

For Every Home, A Video Theater

By ROB SABIN

HARDCORE videophiles are a recurring lot. Determined to re-create in their homes an experience akin to that of the local movie theater — minus the sticky floor and ringing cell phones — these enthusiasts can spend \$100,000 or more pursuing cutting-edge equipment that promises to deliver the nuance and impact of celluloid. They log endless hours on the World Wide Web debating the merits of the latest wide-screen projector or surround-sound processor, and they pay technicians hundreds of dollars to calibrate their televisions so the image is just so.

It's a sorry, all-consuming existence for this high-tech centaur — half gear-head, half Siskel and Ebert. But when the lights go down and the picture and sound come up, these fanatics enter a world most of us visit only at the multiplex. For them, feeling that first jet fly-by, or seeing that breathtaking vista in its natural, blazing glory, makes it all worthwhile.

These days, however, you don't need to go to such lengths to share their bliss. Late-generation digital video and audio gear has narrowed the gap between entry-level home theater and state-of-the-art. It's a matter of degree. If you already have a 27-inch or larger television, a midsize \$1,500 system suitable for small to mid-size rooms can easily achieve those blockbuster special effects. Got more dough? You can enhance the experience by stepping up to a larger television and more powerful sound. Money's no object? Tear up a room and install plush theater seating, high-end in-wall speakers, a 10-foot wide screen and a computerized control system. That is home-video nirvana.

Every home theater system, regardless of cost, has the same basic elements. It starts with a video source component, such as a VCR or videodisk player. When playing a movie, the soundtrack goes to an all-in-one surround-sound receiver, or separate surround processors and amplifiers, and then to five or six speakers strategically arranged in the room. The picture portion of the

movie winds up at the television or video projector. Pretty simple, really. Unless, of course, you're not a technical type, in which case shopping for this stuff can seem like a "Nightmare on Elm Street," complete with ghoulish audio/video salesmen waiting to ambush you at every turn. But by following a few basic tips, even a neophyte can end up with a system that will impress friends and family, stay within budget and deliver hour upon hour of movie and music enjoyment.

TIP NO. 1: Get a DVD player. The DVD, or digital versatile disk, looks like a regular compact disk but has from 7 to 25 times the data capacity. That extra real estate, combined with some fancy digital data com-

What was strictly a videophile's format last year is available now to almost anyone, with the cost of basic players down to \$299.

pression, gives DVD movies twice the detail of VHS videocassettes, with noticeably richer, truer colors. In addition, most disks offer six channels of digital sound, instant access to any portion of the movie and such interactive extras as multiple languages and subtitles, a choice of wide-screen letterbox or conventional picture formats, and additional material, like biographies or scenes that never made it to the final cut.

What's more, what was strictly a videophile's format when introduced in the spring of 1997 has become the people's format. The cost of basic players has dropped to \$299 at good sales, and there are now more than 2,000 DVD video titles, including most new films from virtually all the major studios. With about a million players sold, big video chains are beginning to offer DVD rentals. And a new Web service called NetFlix (www.netflix.com) stocks every title and rents by mail. Some DVD players will accept new Divx pay-per-

play DVD's, which are purchased outright for \$4.49 each and renewed for a small fee via a modem in the player when they are watched a second or third time. If you have been waiting to see whether DVD will stick around before buying a player, you are out of excuses.

TIP NO. 2: Go with a Dolby Digital sound system. Many DVD movies, and virtually all new releases, offer Dolby Digital surround sound. That is a huge improvement over the surround sound from VHS tapes. Videotapes, as played through an old-style Dolby Pro Logic audio/video receiver

or processor, can offer only four separate channels of sound, including a single rear channel that goes to two speakers on either side of the viewing seats. DVD's, however, when played through appropriate Dolby Digital equipment, have six separate channels, with independent sounds going to each of the two rear speakers, plus an additional "low-frequency effects" channel that feeds a dedicated subwoofer to reinforce explosions and the like.

With these advances, movie sound engineers can now place specific sound effects virtually anywhere in the room. You can hear alien zombies creeping up from behind your left shoulder, or egomaniacal fighter pilots flying diagonally overhead. Furthermore, because Dolby Digital is a digital audio system, it delivers the dynamic impact and clarity familiar from CD's.

Prices on Dolby Digital receivers have plummeted to nearly half what they were a year ago, with budget models now advertised at \$399 or less. And the same Dolby Digital receiver that plays DVD's will also decode Dolby Digital broadcasts received on satellite dishes and on the new digital televisions. These units offer Dolby Pro Logic surround sound as well, in case you still get the urge to play one of those wimpy videotapes.

TIP NO. 3: Don't fret about digital television — yet. The buzz is on about the new DTV broadcasts, particularly about high-definition television. You haven't really seen your favorite news anchor until you've seen every hair on his well-coiffed head from the comfort of your den. HDTV is that good. And if you're in the market for just a plain old television around which to build a home theater, the thought of premature obsolescence may be enough to make you freeze in terror. But you should worry only if you plan to buy an HDTV. The models just hitting stores are too expensive (\$7,000 and up) for average consumers and still in their technological infancy. Over the next few years, critical features will be added and prices will drop. One option is to pay a premium today for an HDTV-ready television, to which a digital television tuner can be added later. But there is no guarantee such a "separates" approach will offer the same functionality as an integrated HDTV available in 2001.

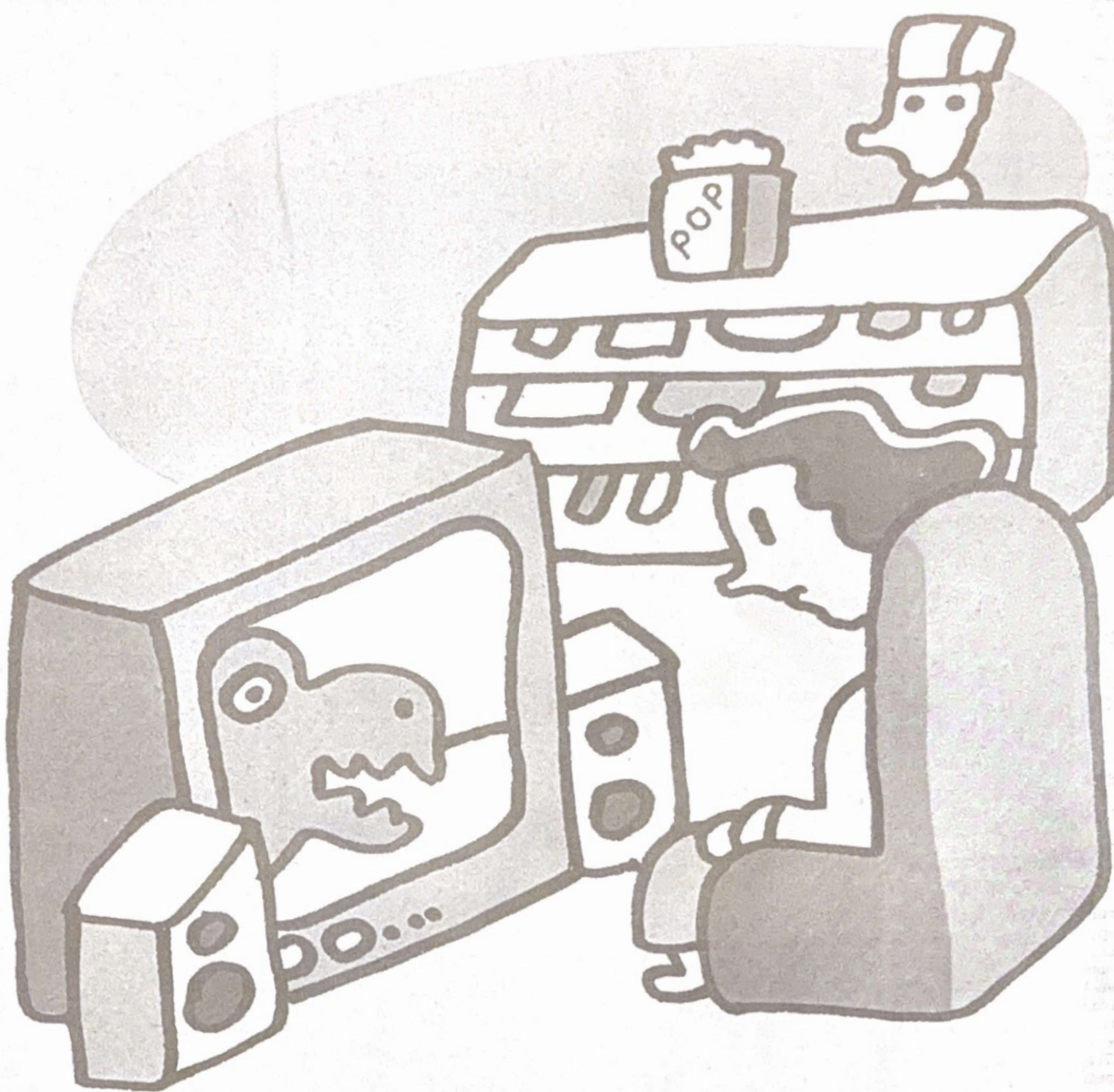
So the best advice for most of us is to wait on HD. And while you wait, go get a regular analog television. Big-screen direct-view tube sets are still going for as little as \$1,000 and 32-inch televisions starting at \$550. For something bigger, there are plenty of bargains in the rear-projector category as well. Just plan ahead and don't buy a television so big that it will not function in a secondary location, such as a bedroom or summer home, if you are ready to step up to HDTV in a few short years. And, by the way, the television you buy today will never go dark — even after broadcasters turn off their analog channels some time beyond 2006, a set-top tuner will permit the viewing of digital programming until the set itself dies.

TIP NO. 4: Know your options. Like anything else, home theaters come in good-better-best packages. A starter system that would impress 90 percent of us includes a DVD player, a Dolby Digital receiver rated at 75 to 100 watts per channel, and, in all likelihood, a subwoofer/satellite speaker system. The latter consists of five tiny monitors (the satellites) and a separate, compact subwoofer to handle bass duties. Good sub/sat systems start at about \$500, and they are a great choice for those whose homes are short on space or long on interior design. All together, it might cost \$1,500 to \$2,000 to add all these items to an existing television.

The next step is to play even louder speakers that will play even louder and offer better dynamics than a modest sub/sat system. A full ensemble built around a decent pair of floor standing tower speakers might start at \$1,500. It will take a top-line receiver to drive those speakers (\$800 to \$2,800), and you may now be thinking about adding a 48-inch or larger rear-projector television (\$1,300 and up). Are we having fun yet?

If space and budget permit, the last step takes you into the realm of high-quality separate surround-sound components, better (though not necessarily louder) audiophile speakers, and a front-projector system that paints an image on an 8- to 10-foot-wide rectangular screen that descends from the ceiling or occupies a wall. A good front projector alone might cost \$10,000 to \$50,000 (though, if it is any consolation, most will display high-definition television images with the addition of a digital tuner). Start adding the rest — remote-controlled lights and drapes, installation — and you are entering the rarefied territory described earlier. However, what this home theater offers, with good DVD or high-definition source material, is a picture nearly indistinguishable from film, accompanied by powerful, gut-wrenching sound.

Of course, do some research before shopping. Specialty magazines are a good source for component recommendations, and are on-line bulletin boards and news groups. And here's one more tip: After installing a new home theater, there is a tendency to, well, stay home. So do make it a point to get out once in a while. Maybe go see a movie.



Stuart Goldenberg

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