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VES Awards: Digital Rivers Converge

By Mark London Williams

"The river is everywhere at the same time, at the source and at the mouth..."

That's Siddhartha, a.k.a. Buddha, speaking from the pages of the **Herman Hesse** novel. I was reminded of this particular avatar by one of his namesakes, the hardworking **Siddhartha Jayakar**, who was part of the team that copped a VES award in the Outstanding Created Environment in a Live Action Broadcast Program, Commercial, or Music Video category for their work on the TNT miniseries *Into the West*.

If the VES Awards haven't quite come of age, in this fourth annual edition everyone seemed to be aware they are *about* to come of age, because now virtually every television show, film and commercial is involved—which makes it hard just to name all the categories.

There are clear-cut awards like Best Single Effect of the Year (which went to *War of the Worlds*) and Outstanding Visual Effects in a Visual Effects Driven Motion Picture (*King Kong*). Then there's Outstanding Supporting Visual Effects in a Motion Picture, which went to *Kingdom of Heaven*, and prompted co-winner **Victoria Alonso** to praise "all these fabulous geeks" in the house.

Receiving the VES Board of Directors award, ILM alum and current **Pixar** producer—and founding chairman of the VES—**Jim Morris** said, "for me, it all started with *Jason and the Argonauts*," and with "8mm junior high school epics."

But not everyone sitting at a VES table that night was necessarily there because of **Ray Harryhausen**. One of my own table mates, **Ian Hunter** of miniature-making **New Deal Studios** (he was up for an award in the Outstanding Models and Miniatures in a Broadcast Program, Commercial, or Music Video category for work on a **Walgreens** commercial but lost to **Michael Cook** for an episode of *Las Vegas*), posited not one, but two fundamental influences on budding FXers, describing the two schools as

when the cutting edge there ran toward *Mickey's Christmas Carol*, then saw the potential of pixels to revolutionize—or at least limber up—animation, especially with Disney's initial foray into *Tron*, and tried to get folks there to listen, with pleas and early demos falling "on deaf eyes."

So it was off to Northern California, for some incubation at **Lucasfilm**, a later purchase by **Steve Jobs**, and of course, a triumphant return to Disney.

Laseter told of a family friend who has noted, with pride that "their grandfather was a cel painter on *Snow White*." Clearly moved as he recounted this anecdote, he said he wanted that same kind of generational pride in Pixar's works: "My daddy worked on *Toy Story*" or "My mommy worked on *The Incredibles*."

But as we've noted before in these pages, when nearly all filmed entertainment has digital components, what's the difference between a "real" film and an "effects" film? A "live" film or a "cartoon?"

VES, with its growing animation-friendly component, remains poised to help figure it all out. As its awards show becomes more firmly established—that it will eventually outgrow the Hollywood Palladium from a sheer logistical standpoint seems now like only a matter of time—much will be revealed by how the award categories themselves change.

The winners:

Outstanding Visual Effects in a Visual Effects Driven Motion Picture: *King Kong* – **Joe Letteri, Eileen Moran, Christian Rivers, Eric Saindon**

Outstanding Supporting Visual Effects in a Motion Picture: *Kingdom of Heaven* – **Wes Sewell, Victoria Alonso, Tom Wood, Gary Brozenich**

Outstanding Visual Effects in a Broadcast Miniseries, Movie or Special: *Walking With Monsters* – **Tim Greenwood, Jo Nodwell, Neil Glasbey, Darren Byford**

Outstanding Visual Effects in a Broadcast Series: *Rome-Episode 1* – **Barrie Hemsley, James Madigan, Duncan Kinnaird, Joe Pavlo**

Outstanding Supporting Visual Effects in a Broadcast Program: *Lost-Exodus Part 2* – **Kevin Blank, Mitchell Ferm, Eric Chauvin, John Teska**

Outstanding Visual Effects in a Commercial: *Guinness noitulovE* – **William Bartlett, Scott**

Griffin, Andrew Boyd, Dan Seddon

Outstanding Visual Effects in a Music Video: *Nine Inch Nails-Only* – **Eric Barba, Lisa Beroud, Jay Barton, Jim Gaczkowski**

Best Single Visual Effect of the Year: *War of the Worlds-Fleeing the Neighborhood* – **Dennis Muren, Pablo Helman, Sandra Scott, Marshall Krasser**

Outstanding Real Time Visuals in a Video Game: *Need For Speed Most Wanted* – **Habib Zargarpour, Greg D'Esposito, Eduardo Agostini, Colin O'Connor**

Outstanding Pre-Rendered Visuals in a Video Game: *Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones-The Palace Balcony Cinematic* – **Jean-Jacques Tremblay, Raphael Lacoste, Anne Mai Le Bouyonnec**

Outstanding Visual Effects in a Special Venue Project: *Magnificent Desolation: Walking on the Moon* – **Jack Geist, Sean Phillips, Johnathan Banta, Jerome Morin**

Outstanding Animated Character in a Live Action Motion Picture: *King Kong-Kong* – **Andy Serkis, Atsushi Sato, Guy Williams, Eric Saindon**

Outstanding Animated Character in an Animated Motion Picture: *Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit-Gromit* – **Loyd Price**

Outstanding Animated Character in a Live Action Broadcast Program, Commercial, or Music Video: *Battlestar Galactica-Season 2, Episode 03 "Fragged"-Cylon* – **Gary Hutzel, Andrew Karr, Gary Hughes, Allan Henderson**

Outstanding Created Environment in a Live Action Motion Picture: *King Kong-New York Dawn Attack* – **Dan Lemmon, R. Christopher White, Matt Aitken, Charles Tait**

Outstanding Created Environment in a Live Action Broadcast Program, Commercial, or Music Video: *Into The West Mini-Series Movies I, II and III* – **Cedric Tomacruz, David Bailey, Valeri Pfahning, Siddhartha Jayakar**

Outstanding Models and Miniatures in a Motion Picture: *War of the Worlds* – **Ed Hirsh, Steve Gawley, Joshua Ong, Russell Paul**

Outstanding Models and Miniatures in a Broadcast Program: *Las Vegas Series - Episode 308 "Bold, Beautiful and Blue"* – **Michael Cook, Anthony O'Campo, Eugene Kim, Renaud Talon**

Outstanding Compositing in a Motion Picture: *War of the Worlds* – **Marshall Krasser, Michael Jamieson, Jeff Saltzman, Regan McGee**

Outstanding Compositing in a Broadcast Program, Commercial, or Music Video: *Empire* – **Stefano Trivelli, Michele Moen, Kelly Bumbarger, Sean Wilson**

George Méliès Award for Artistic Excellence: **John Lasseter**

Visual Effects Society Board of Directors Award: **Jim Morris**

Below the Line

ffects, describing the two schools as Whitlock vs. Harryhausen.

That other school would be **Albert Whitlock**, of course, the miniature and matte whiz who delivered pre-digital FX to “real” films—as opposed to Harryhausen’s fantasies—over a storied decades-long career that included *The 39 Steps*, *Catch-22* and *The Sting*.

The George Méliès Award for Artistic Excellence went to Pixar director **John Lasseter**. It was the most emotional part of the evening—redoubtable Pixar voice thesp **John Ratzenberger** presented the award, telling of the “thrill” he had when reading that Lasseter was going to “take over **Disney** animation,” leading, at last, to Walt himself no longer “spinning in his grave.”

Lasseter talked about growing up not wanting to be Whitlock or Harryhausen, but simply wanting to work at Disney, and took a big step in that direction by enrolling in Disney-funded Cal Arts.

He wound up working for Disney

AWARDOMETER

Overall score **8/10**

VES Awards

Venue: The Hollywood Palladium.

Price of parking: \$10 + tip.

Alcohol: Two free drink tickets during cocktail hour. Red or white wine at the dinner table.

Quality of alcohol: Good.

Attire: Black Tie.

Show length: Presenter Cheech Marin noted the first five hours just flew by.

Swag: Yes. More DVDs, primarily. Glad to have updated *Toy Story* from the well-worn VHS copy my pre-teen wore out dur-

ing his toddlerhood.

After party: I wasn’t invited. Is that the opposite of a Sally Fields moment?

Host: The ’70s Oscar rotating host strategy was once again deployed, to reasonable success.

Best quote of the night: A tie between John Lasseter’s line about digital animation falling on deaf eyes, and John Ratzenberger’s comment about Walt Disney’s grave-spinning.

Attendance: 800+.