

BOTTOM LINE

Business, management, and finance

Show Business

Henry Plitt's latest coup will revolutionize the movie game.

BY CAROL SCHMUCKLER

AFTER 30 YEARS in the theater business, during which he'd risen from a Paramount executive trainee to the owner of the fourth largest theater chain in the country, Henry Plitt thought he'd seen it all. Until, that is, he got a look at Showscan.

"I'd come to have very mixed feelings about the theater business," Plitt explains. "For years I'd realized the living room was our biggest competitor, and I was looking for something that would take the theater out of that competition and make it a unique experience again. Showscan was all that and more."

Don't be embarrassed if you don't quite know what Showscan is. Few people do, because few have seen it. Showscan is a revolutionary filmmaking and projection process that delivers a picture of incredible depth and realism. It's new technology.

But that doesn't begin to explain what Showscan does to viewers, Henry Plitt among them. Showscan involves the audience in a film experience so breathtakingly distinct and clear that one critic claimed that if they made a movie like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* in Showscan, it would simply be too intense for many people and

they would have to leave the theater.

Showscan was invented by special effects genius Douglas Trumbull, who was responsible for the stunning effects in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, and *Blade Runner*. Although he developed the Showscan technology 10 years ago, Trumbull couldn't get anyone interested in using the process. But when he teamed up with Henry Plitt, things started to change. That's not too surprising if you know anything about Plitt.

Plitt was a member of SU's 1939 class, but a family illness interrupted his studies. Eventually he completed a combined undergraduate/law degree at Brooklyn Law School, and then, on the eve of World War II, he entered the service. He came out a bona fide war hero.

As a captain in the Army Air Corps' Screaming Eagle division, he was to be part of the D-Day operation. Disturbed about the seeming inefficiency of the invasion plans, he decided to lead his detachment in. That decision made him the first GI to parachute into Normandy.

"There I was," he recalls, "jumping into German territory with an 'H' [for Hebrew] on my dog tag. . . . Suddenly I had the opportunity to play on the first team in a stadium much bigger than Archbold—and I took it."

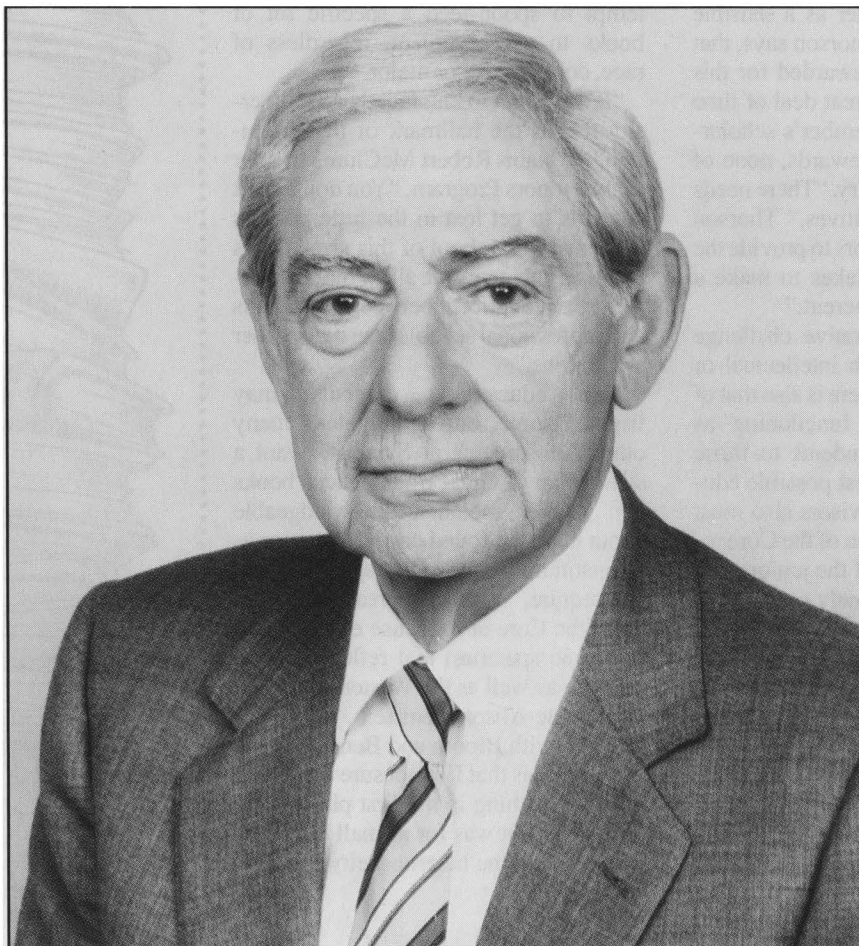
While working in intelligence after V-E Day, he was sent out to look for escaped Nazi war criminals reported to be in the area. He one day encountered a man quietly painting an alpine landscape, and, inspecting the man's papers, noticed the initials J.S. Acting on a hunch, Plitt asked the man if he knew of a notorious Nazi, Julius

Streicher, whose weekly newspaper, *Der Sturmer*, was devoted entirely to arousing hatred against Jews. The man turned to him and said calmly, "Yes, that's who I am." Streicher was apprehended.

Those feats—and the five combat medals he received—brought him home on a hero's tour during which he was assigned to appear on the Paramount theater circuit. Theater executives were so impressed with Plitt they offered him a postwar trainee job.

At that time, Paramount had 1,700 theaters and was the largest circuit in the world. Plitt worked at Paramount organizations in Cincinnati, Detroit, New Orleans, New York, and Chicago, learning all aspects of the theater business. He rose steadily in the company, taking on more and more responsibility and authority.

Plitt worked for Paramount at a time when the studio was forced by federal anti-trust legislation to divest itself of many holdings,



ALAN BERLINER

CAROL NORTH SCHMUCKLER, an M.F.A. candidate in film who holds SU degrees in English and advertising, is a member of the SU Publications staff.

Henry Plitt makes million-dollar deals so the show can go on.

after which Paramount sought investments in other parts of the business. Companies and titles came and went—Plitt's resumé lists a half-dozen different employers—but it was all part of the Paramount empire and it was always Plitt's job to seal the deals that make big-time show business possible.

In one of his assignments, he was approached by Australian media mogul Rupert Murdoch, who wanted three of America's top television shows (Paramount's *Combat*, *Ben Casey*, and *The Fugitive*) for his network, although two of the shows were then playing on a competing Australian network.

"I pointed out that if I gave them to him, I'd never be able to sell to anyone else in Australia again," Plitt says, "and I insisted that he contract to buy everything we released for the next five years, with a minimum guarantee of \$1 million a year. He agreed, and I had myself a sure \$5 million in 1965 dollars."

IN 1958, PLITT BECAME president of ABC Films, the television distribution and production arm of the American Broadcasting Company. The company had not been doing well; only later did Plitt discover that Paramount intended to let ABC Films die once its losses exceeded \$1 million, which it seemed well on its way to doing when Plitt took over.

"We had a [television] series, *Congressional Investigator*, that had racked up \$490,000 in costs and that was a total disaster," Plitt recalls. "We couldn't sell it and were going to lose the show's total cost, which, added to our normal losses, would have put us well over that \$1-million mark."

Then he heard that a French company was looking for a distributor of various films they'd acquired. He offered to be that distributor and promised them a \$570,000 guaranteed return on their films. But he also suggested that \$500,000 of the guarantee be paid not in money, but

in product—the producer's cut on a brand new television series that had never been seen anywhere in the world. Guess the name of that show.

"I picked up the cost of *Congressional Investigator* plus half a million in anticipated profits on the film distribution," says Plitt. "Within a year, I'd turned the company around. In all these years, I'm proudest of having saved ABC Films. It was a company destined to be put away, and we saved it with an unbelievable bailout."

He eventually became president of Paramount's Midwest-ABC Great States Company, which managed a string of Midwestern movie houses. By 1972, though, Plitt realized that Paramount no longer had any interest in owning theaters, so he offered to buy them. Eventually all the old theaters on the Paramount circuit became Plitt Theaters, and some 30 years after he'd appeared on the Paramount stage as a war hero, Henry Plitt bought a big piece of the company.

WHEN PLITT SOLD his theaters to Cineplex Odeon in 1985, he went looking for new challenges. He formed the Plitt Entertainment Group and today serves as chairman of the board. The company produces films, ordinarily for non-theatrical release. Its latest venture is the television miniseries *Pursuit*, a spy adventure starring Veronica Hammel and Ben Cross, due to air this winter.

Plitt's other major business commitment is as co-chairman (with creator Trumbull) of Showscan.

"Seeing a Showscan film is not like seeing any other kind of film," Plitt says. "When you go to a regular movie, you're looking 'at' something. When you watch Showscan, you become a part of it."

Showscan is so stunning because it delivers much more visual information. Ordinary film size is 35mm; Showscan is 70mm. Ordinary film is projected at 24 frames per second (f.p.s.); Showscan is projected at 60 f.p.s., the maximum that a human eye can absorb. The result is an image delivering five times as much information as today's movies.

The faster filming speed reduces blurring and allows the use of projectors with much brighter lights, which present more vivid colors. There's also more room on the film for the sound track, allowing a greater dynamic range of sound. The image is so sharp, so vivid, and so real that it's like 3-D in reverse: instead of popping out of the screen at you, Showscan gives a picture of such amazing depth that you can look into it. The result is a viewing experience far beyond what we're accustomed to in motion pictures.

Together with a Swiss partner, Showscan also manufactures Dynamic Motion Simulators (DMS) that combine short Showscan-filmed "rides" with hydraulically-driven seats whose action is synchronized to the screen action. Viewers are not only involved

visually, but their seats actually pitch and yaw as they "experience" the ride on the screen.

While a temporary DMS has been installed at Pier 39 in San Francisco, the first permanent DMS recently opened at Futuroscope in France. A major Japanese leisure company has signed for 10 DMS units, and others are due in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan.

"It's better than thrill rides in an amusement park. The DMS becomes a new attraction simply

by changing the film. Besides," Plitt laughs, "you don't need insurance."

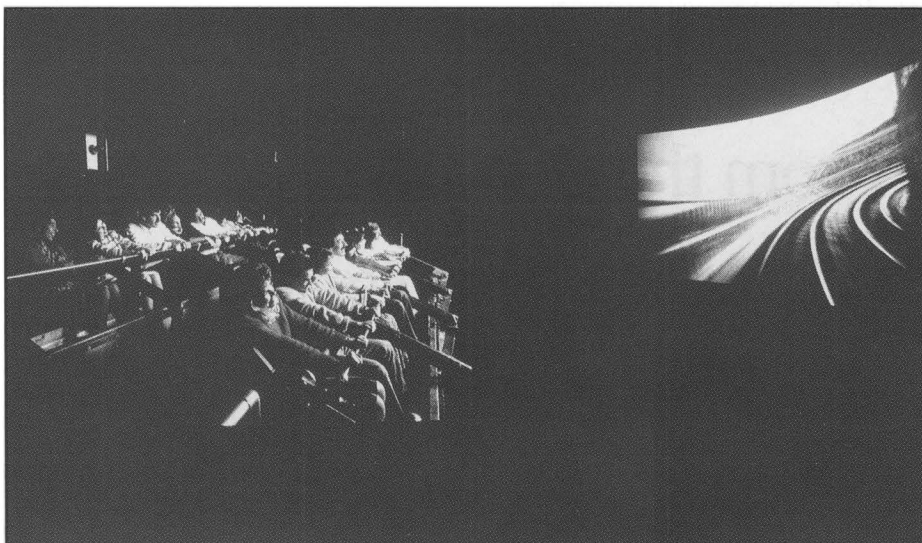
Showscan also sells its own specialty theaters, which capitalize on the strengths of the Showscan process with a wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling screen. The theaters are intended for short films although they may later show features.

While industry experts acknowledge that Showscan is the most extraordinary advance in film since the advent of talkies, it faces a frustrating Catch-22. Studios are reluctant to make a film using the process (\$2 million to \$3 million more to shoot) until enough theaters are equipped to show it, and exhibitors are reluctant to equip and reconfigure their theaters (\$100,000 to \$400,000) until they know a film is ready.

The good news is that the ball is already rolling. Plitt has announced an agreement in principle with Aaron Russo Films (producer of *Trading Places* and *The Rose*) for three feature-length Showscan films, the first to be released at Christmas 1989. Plitt already has a commitment for its exhibition in Showscan-equipped theaters in the top 25 markets in the U.S.

All in all, Showscan seems to fit Plitt's requirements—it's a unique viewing experience, it's just starting, and it can use his special brand of vision and nerve.

"This is the most exciting thing I've ever seen on film," Plitt says. "Things are really happening now and I can't wait for them all to fall into place. Showscan is about to revolutionize the film industry."



In a Dynamic Motion Simulator, seats pitch and yaw to match action on the screen.