the degree of curve in the screen does away with the distortion. The screen used at the demonstration measured 51 by 25 feet. Its curve had a depth of 13 feet at the center. The over-all curved area measured 60 feet.

Dr. O'Brien said Todd-AO pictures could be projected on flat surface screens. However, he added, the images then would be subject to distortion if viewed close up or from extreme side seats. He also pointed out that the curve helped to develop the illusion of audience participation and peripheral vision.

New CinemaScope

By an interesting coincidence, Todd-AO had its first semi-public demonstration only a few hours after Twentieth Century-Fox exhibited a special subject to illustrate advances made in CinemaScope photography and stereophonic sound. (The Todd-AO seven-channel sound source—one is a control track—was not demonstrated.) The new CinemaScope lenses result in photography of superior quality—as different as night and day in comparison with the texture of "The Robe" and other films made with the early anamorphic lenses. The new picture—"The Egyptian"—is the first to be shot in entirety with the refined lenses—looks infinitely sharper, have more depth of focus and do not fade out at the ends.

The two demonstrations served to point up a marked difference between the systems. Todd-AO is definitely big-screen. As demonstrated, at least, it had a proportion of 2 feet in width to 1 in height. CinemaScope results in a more compressed picture, having a ratio of 2.55 feet in width to 1 foot in height. The added height in Todd-AO helps, in our opinion, to heighten the panoramic effect as well as to add stature to images seen in full figure.

So far, Todd-AO is the only process which employs extra size

film both in the taking negative and the prints used for projection. The 65 mm. film has an image area three and a half times greater than that of the 35 mm. film used in Cinerama and CinemaScope. The last achieves its width by squeezing images into elongated form in photography and then spreading them out via a compensating-enlarging lens in projection. The Todd-AO image is big to start with.

According to Dr. O'Brien, the film can be reduced to standard size without any loss of quality. Joseph Schenck, head of Magna Theatres Corporation which controls the process and is affiliated with Rodgers-Hammerstein Pictures in producing "Oklahoma," says the picture first will be road shown in some forty-five to fifty theatres. Later, the 35 mm. prints will be distributed in the usual fashion to theatres not equipped for the process.