



Ramoji Film City

It is extremely difficult to communicate the full scale of India's Ramoji Film City. It's billed as 'the world's largest integrated film production complex' and it is hard to argue with that. **ZENON SCHOEPE** is amazed.

OCCUPYING 2000 ACRES of land some 25km from Hyderabad; it is best to let the Ramoji Film City facts speak for themselves. It contains all you would need for a film one-stop shop. Aside from acres of unspoilt middle-India terrain there is a wealth of constructed sets and plots taking in everything from Japanese gardens, to city vistas, to traditional Indian backdrops, to an airport.

I was here to look at the Symphony audio postproduction facility, but there's also a cameras operation (37 shooting floors up to 28,000sqft), a prop shop, a set design and construction operation (staffed by 1000), an audio duplication facility (20,000 cassettes per day), a digital film facility with SFX (Mantra), and a film lab (Rainbow). All are massive and occupy their own dedicated buildings. You need a car to get between them. There's also the small matter of a satellite earth station located on one of the hills on the plot, which reflects the broadcast interests of the founder – media mogul-actor-producer-director Ramoji Rao.

The whole thing is backed by an infrastructure that includes hotels and support services. It may have only been fully operational for less than a year but the site has been attracting tourists in their thousands for some years. They come for a theme park-style experience, others come for weddings.

Hyderabad needs some introduction. While it has

strong historical significance as a seat of kings and culture, the film industry has largely flown over its South India position on its way between the established film centre in Bombay and the increasing music activity occurring in Madras. Ramoji Film City changes all that, in fact it has had a revitalising effect upon the whole region. Composers and producers are building their own rooms in the vicinity in order to be close to it.

It has to be said that Bombay, although the traditional heart of Indian film, cannot compete with Film City on Film City's terms. It may have the base of talent and experience and the full range of high-end facilities required, but what it doesn't have is the ability to grant the 'drive in with a script and an idea, and drive out with a tin of film' wish. It is also substantially cheaper than Bombay on pretty much all counts. It goes without saying that it is competitively priced with just about anywhere in the world and an international client draw is part of the long-term business plan.

About the only thing that begins to get close to Ramoji Film City, in terms of ambition and scale, is perhaps the 'Hollywood on the Nile' concept being completed in Egypt.

However, it's the Symphony complex dedicated to all things audio, and headed by Ravi Shanker, that we are most interested in. It offers a variety of rooms all designed by Sam Toyashima and John Flynn of ADG



and all equipped with Genelec multichannel monitoring. The other common threads are networked Fairlights and Yamaha digital desks with Pro Tools HD in the music recording studio and Harrison MPC2-equipped mix theatre.

The Film City opened in 1998, but some of the technical facilities were finished more recently. Shanker joined in 1997, with plans underway for the audio aspect of the complete production solution for film and TV. He came from the Bombay industry although Hyderabad is his home region. He describes the project as a once in a lifetime opportunity.

'We spent a lot of time in the beginning studying which way the technology was moving and seeing what the clients – the recording engineers, music composers and music directors – wanted,' he explains. 'Digital was accepted, whether people liked it or not. We also looked at networking as we were sure that it was the way to go but we also had to build a place that was compatible with the outside.'

Deciding on the number of rooms and their nature was a crucial stage. 'You have to get a feel from the market for the demand and the potential,' he says. 'If you look at audio postproduction in India, dialogue replacement is a major activity because we don't do live location sound, yet there are relatively few studios that offer rerecording and mixing. There are two mix studios here but only one is implemented now, the other one's structure is ready for the time when we feel we need more capacity. We also have another two rooms [built but empty] for future expansion.'

This forward planning for future eventualities illustrates the sort of care and attention paid to the decision process. 'Before we started building [at the Symphony site] we thought we ought to get a feel for what it's like. So, we built an interim studio just to work out what the correct size of the control room and live area should be, and to decide on the monitoring,' says Shanker. 'It was very valuable for us because we lacked that experience. It turned out really well with the Genelec monitors – it was the first time I'd tried out the 1037s – and the room we built is one of the best rooms I've ever worked in. It's a multipurpose studio where we could do the entire postproduction but we also needed to practice building a mix room so we built one right next to the other one.'

ADG designed both these studios and went on to handle the whole project, with assistance from consultant Martin Bengé. The plan took in two dialogue replacement rooms, which are also multipurpose, one main scoring stage/big music recording studio, another smaller music recording studio, a main mix stage (THX, DTS and Dolby with 3-way JBLs), and dedicated effects recording rooms with Foley.

'The work capacity at Symphony is good and the point at which we feel we can't manage then we'll open another room,' says Shanker. 'Our rooms have been built for certain types of work but at the same time each can also handle other postproduction jobs.'

'We wanted to simplify the workflow as much for the clients as for the engineers. We wanted a very transparent acoustic and a creative ambience for the client.'

'Genelec is a very popular monitoring solution, especially when it comes to music, but this was primarily a film-oriented facility,' he continues. 'What we produce here ends up being played in a cinema on a JBL or ElectroVoice system and how do you bridge the gap? What you produce in your studio should transfer to the cinema theatre. We tried this and it worked.'

'Our basic concept is that you should be able to



listen to what you are recording in a room and judge the sound in all fairness,' states Shanker. 'You can only do that in an electronically and acoustically transparent environment and that needs good acoustics, good monitoring and good equipment.'

'When people come here they can see the difference and hear it. Our rooms are so transparent and people who have been working in smaller studios – not really studios but converted spaces – who think that they're doing a reasonably good job, come here and listen to the monitoring and they realise what they've been missing.'

The Symphony complex uses Genelec 1034s, 1037s, 1038s and 1032s and the engineering team is grateful for the consistency that they give to the studios because operators do tend to move between rooms. 'The combination of Sam Toyashima and Genelec is a good one,' says Shanker.

Yamaha DM2000s, with the occasional O2R, are the desks of choice with the exception of the Harrison MPC2 in the mix theatre and an Amek Media 51 in the big music recording room.

'For dialogue replacement, I couldn't find a desk on the market that would do the job,' states Shanker. 'If

you look at the requirements of dubbing then it's very simple. I talked to Rupert Neve about it and he offered to build me one! All you need is a few inputs, proper talkback and foldback, and some EQ.'

'The music desk was a difficult choice because there is such a selection in analogue and digital,' he continues. 'Music is a big market in India but the problem is that while people would love to record on an SSL 9000, given the choice, they will pay no more than a Mackie or O2R hourly rate for it.'

'Our chairman is very caring, he wants to build a facility that is international standard,' he adds. 'At the same time you need to do justice to the investment – if I can't generate extra revenue then I can't justify the investment. We were very clear that we wanted to implement networking here and surround was equally important in our equipment decisions. The Media 51 was a good choice.'

'With regard to the Harrison, if you look at Indian cinema and the kind of films we make, the requirements are not the same as the way Hollywood makes a film with 500 tracks,' he states. 'On average we'd use between 100 to 200 tracks but we wanted to build a facility that would meet the requirements of





international clients.'

Fairlight editors were chosen for speed of use, integration, networking and compatibility, according to Shanker. 'It's the same everywhere, they have all the time in the world to do the principle photography but when it comes to audio post we are always under pressure. We need to make up time so we needed a user-friendly, fast interface.

'We've gone with products that are proven, stable, that people have used and are comfortable with, and, wherever possible, dedicated solutions not PC or Mac-based because we will always be dictated to by Microsoft or Apple as to the way we have to work,' says Shanker adding that dedicated solutions are just that. 'They're optimised for audio in efficiency and speed and these things are going to reflect on your output.'

Symphony has a staff of some 25 that combines experienced operators with the less experienced as a matter of strategy. 'We want people who are not moulded into a certain style of working and who don't have fixed ideas because that's not a good attitude,' he states. 'Today we are working with a new generation of directors who are experimental by nature, they want to try things, and if you have an engineer who is very rigid and dogmatic then it's not good for the creative process.'

A walk around the Symphony complex reveals large cool open spaces with some of the passageways linking the working areas opening out onto grass covered courtyards. The studios' high ceilings are worthy of mention but then the building was constructed to suit the rooms, not the other way around. They all hit NC15 with isolation greater than 60dB and the aircon really works – it was 43 degrees C when I was there.

The music recording studio is spectacular with a recording area large enough to house 40 musicians comfortably and a control room large enough to house a working team without compromising the multichannel monitoring. However, there is a client suite directly above the control room.

It's nice to see the spirit of the in-house build alive and well at Symphony as it has designed and built its own mic and music stands. The mic stands include cushioning springs on the uprights. The music stands get away from the traditional straight up and down orientation and permit the inclusion of an offset boom.

The dimensions of the postproduction control rooms and associated studios (all have their own live areas) have been arrived at through research and practical application. They are wonderfully efficient areas with excellent equipment layouts in the sweet spot.

A similar approach was taken with the dimensions of the main mix theatre, which reflects the taller but shallower proportions now commonly found in multiplex cinemas.

A central machine room handles signal routing and the management of the Fairlights with centralised backing up, restoring and loading up to the network. Symphony runs Vmotion for its picture with a variety of monitor and screen options in every room.

Shanker is philosophical on the life expectancy of the studios. 'The rooms will stand for a very long time. The equipment, I don't know,' he laughs. 'There are different forces at work. There are times when you may have to change equipment, even though there is nothing wrong with it, simply because something else comes along. But we have tried our best to install equipment that is compatible with the outside world. In the end we will be judged by our output – the end product. We can deliver that to a very high standard and we believe that we are ahead technologically in India. It's important that your choices are not just driven by what is popular, they should also satisfy your own requirements and help you to work faster.' ■

Contact

**SYMPHONY, RAMOJI FILM CITY,
HYDERABAD, ANDHRA PRADESH, INDIA:**
Tel: +91 8415 246552