

Sound Issues when Projecting

Thanks to some collaborative work between ACOFS (in particular, the secretary – David Harcombe) and the FVFS, we have been able to compile the thoughts and views of many film society “experts” who have had experience getting the sound right for their film societies. This compilation was originally published in The ACOFS Bulletin and ReelNews and is reprinted here for posterity. It is more a collection of first-hand experience in fixing sound issues rather than an expert reference source.

Amplifiers and Speakers

Have you, or your film society, had any of these problems?

Recently, a northern Tasmanian film society sought advice about the sound problems they face when screening DVDs in their regular venue. They reported that their venue’s boxy shape makes it difficult to achieve the correct acoustics, with many films having bits of dialogue that are hard to hear. This especially applies when characters in films speak with a broad regional accent, or are soft-spoken. They wondered if specially designed DVDs were available whose acoustics would suit larger venues.

It was clear from the replies, including one each from Victoria & WA, that sound clarity is a widespread problem for film societies & their members. This is what they advised:

Most DVDs come with 5+1 channels of sound. If these are all lumped together into two stereo speakers, there is not much you can do about it. But if you are using 5+1 speakers (ie two main front speakers, two smaller rear surround speakers, a centre front speaker, & also a sub-woofer) then most of the sound effects & music will come from the two front stereo speakers - with much of the dialogue coming from the front centre speaker. If so, you can usually boost this centre channel by several decibels to increase your members’ chances of hearing the dialogue clearly. Incidentally, DVD sound systems often have multiple settings to choose from - ie for use in cinemas, halls, & lounge-rooms etc. Use trial and error to pick the best option.

However, another film society advised that if you run Dolby 5.1 through a normal stereo system, ambient sounds tend to amplify compared to the dialogue. So, if your DVD has soundtrack options, & you are running through a normal stereo system, it may be wiser to switch instead to Dolby 2.1.

Accents

Sometimes accents are hard to follow. This may apply in some American films, and also with Scottish, Irish, Indian, & Caribbean dialogue - and even some regional English dialects. In this situation, you could try displaying the subtitles. These may be marked as “captions for the hard of hearing” - if they are in the same language as the movies. Their disadvantage is that they often add descriptions of the sound effects as well as the dialogue. Granted, while that’s a slight distraction, it’s surely a small price to pay for an improved understanding of the film!

Film Actors Mumbling

In addition, many film viewers find diction is often mumbled in today’s movies - particularly those from the USA. Unfortunately, there’s little that can be done about that apart from showing the subtitles - if available. Alternatively, you could encourage your members to accept that this is naturalistic (ie how people actually speak to each other in real life), and you don’t have to hear every word - just the important ones, and the conversation’s general gist!

Furnishings

One society asked: “Have you considered using furnishings to improve sound? If so, have you tried hanging up curtains or drapes, or putting down extra floor coverings?” The intention of both of these would be to reduce the effect of sound either bouncing around the room, or being reflected around it.

However, another film society’s solution, in a hall where there are no soft furnishings or curtains, is to use just two 1000 watt speakers - placing them together in the front centre of the hall, and positioned forward from the screen. This has improved dialogue, especially for those of their audience who are ‘hard of hearing’.

Another reply told of how their film society has a 10+ year old Sony cinema ‘home’ 7.2 theatre surround sound system with 10 speakers. This gives them almost the same clarity as in a commercial cinema. Despite this they find that many films have less than perfect sound, and diction is often poor. So they now run subtitles

whenever these are available.

Subtitles

They also say that, with subtitles, the base of the projected image needs to be above head height - so everyone can see them. This might require the projection to be made smaller, so that the film's base can be raised. Naturally, this depends on the hall's design and the height of the screen.

Are you Just Getting Older?

There were also some suggestions from individuals. One noted that lip reading is a natural response to 'aging hearing'. Perhaps older film viewers are already doing this at our movies. Another suggested trying out different seating positions in the film society's regular venue - to suit 'aging eyes, ears, and neck'! He reported that, in some positions in his society's venue (a tiered theatre) that his eyes favoured, he often heard virtually nothing unless he used his hands to "cup" his ears - despite this being quite tiring when watching a 2 hour film! But then he tried moving halfway down, and sat right in the centre, and at last could hear pretty well everything. Pleasingly, his eyes & neck seemed to manage Ok as well!

Further Comments?

I hope these answer your queries if you have had any, and will be helpful to your film society and members. Clearly this topic is not exhausted, so if anyone has any further comments or suggestion to make we would love to hear from you. Email secretary@fvfs.org.au

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www.fvfs.org.au

Federation of Victorian Film Societies
ABN: 62 373 979 409 Inc: A0028942B
03 9874 4270 17 Bruce St Mitcham Vic. 3132