

La Femme et l'Home Theater



I went shopping for a Home Theater. I thought this would be fun. All ideal, state-of-the-art, hot new stuff! And I know about this. An arrogant assumption—that being a photographer, being computer literate, and a conscientious electronics consumer, not to mention being a lover of movies—would be enough to easily assess Home Theater options here in New Mexico.

Boy, was I wrong! It was not easy—and what I know now is how much homework I have to do before I buy a Home Theater. And how, for me, the options aren't yet satisfactory.

I went to a furniture store, an electronics superstore, a small electronics store, and an audio specialty company.

In two stores I talked to young men who had memorized their sales pitches. In the other two I was treated better, more intelligently, and with a better grounding in information. At Paradise Village and Sound Ideas, the men knew what they were talking

about and knew that to help me, to interest me in the right system, they had to know more about me and what I wanted. They discussed all kinds of options.

To start...

FIRST STOP: FURNITURE STORE

I went to the furniture company first, thinking they would have the most complete set-up, as they have access to the furniture as well as the electronics. I had heard they had a great Home Theater presentation—it was the worst! It was a very small furniture grouping on a parquet dais on the edge of the electronics section. It consisted of a black leather two-seat sofa, one floor lamp, a big screen TV, a VCR, and a bunch of speakers on carpeted stands. As I faced the television screen I could see at least 20-30 other televisions on display. It was set up in such a way that sitting there made me feel like I was on display. Not a great place to sit and relax and learn about the system.

The salesman, whom I will call Earnest because he was, looked fresh-faced and right out of college. He knew that Dolby Pro Logic was important and took me through the general explanation of monaural, stereo, quadraphonic, surround sound, and now Dolby Pro Logic technologies.

He told me that monaural, stereo, and quadraphonic all used the same tracks of sound—they simply had different numbers of outlets/speakers. Surround sound used separate tracks of sound; but, with surround sound the dialogue got lost, which led to the development of Pro Logic by Thomas Dolby. Essentially, this five speaker system has a center "outlet" that is the predominant speaker for dialogue and mid-range

sounds. Earnest never demonstrated, or compared, Dolby Pro Logic to anything else.

"There is, also, THX," he whispered. "But, that's very expensive."

By this time I'm thinking, "Dolby Pro Logic. THX. I know nothing of this. Is this just jargon, or what? I am not equipped to know if what he's telling me is good or not."

OK, but I know TVs—I'm a photographer. I know a good picture when I see one. I looked at the large screen TVs. They had poor, dim pictures. I asked Earnest why the picture on the big rear projection TVs was so faded and not very clear. He said I needed to be further away from the screen than I normally would be, that the lights needed to be dimmer, and I needed to be seated "straight-on."

"But, I get a great picture on my 26-inch Price Club TV," I said.

His response—"Size for size, a tube picture is better."

"So why don't they make tube TVs larger?"

"35 inches is the largest, but they get more glare."

OK, glare. What glare?

"What about HDTV?" I asked. "Isn't that the new wave of better resolution?"

"Oh," he said. "It's at least three years away."

"So I should wait."

"No. It will be ten to fifteen years before they are reasonably priced."

So we got back to the dais and his demo. He stood over me, while I sat on the black leather love seat, and he flipped back and forth to different channels and different formats on the Hitachi Ultra Vision 55-inch television. Some of the formats had better resolution than others.

"What about rectangular TVs?" I asked.

"Yes, you can get those, but the Hitachi wide format is better."

I asked about service and he said they recommend the Hitachi because that company had good customer service and an 800 number. I know about 800 numbers—they can be great, but they aren't good at all if they're always busy.

As he kept flipping through the remotes, to put the TV into its different formats and from the VCR to over-the-air, I went into hi-tech overload, and I started to complain (Was I whining?).

"I hate remotes," I said. "They're so complicated. How can I make them do what I want, easily?"

He took that as a statement, not a question, and kept flipping through options like showing two channels on the screen at one time. I was getting a headache.

I went home. If I really had the money, I'd spend it on something else.



SECOND STOP: ELECTRONICS SUPERSTORE

Day Two: Hope this goes better, but I'm not counting on it.

I saw an ad in the paper for the Electronic Superstore and its Home Theater systems. So, I went to see. This is a neon store. Small-ish but with stylish neon graphics identifying sections. Across the subdued, gray-ish room was a bright, scripted neon sign: Home Theater, above a glassed in room.



Great, I thought, this'll be it. No one stops to ask me if I need help. I walk into the room and one large TV is playing. The room is maybe 15 feet by 25 feet and there are two other TVs in the room—one at either end of the long rectangle, at right angles to the main, larger TV. There is a beige leather sofa, a glass topped table, and a lamp. The room is softly lit and carpeted wall-to-wall. A good place for a demo. A man in his 30s came to ask if he could help. He was jingling the coins in his pocket, the loudest sound in the room. He never stopped. I'll call him Small Change.

"We are converting our garage into a Home Theater. It's maybe 20 feet by 20 feet, and I've been elected to gather information," I said. Without asking for more details, he said I needed a stereo TV with five speakers, a stereo receiver, a stereo VCR, and an amplifier. I needed Dolby Pro Logic, with digital effects and 15 channels of sound. He said Dolby Pro Logic provided theater quality sound with a five-speaker system.

Small Change, without hesitation, recommended the Mitsubishi 60-inch stereo television which would cost me close to \$4,000.

I asked why the Mitsubishi was his recommendation.

"Oh, it's much better. Mitsubishi owns Nikon, and they use glass lenses instead of plastic lenses."

I remarked that the picture wasn't very clear. He didn't say anything, or ask me to sit down on the leather couch. He didn't give me a demo. So, I asked about the next generation of TV. HDTV. He said HDTV was a year or so away, maybe. And it would have better resolution.

"What about letterbox?" I asked, still trying to get some information, something specific from him.

One of the reasons I haven't been a big video rental fan is that I hate cropping or distortions caused by forcing a 70mm movie into a square television format. As a matter of fact, I don't mind movies shown on TV with black borders, which are used to allow the proportions of the original film to be translated more accurately onto my squarish screen.

Letterbox is a rectangular TV. Wide format, one of the options on the higher priced TVs, delivers the same proportions. 16 by 9. Sounds like it's something I'd want. So when I asked Small Change about letterbox I really was interested in his answer. He had already said he was a photographer. Ah, he knows what I want. Bad assumption.

"Oh, yes," he said, and led me out of the Home Theater room and over to the TV display where he spoke with a man he introduced as the main buyer. The two guys stood there, jingling coins, and talking, all the while watching the letterbox TV, while I tried to get their attention.



"What's 16 by 9 equivalent to? 35mm? 70mm? What?" I asked.

Small Change said 16 by 9 was standard movie format. Whatever that is. Is there such a thing as standard movie format? And they changed the subject to talk about work as I asked again.

I was so fed up, I left. Small Change followed me as I headed for the door. As we walked across the store I asked about service, installation, about learning the ins and outs of what I bought. He said they provided free setup and delivery. And for after-sale service, I could purchase an extended warranty—the advantage being that it would be honored in many of their stores in other states. I'd told him I was converting a garage. Sounds like I'm staying, not leaving, doesn't it?

The only time he showed any enthusiasm was when I asked for his business card. His eyes lit up, he smiled, and said "Call me Freddie."

THIRD STOP: PARADISE VILLAGE

By this time I'm wondering about the sanity of accepting this assignment and having *anything* useful to say when I'm done.

Paradise Village. I'd never been there. A white building with turquoise lettering. Why do I think of Hawaii? But, a friend, an electrical contractor, said they were good, knew what they were talking about... So, I went.

This was a small store, but with quite a few employees. For the size of the store, and lack of customers while I was there, I was surprised. A man in his late 30s came up immediately and asked to help.

"Yes," I said. "Home theater." Among the first things he said to me were:

- I shouldn't even consider going with a company that didn't provide service: delivery, installation, and after-sale service.
- Decor is important. The equipment is important, but so is how and where you are going to use it/house it.

I was impressed. I couldn't see any furniture displays, but his awareness of this aspect of the decision-making process made me more receptive to him. We walked into the TV room. I told him my converted garage story, my husband and son who have different requirements myth, and he stopped and thought for a while. I could tell he was thinking of options to show me. No standard sales pitch. Yay!

Their home theater setup was a room, approximately 20 feet by 20 feet. A wall of components on the right and a wall of speakers on the left flanked the far wall, which had a big, rear projection TV and a smaller tube TV above it. In the middle of the room was one black leather recliner chair.



"Uh oh, this looks like the old days, when buying a stereo meant buying components," I said.

"Yes," he said. "It is like that."

He didn't just tell me what I needed. He demonstrated several things and showed me the differences. And for the first time—someone told me that there were important differences between the theater experience (audio and video) and the music experience (audio only). This jazz-loving salesman was the first to talk about laser disks. I'll call him Jazz Man.

By demonstrating via laser disks and CDs, he let me hear for myself the differences in receivers and speakers when using jazz recordings vs. movie recordings. The cost of the receiver increases as options like "hall sound" (for audio alone) are added.

So, he pushed me further back in my own mind—What, really, do I want? A home theater? Only? Or a home entertainment room—a system that will do an adequate job for home theater and music as well? How many rooms are involved? Do I want something that can do several things at a time in different rooms—have multi-room functions?

Jazz Man showed me wall speakers and small, excellent-sounding American-made speakers. He didn't talk down to me. But he was aware I was trying to absorb a lot of information and tried to make it bite-size, but adequate.

While I was tired when I left, from information jamming my brain waves—I knew I had some basic priority questions to answer: What do I want? Can I/we compromise?

FOURTH AND FINAL STOP: SOUND IDEAS

I didn't want to make this last call. I still had unanswered questions and it was beginning to feel so "male"—all this technical stuff and "components." And this store was all the way across town. On the other hand, two different male friends recommended this mart highly.

Sound Ideas had several different rooms built with a variety of options—both electronic and furniture. We went into the largest space—two leather couches a right angles to each other, an area rug, several small tables and lamps, plants, a large bookcase/hutch on the left wall—and all the components built into the front wall. A very pleasing setup. Of all I saw, most like a room in a home.



Loren Bishop, owner of Sound Ideas, whom I call the Voice of Experience (VOE for short), has a technical background, primarily in the audio field. At first this bothered me, because *my* standards for video are higher than my standards for audio. And yet, when all is said and done, the video part, for me, is easy. Can I see the picture OK? Is it clear enough, big enough, dramatic enough? It's the audio part that is technically more complex.

VOE explained in detail about sound and where it comes from and how it will reach the listener. He was enthusiastic about THX and demonstrated the advantages of a THX system. THX offers seamless panning of sound—such as when a horse gallops across the screen—and smooth transitions around behind the viewer. It also delivers a wider range of sounds, from whispers to gunshots. The dialogue during an



Indiana Jones, noisy chase scene was heard clearly. THX blends the sounds better and adjusts the timbre. Even I could clearly hear how much better it was.

In the home, we want sound to bounce around and diffuse itself—like photographic light. Diffused light produces less harsh shadows, softer, more even light. The rear speakers spray the sound front and back, not directly at the listeners, so it envelopes them. To make the sound bounce around the way we want it to—we need to have reflective (non-absorbent) and non-reflective (absorbent) surfaces, and we need to control the sound and vibrations that will affect it as much as we can. For example, the room ideally would be carpeted from the main seating area all the way forward to the wall where the TV is. Sound (ambient sound, echoes, music) can bounce around behind the listener, but directional sound is preferred for dialogue and main sound tracks. Bookcases in the rear of the room are great because they are an irregular surface and diffuse the sound effectively. The components ideally would be placed in the back of the room away from the TV and the front speakers because the vibrations from the components can affect the sound we hear.



While we were talking about speakers I asked about music. And without getting real technical Bishop said the sound systems were completely different. Audio speakers differ from theater speakers. Theater speakers are more directed at the viewer, while audio has a wider angle of dispersion. Meaning, again, I need to figure out what I want this room to do or be. A home theater or a media room.

I finally got an answer to my question about the poor resolution of the big screen TVs. It's a two-part answer. First, I wasn't wrong—the big TVs do have poorer resolution than the smaller tube TVs, but it's a trade off—a 60-inch screen or a sharper picture?

Secondly, the laser disk players produce “flutter”—they are the weak link in the system. The technology is still mechanical—we *could* have computer chips with dozens of movies on them, but our state-of-the-art consumer equipment still has a laser “reading” a disk. Ah, Loren. Thank you.

VOE believes the best TV with a good picture is the Pioneer Elite, and their new model will offer digitally processed video (currently audio is digital and video is analog). This 55-inch TV is \$5,500 with digital video. He has also answered the question about the size of the room. “If your TV is a 48-inch wide, you should sit 8 to 12 feet away from the TV itself—two to three times its width,” he said.

I then asked, with only a little complaining, and not much hope, about remotes.

“We can do anything that makes sense. There are several options. Wall key pads, remotes, to computer menus with cursors.”

Yes, I thought. Give me a menu. With a cursor. I can do that. Finally, I sighed, some user friendly, non-tech tools.

And at last we began to talk about money. Price ranges.

“You can get a basic Pro Logic system for \$3,000,” Bishop said. But his average custom installation runs \$12,000 to 15,000 including planning, wiring, and labor. And a system with THX would cost \$10,000 to 15,000 and up. For comparison, the range of prices I encountered on my shopping spree included:



- Big screen TVs — \$1,999-5,500
- Dolby Pro Logic receivers (some with speakers) — \$300-1,500
- Hi-fi stereo VCRs — \$300-600
- Laser disk players — \$300-900
- THX systems — \$2,000 and up

“At the high end, the sky’s the limit. But remember, a low-end system installed properly will provide better performance and satisfaction than an expensive system installed incorrectly,” he said.

He then reminded me that if a system is built into the house, its walls, it will meet mortgage/ home improvement loan requirements. And his company, among others, can plan a whole system, but install it a piece at a time.

So, where does that leave me/us/you?

We need to decide what kind of room we really want. Draw up a list and prioritize desires—for video, multi-room, music, or camcorders. Be prepared to compromise. Do more homework, read the magazines (like I did when buying my computer). And keep asking questions. Set a realistic budget.

But where does this place the industry? The high end is here and provides quality, but the mid-range, where I live, is still too expensive and complicated. I want a better picture, a simpler system, and a lower price. Like the choices I now have in audio equipment alone. Or like computers—many reputable companies allow customers to choose from a menu of options, all high quality, at a low price, with good after-sale service. Unfortunately, we aren’t there yet. But, I mustn’t complain. This is just the beginning. And soon even low-tech, movie lovers like me will get what we want.

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