

Otherworld masters of dubbing

By JERRY A. SIERRA

BURBANK, CA — In its original French language the film was considered a classic. But in this version the characters spoke clear contemporary English, and the dialogue didn't come close to matching the movements of their lips. In some moments the actors showed the physical signs of raising their voices, but the volume didn't change. The classic had been dubbed, but the audience was not duped. They were, in fact, mad as hell.

"It's unfortunate that a lot of distributors haven't caught on to the fact that dubbing can be much better," says Travis Pike of Otherworld Language Dubbing Services, "and that it's worth the extra money. The lips can match."

Using the totally digital environment of Burbank's EFX Systems, Pike strives for, and usually achieves, lip-sync perfection. Many other improvements are also made to the soundtrack along the way, from audio sweetening to full stereo separation on mono originals, to improved background and sound effects, and the improved quality of the overall mix.

A wing of Otherworld Entertainment Corp., Otherworld Language Dubbing Services was created last year when Lingo-Tech Dubbing Service's Betty Givens retired after seven years of service. Her complete talent files and contacts were transferred to her partner Pike, who vowed to continue pursuing the high quality Givens was known for.

Pike's credits include the 13-part German TV series *Tim Tyler*, which went from German to English, *If a Body Meets A Body*, a Three Stooges classic that went from English to German, and *Fanny and Alexander*.

"If quality matters, we're the right people for the job," Pike says. "We don't compete with the cheap houses. We offer a totally digital service, and that's the difference. We're not terribly cost-effective unless we dub into four or five languages."

Once a film comes in for dubbing, Pike pays close attention to every step of the procedure. First an accurate translation is obtained, after which timecodes are noted for each spoken segment. "We know where each piece of conversation starts and where it stops," says Pike, "and whether the actors are on-screen or off, down to 1/26th of a second."

After timecodes are recorded, the project is turned over to an

each one is first-generation."

It's not unusual for a film dubbed by Otherworld to sound better than the original, especially when going into English from a European language. Aside from all the other improvements, the company generally matches eight percent of the Ns and Ps, and 100 percent of the cadences (the exact rhythm of the original speaker). Room sizes and distance perspective are also carefully considered

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adaptor. "A translation and an adaptation are very different," he explains, "a translation is a verbatim transcript, but an interpretation involves the romance of the language, so that the emotional loading is the same as the original." At the same time, they try to match the Ms, Bs, and Ps, while creating a dialogue that conveys the emotional substance of the scene and fits exactly between the allotted timecodes.

The actual recording is only part of the process. In a digital environment, the new soundtrack can be rebuilt in memory and stored on disk, at which point the dialogue can be added. "After the ambiance is created for every scene," says Pike, "it's the same in any language." Once the master mix is made, digital technology allows for easy substitution of dialogue tracks, with the new mix being done in near run-time.

"What digital sound means to us is that it doesn't exist on tape, it floats on either," says Pike. "Digital sound is always perfect, it's always an original. Whether you have the same soundtrack in French, German, Italian, English and Spanish,

and adjusted. For example, a scene in a cathedral with stone walls can be adjusted to convey how much slap comes of the wall as the characters talk. In a wide shot the sound is different than in a tight one, and if one of the characters raises his voice as the director cuts to a wide shot, there's more echo than if they're in a close-up.

All the advantages available in a digital environment tend to slow down producers who are not as familiar with the equipment. "In a digital environment producers get gadget-crazy," Pike explains. "One of my jobs is to keep that from happening, and I do it by getting specific about what's needed. You want motorcycles? I can start up all the Hell's Angels with a keyboard." A keyboard allows the Synclavier to generate sound, which can be altered and adjusted to suit any situation.

EFX Systems boasts an impressive accumulation of the latest digital equipment, including seven Synclavier units, an optical disk library, and live direct-to-disk recording units. Any of the Synclaviers can access the library instantly, as can a second unit, so

long as it's searching in a different category. "We're on the cutting edge," says Paul Key of EFX, "but it's not enough to just have equipment, it's knowing how it works, what it can do, when to use it and when not to use it."

The system delivers true random access editing, with more than 100,000 stored sound effects (over 1,000 hours). "Our brochure lists over 20,000 effects," says Pike, "but don't tell that to the producer because he'll want to listen to each one. I just don't have enough life left to sit around listening."

While some facilities buy one piece of equipment and use the word "digital" to describe their operation, EFX Systems employs top engineers, who are often involved with developing equipment in conjunction with New England Digital, makers of the Synclavier. "If you only have a hammer," says Key, "you tend to think that every problem is a nail."

The problem with dubbing is that too often producers know they're going to dub before the shooting even begins. According to Pike, some of the worst sound in the world comes out of Europe, because most productions don't have the budget for long shooting schedules, so sound quality takes a back seat to visual content. "Their philosophy is that the soundtrack can be completely replaced in post," he explains, "where all the ambient sound can be plugged in." If they don't dub their film for international distribution, it may not make its money back.

With all this in mind, many foreign productions get downright sloppy about their sound quality. "It's not bad in theory," Pike says, "but in practice it can be terrible."

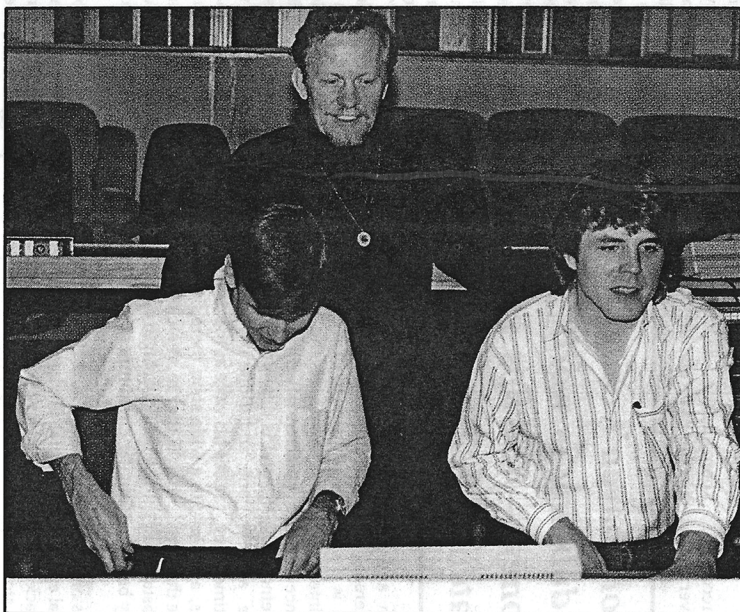
"At the lunatic fringe of high-tech there are those who will pause at every word. This is not cost-effective dubbing, this is madness, it's insanity. We don't do that, we have great actors, and we make them even better by giving them fantastic adaptations."

Back in the days when films were silent, studios could distribute their products in any market throughout the film-watching world by simply substituting the dialogue cards from the original English to any desired language. Foreign films could play in the states, and German titles such as *Nosferatu* enjoyed profitable runs.

But the advent of sound brought along new creative possibilities along with specific distribution problems. In the 90s, foreign films play with subtitles in art houses to selective audiences. If a film becomes a hit in this market of cable sales, sales to airlines, syndicated TV and video rental outlets (*La Cage Aux Folles*, and *Das Boot* are recent examples) it needs dubbing to enjoy mass appeal.

"We can come out of any language," says Pike, "because movies are made everywhere in the world." But the kind of exhibition with money at the other end is very limited, so dubbing is usually done only for the biggest markets.

Most dubs are made into English, French, German and Spanish, with the recent emergence of Japanese and Russian dubbing. Pike is currently adding a Russian department, expecting most of the business to go from Russian into English. "They're a huge market," he observes, "but they just don't pay a lot to see movies."



Pike (center) working at EFX with Greg Hodge (left) and Optical Radiation's Jeff Levison: digital dubs and now, Cinema Digital Sound.

With the Spanish-speaking world growing by leaps and bounds (by the end of the decade Spanish is expected to be the second most common language in the world) a "universal" Spanish, otherwise known as Castellian, is used. American English, on the other hand, has become the standard in entertainment, playing as easily in Australia and England as in the biggest movie-market of all, the U.S.

Recently Otherworld upgraded a standard analog soundtrack to

complement the recently introduced Cinema Digital Sound, a theater sound-processing system by Optical Radiation Corp. and Eastman Kodak Company. The project involved adding surround effects and digital quality soundtrack to General Cinema's feature presentation trailer. Along with the CD quality sound, CDS offers the advantage of six-channel performance on 70mm prints, with similar 35mm capability to follow. Theaters wishing to use the CDS system will have to make a small

investment on a decoder unit, but the tradeoff will be exceptional sound quality even for small multiplexes.

Pike believes the new sound system will also benefit the dubbing industry. Since the technology allows for several languages to fit on the same print, exhibitors need only plug into whichever channel has the proper language soundtrack, making it possible, for example, to have a Spanish matinee followed by English or French shows, to attract a variety of audiences. The new system also makes it theoretically possible for as many as five or six different languages to feature surround-stereo quality. Using two or three coded languages per track, the desired language could be decoded for any given showing. "No one has devised such a decoder yet," Pike says, "but looking at the future possibilities, it could happen tomorrow."

Meanwhile, Pike is happy to continue reaching for dubbing perfection. "I'm not interested in doing any dubbing that doesn't try to be perfect," he says, "I want it to sound original. Then I don't mind having my name on it and spending my time. But let's face it, it's not cheaper to do it better." With Pike's talents and painstaking attention to detail it may not be cheaper but it's definitely better.