

ALAMO IN

OMAHA

Alamo Drafthouse Channels *Star Wars* in a Force-ful New Location

by Rebecca Pahle



AT RIGHT, THE *STAR WARS*-INSPIRED LOBBY

As anyone who's ever travelled for hours to get to an Alamo Drafthouse theatre can tell you (this writer is guilty), the opening of a new branch of the famous, funky—and famously funky—movie chain is a big deal. As the Austin-based chain's reputation, not to mention its earnings, has grown, it's increasingly expanded out of the Lone Star State to establish outposts in New York, California, Virginia, Colorado and more. November 2, 2015 saw the movie lovers of Omaha, Nebraska

get blessed with their very first Alamo Drafthouse. But this one's a little different. Nerds, rejoice.

With \$5 Tuesdays and its signature Alamo programming—a mix of first-run films and repertory screenings that includes everything from Jacques Tati's *Mon Oncle* to cult midnight favorite *The Room*—this new theatre has already won the heart of Omaha. But before it was the Midwest's hottest new mecca for movie lovers, the Alamo Drafthouse Omaha in La Vista was just a patch of land and a dream.

It's also something of a family affair. The theatre is owned by Phil Rafnson and co-managed by his two nephews, Tyler and Chris Calabrese. A more metaphorical family is involved as well: movie theatre installation/operations powerhouse Moving iMage Technologies (MiT), which counts Rafnson as its chairman.

MiT has had a strong relationship with Alamo Drafthouse for many years, overseeing the installation of its new theatres. Rafnson also boasts a friendship with Alamo Drafthouse founder and CEO Tim

League. So, really, when Rafnson decided to venture across the fence and try movie theatre ownership for the first time, becoming an Alamo franchisee was an easy decision. But the hands-on way Alamo approaches its business made the decision even easier, Rafnson explains, especially given his own admitted lack of knowledge about the film-bookings side of the business.

"They have a really good organization set up for booking and marketing, and it's proved to be very helpful in these first few weeks," Rafnson notes. "Those are the



kinds of things that, if I was doing this myself with inexperienced managers, it would be very difficult to know what to do and how to book and get a good mix of product. They've got set policies, and they keep in constant communication with Derek [Michael Dillon], our creative manager. And the booker is the same booker who works for all the other Alamos, too. It's going really well."

The franchise fee that must be paid out to Alamo is, Rafnson admits, higher than he's used to based on previous franchisee experience. But the help the brand-strong Alamo provides makes the deal more than fair: "Many, many franchises that go from anywhere from three to five percent of your gross give you almost nothing. It's just the opposite with Alamo; they're very, very active. They provide a lot of value for what they get paid. If I do another [theatre], it will almost definitely be Alamo."

On Alamo's part, the decision to open a theatre isn't one that's made lightly. Notes League, "There's a lot of research that goes into every new location. Demographic information and other theatres in the area are the main drivers. For every

project, we develop a financial model, and all of the executives at Drafthouse approve the site before it can proceed."

For his part, Dillon knew that "Omaha has really been yearning for a place like the Alamo Drafthouse to open, because there's just no other theatre in town that does anything like [what Alamo does]." A lifelong cinephile, Dillon was familiar with the Alamo Drafthouse brand before he ever thought he'd work at one of their theatres; in a refrain familiar to Alamo's devoted fanbase, he drove three hours down to the chain's Kansas City location back in 2014 for an eight-hour "Dismember the Alamo" horror-movie marathon. With experience on the board of directors for a Lincoln, Nebraska movie theatre in his back pocket, Dillon initially reached out via Twitter to inquire about volunteer opportunities, only to find himself with a full-time job offer a month later.



PHIL
RAFNSON

Now that Omaha was getting their own brand-spanking-new Alamo Drafthouse movie theatre, there was the small matter of building it. As one expects, MiT handled installation; in discussing the challenges of putting together the new-build theatre, senior VP of sales and president of Rydt

Entertainment Jerry Van de Rydt jokes that "when my boss owns the theatre, it's very stressful!"

Still, barring a delay in construction due to an unnaturally cold Omaha winter—not something anyone has much control over, after all—the process of bringing the Alamo Drafthouse Omaha from "dirt to popcorn," in the words of MiT's VP of sales and customer service Tom Lipiec, wasn't anything particularly out of the ordinary. "There are always challenges, because it's a choreography of all the different disciplines that are happening," Lipiec notes.

MiT starts off working with the ar-



THE LIQUID SUNSHINE TAPROOM

CONGRATULATIONS! PHIL, TYLER & CHRIS

From all of your friends at Moving Image

Technologies - Congratulations, on

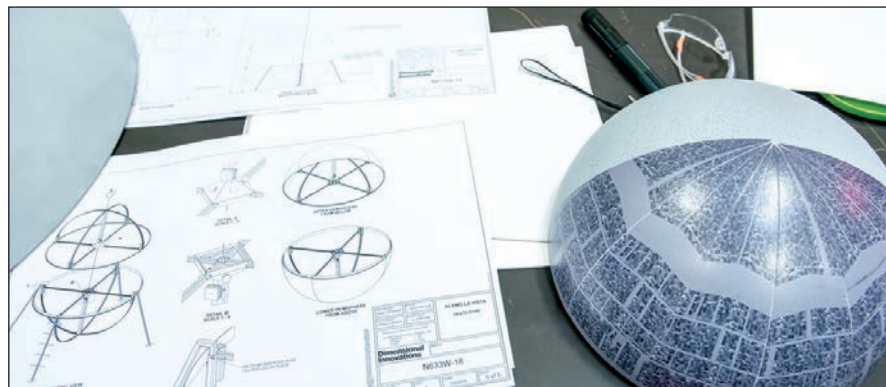
the opening of your new theatre that

showcases out-of-this-world creativity

and innovations that stand out in this

galaxy and those far, far away...





THE ALAMO DRAFTHOUSE
SIGNATURE DEATH STAR,
FROM DESIGN TO LOBBY.



chitect and goes on to procurement—"we inspect all the equipment, so you get the best presentation," Van de Rydt explains. "Then we work with spec'ing the audio and digital projection systems... Once the equipment starts getting delivered, we become project managers. We work with the delivery companies and make sure ev-

everything gets scheduled. Our guys are here to receive it. We visit the job site every four weeks to check in on it and make sure the [subcontractors] are doing a good job and everything is up to par. And then we go to the grand opening party!"

Or, Van de Rydt sums up nicely: "Give us an empty building, and we'll fill it up."

The Alamo Drafthouse Omaha is home to eight screens, one of which features both Sony 4K projection and Dolby Atmos immersive audio. "It's top of the line, really well-done," Lipiec notes. On top of that, Van de Rydt explains, while Drafthouse locations normally use drapes on their in-theatre walls to reach a perfect acoustic balance, the Omaha theatre uses acoustic panels provided by EOMAC for a more "contemporary" and "structural" look. Panels are "considered a lot more new and fresh, more modern," Lipiec adds. "Every few years it goes in cycles, where [panels are] in favor and then out of favor. Right now, we're going through a cycle again where panels are the hip thing to do."

Alamo Drafthouse Omaha's *pièce de résistance*, though, isn't anything inside its theatres: It's the custom *Star Wars*-themed lobby, designed and built by Dimensional Innovations and based on an original idea by Tyler Calabrese and architect Kip Cole-

man of Elevation Architects. All Alamo lobbies have a theme, but with their lobby, Dillon says, they wanted to "take it up a notch." Initially, a *Goonies*-themed lobby was proposed, but Rafnson calls *Star Wars* more of a "natural fit [with] what we're trying to do here." He does, however, laughingly admit that "we kind of went overboard and spent more than I intended!"

Any money spent was well worth it. The centerpiece of the lobby is the Emperor's throne, which features controls that can be used by patrons to activate the lobby's other main feature. That's no moon...it's a fully armed and operational Death Star hanging from the ceiling. OK, not "armed," but the operational part is true. "As soon as you push the button [on the Emperor's throne]," explains Brad Woods, practice director of Dimensional Innovations, "the sound engages and the Death Star begins the firing sequence. The lights in the lobby dim and flicker and the programmable LED lights 'shoot' from the crater into a nearby wall."

"The hardest part of the project was trying to figure out how to simulate a Death Star super-laser firing," Woods continues. "Using DI's innovations lab, we were able to design and install a proprietary LED system that was program-



THE EMPEROR'S THRONE

Industry Innovators

Irwin Seating Company is proud to partner with those who think outside their own galaxy like Alamo Drafthouse Cinema!



**Irwin
Seating
Company®**

www.irwinseating.com • 866 GO IRWIN

mable and resembled the laser from the Death Star in the movies. It had to be synced with the sound system, as well as be serviceable from the manager's office." The theatre manager can also adjust a time delay, which takes the form of a Death Star charging sequence and makes it so guests can't push the button every five seconds. I think I speak on behalf of the Alamo Drafthouse Omaha's employees when I say: Thank you.

The lobby wasn't just a challenge from a design/installation perspective: Sheldon Oxner, president of National Commercial Builders, Inc., notes that getting Coleman's renderings for the lobby took their work building the theatre up a few notches in terms of difficulty. "This turned into a very complex project to frame and provide electrical for, [and] to get all the work ready for Dimensional Innovations to come and apply the Death Star. It was a great team effort to complete [in a] timely [manner]. It took great courage by the ownership to step up and spend the dollars to create this look."

The Alamo Drafthouse Omaha's lobby ties into something we talk about a lot in the pages of *FJI*: the need to combat the growing popularity of Netflix, VOD and

other streaming services by making moviegoing an experience that expands beyond sitting in a chair and watching a movie for two hours. "With something as iconic as this unique Alamo Drafthouse design, people are going to flock to the theatre," Woods contends. "It is all about creating a memorable experience for moviegoers, and we feel that this begins in the lobby. Our designs help keep patrons engaged and coming back to see movies and thoroughly enjoy their experience."

The hours and money that everyone invested in the impressive lobby certainly didn't go unrewarded. As Oxner notes: "Never in over 25 years of building theatres and entertainment facilities have we been involved in a project with so much excitement and media coverage."

Media coverage *and how*. Approximately a month after it opened, the Alamo Drafthouse Omaha experienced a media blitz the stuff of which theatre owners' dreams are made of. On Dec. 1, *Entertainment Weekly's* website ran a slight, 233-word story about how a new theatre in Omaha boasts a *Star Wars*-themed lobby. With *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* opening in just over two weeks, anticipation for the new addition to the franchise was at a fever

Supplying Alamo Drafthouse Omaha

FF&E: Moving iMage Technologies (MiT)

Projectors: Sony

Speakers & Amplifiers: QSC

Immersive Audio: Dolby Atmos

Seating: Irwin Seating Company

Screens: MDI

Architect: Kip Coleman

with Elevation Architects

Builder: National Commercial

Builders, Inc.

Assistance with 35mm systems:

Strong

Hearing-Impaired: Ultra Stereo

Portholes: GST

Sidewalls and Front Ends: EOMAC

Aisle Lighting: Tempo

Installation of Aisle Lighting:

Wulf Installations

Lobby: Dimensional Innovations

Mill Work: Proctor Co.

Bar/Kitchen: Proctor Co.

Beer System: Draftex

Congratulations

On the opening of the new

Alamo Drafthouse Cinema in Omaha!

We're proud to be your complete audio systems supplier, featuring QSC signal processors, amplifiers and loudspeakers for all your rooms as well as Q-SYS™ processing for your Dolby® Atmos® cinema.

QSC CINEMA
qsc.com

© 2016 QSC, LLC, all rights reserved. QSC, and the QSC logo are registered trademarks in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office and other countries. Dolby and Atmos are registered trademarks of Dolby Laboratories.

System**Synergy**

1+1+1>3



Monitors/Processors



Amplifiers



Loudspeakers

SONY

CONGRATULATIONS PHIL!



Alamo La Vista is out of this world!
The force is strong with Alamo
and Sony Digital Cinema 4K

No matter the screen size, awaken your audience with the benefits of Sony 4K

www.sony.com/digitalcinema

© 2016 Sony Electronics Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without written permission is prohibited. Features and specifications are subject to change without notice. Sony, Sony Digital Cinema 4K, and their respective logos are trademarks of Sony.

Sony Digital Cinema **4K**
Creating Extraordinary

pitch; the timing for the story couldn't have been better. "The Today Show" and "Good Morning America" came calling. Outlets from around the world picked up the story, and *Wired* magazine's online arm named it one of the seven best theatres in which to watch *The Force Awakens*.

"I had absolutely no idea that it would blow up as big as it did," recalls Dillon. "It was crazy. I was super-excited about it." When I spoke to Dillon, it was a few days before *The Force Awakens*' grand debut, with screenings starting all over the country, including at the Alamo Drafthouse Omaha, at 7 p.m. on Thursday, Dec. 17. Dillon modestly predicted that, with "the national attention we've been getting," the theatre "might see a huge influx this weekend."

You don't need the power of the Force to guess that his prediction came true. Local news crew were camped out with cameras on Thursday and Friday, and they had quite the show to point their cameras at: The local arm of the 501st Legion, a fan organization known for dressing up in high-quality *Star Wars* costumes, was on hand Thursday night, "hanging around the theatre and the bar, visiting with the kids," Rafnson recalls. There was a special food

and beverage menu—who wants "Trash Compactor Pizza" with "Wookiee Wasaka Berry Crêpes" for dessert and a "Tatooine Sunset" to drink?—and then, of course, the lobby itself.

Star Wars weekend—indeed, the entire holiday span—went "even better than we anticipated," says Rafnson. Even with a seat count much lower than that of larger chains in the area, and the fact that they can't have as many shows per day as theatres without a food-service component, the Alamo Drafthouse Omaha ended up third in the Omaha marketplace for *Star Wars* over the opening weekend.

And there was another challenge: By the time *The Force Awakens* opened, the Alamo Drafthouse Omaha had only been in operation for six weeks. "In a regular movie theatre, you have a ramp-up, but when you're dealing with an Alamo Drafthouse, or, for that matter, an eatery, you have even more of a ramp-up. Because you have a menu, you have delivery training, you have the regular movie theatre training, you have the bar," Lipiec explains. "You want to have a ramp-up that's manageable, so by the time you get hit by a ton of bricks—which is basically what *Star Wars*

is—you have it figured out. It sounds like six weeks is a long time, but in reality, for a restaurant-slash-movie theatre, especially when both are high-level, that six weeks goes by really fast."

But in the end, "it did just right," Rafnson says. "If we had booked one or two more screens for *Star Wars*, we could have gotten more people. But we were almost at our max, because the other theatres that didn't have *Star Wars* were doing well also. We didn't want to overdo it, [because we had] an all-new staff, and we wanted to make sure everybody was really happy with their experiences. It worked out well."

The allure of the Alamo Drafthouse Omaha extends beyond its lobby, of course. A huge part of Alamo's brand is their food and beverage service, here represented by the Liquid Sunshine Taproom, which, Dillon explains, "is aesthetically and design-wise completely different from the lobby. Then you walk into the actual theatre, which is pretty much the Alamo standard. And it also completely stands out against the lobby and the bar. Most theatres, you walk in and everything looks the same. But with ours, design-wise, we have three different sections of the theatre. They all stand

NCB is proud to have been the general contractor for the Alamo Drafthouse of Omaha, working with the team of Kip Coleman of Elevation Architects, Dimentional Innovations, and Moving Image Technology.

National Commercial Builders, Inc.

10555 Rene St.

Lenexa, KS 66215-4054

www.nationalcb.com

Contact: Sheldon Oxner 913-599-0200

Theatres • Restaurants • Nightclubs •

Multi-Venue Entertainment Centers • Bowling Entertainment Centers

We Go Where You Need Us

Building Theatres and Entertainment Projects for 25 Years



CONGRATULATIONS

PHIL RAFNSON

AND ALL YOUR TEAM

ON THE SUCCESSFUL LAUNCH OF THE

★ THE NEW ★



IN OMAHA



**STRONG
TECHNICAL SERVICES**
BALLANTYNESTRONG.COM



**STRONG MDI
SCREEN SYSTEMS**
STRONGMDI.COM

out. They all have their unique spin. They're all their own entity."

That eclectic flavor continues throughout the Alamo Drafthouse Omaha's programming. In its first months of release, the theatre boasted sold-out screenings of *Friday the 13th* and *The Room*, with actor Greg Sestero in attendance. There was a *Home Alone* party and a screening of *Die Hard*, plus a *Kill Bill* "double feature feast," comprised of back-to-back screenings of *Kill Bill 1* and *2* along with a six-course meal.

For Dillon, the most satisfying part of his job—which also involves serving as the theatres' head programmer—is seeing audience members respond to the films he chooses. He cites a sold-out 35mm screening of *The Dark Knight*, which ended with a standing ovation. "A lot of our programming comes up in Austin, and we pick and choose what we're going to play," he says. "We ask ourselves: What would make sense here? How will Omaha react to this? Seeing Omaha reacting to the films we're screening is super-gratifying."

Of course, an integral part of the Alamo experience is their famous (and famously enforced) "No talking, no texting" rule. As League explains, it actually isn't that difficult to get new audience members

Behind the Scenes: The Making of an Alamo Drafthouse

Proctor Companies worked closely with Alamo Drafthouse franchisees Phil Rafnson and Tyler Calabrese to design, build and install the box office, concession stand, restaurant, bar and commercial kitchen for their newly opened location in La Vista, Nebraska.

The Alamo Drafthouse concept pushes the in-theatre dining concept to its very limit. Auditorium diners typically place orders during highly compressed timeline—often during the ten minutes of previews—and these orders crash in atop the orders from diners at the bar and the restaurant. So it's critical that the facility's systems be designed to support increased server traffic, high foodservice output, and strong communication.

As a result, Proctor's kitchen design for the La Vista Alamo features wider backroom hallways and workspaces, a large, centrally located walk-in freezer, a mix of different ovens, warmers and stoves, and nearly triple the typical prep-surface area. These modifications enable large numbers of orders to be processed



THE KITCHEN AT THE ALAMO DRAFTHOUSE OMAHA.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28



Proctor Companies: The Force Behind the Alamo Drafthouse.



The Alamo Drafthouse's Star Wars themed box office.

Proctor Companies supplied design services, casework, food and beverage equipment, and a full commercial kitchen for the beautiful, new Alamo Drafthouse in La Vista, Nebraska.

Proctor can awaken the force of greater profitability for you too. Call us today!



PROCTOR
IN-THEATRE DINING™

800-221-3699

sales@proctorco.com

used to the concept: “There’s always a few folks who don’t understand, but the vast majority fall in line right away. We are very, very clear in our pre-movie announcements. People know that we are serious about the policy. They put away their devices, keep quiet and simply enjoy the show.” Dillon used social media—an integral part of the Alamo brand as a whole—to make sure Omaha moviegoers were up to speed before the new theatre opened its doors. “There’s a small percentage of people who might not like it, but the overall response is that 99% of the people that walk through our doors have gotten that concept,” he explains. “They love the concept, and they’ll actually be returning because our theatre offers that sort of haven for moviegoers.”

Going forward, Dillon hopes that the Alamo Drafthouse Omaha can further establish itself as an integral part of its city. “Our involvement with the community is something that is extremely unique compared to other movie theatres. I’m working on many more partnerships with community groups and businesses,” he explains. And, of course, more screenings of awesome films, new and old alike. Including a *Star Wars* or two. 🍿

BEHIND THE SCENES CONTINUED FROM PAGE 28

simultaneously. Where possible, equipment is mounted on casters to make cleanup easier—which also keeps health inspectors happy.

And then there are the details. Expanded foodservice capability requires more power, better lighting, more drain and sewer capacity, greater exhaust hood volumes, and fortified fire suppression and safety systems. Closed-circuit monitors and copious signage are required to keep orders straight and customers satisfied. Often overlooked, Proctor Companies made sure these considerations were baked into the plan at the very outset of the design phase.

One of the key features of the Alamo model is a robust selection of tap beers. Proctor’s design helped organize the nearly quarter-mile of tap lines to make cleaning, maintenance and troubleshooting simple and fast. In addition, Proctor wrapped the keg room in clear glass to highlight the craft-brew nature of the operation, adding visual interest to the dining experience and prominently reinforcing a powerful narrative of the Alamo brand.

Finally, there was one last hurdle to clear: the weather. During construction, unusually bad weather pummeled the Midwest, shortening the construction timeline to nearly half the original estimate. With a major premiere looming, Proctor sent additional installers to the job site and coordinated with Alamo management and other contractors to recalibrate the schedule. In the end, not a day was lost, and both Alamo and *The Force* awakened on time and on budget. 🍿



AN ALAMO
DRAFTHOUSE
CORRIDOR

TOM and JERRY

WOULD LIKE TO CONGRATULATE
ALAMO DRAFTHOUSE ON THEIR
NEWEST THEATRE IN OMAHA
NEBRASKA!