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the professionals: ves

RIPPLE EFFECT

The VES continues to reach out to an increasingly global industry

By Sheigh Crabtree

Neither an ape with a scarred psyche nor a majestic lion with a speaking part, both featured in 2005 movie releases, was the work of one man — yet when visual effects practitioners are recognized for their sleight of hand at the Oscars, the honors often go to a couple of key supervisors.

When launching its awards ceremony four years ago, the Visual Effects Society hoped to change that by spreading its honors across the many varied effects disciplines. The honorary society celebrates its fourth annual VES Awards tonight at the Hollywood Palladium, and by all accounts, the sophistication of the work being feted and the significance of the kudos themselves have grown by leaps and bounds.

“Every year we think it’s the most amazing work we’ve ever seen, and then the next year, people blow us away again,” VES awards committee co-chairman Tim McGovern says. “This year, we’re particularly thrilled with the pioneering aspect of the event.”

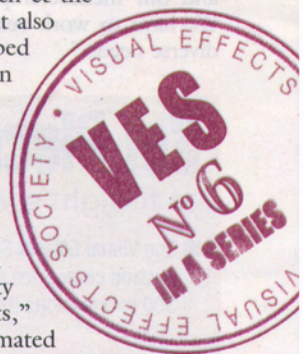
The VES will recognize not only the groundbreaking work featured in such films as 2005’s pair of year-end blockbusters — Buena Vista’s “The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch & the Wardrobe” and Universal’s “King Kong” — but also two computer-graphics frontiersmen who helped shape the current industry. Pixar Animation Studios co-founder and noted animated-feature director John Lasseter will receive the Georges Méliès Award for Artistic Excellence, and former Lucasfilm chief Jim Morris will take home the Board of Directors Award.

If it seems odd that the board of a visual effects group is celebrating a ‘toon director, then McGovern offers an explanation. “Our society represents animators and visual effects artists,” he says. “(Lasseter) created the computer-animated feature genre, but he did it slowly, with (computer-generated) commercials and computer-animated shorts. With his storytelling and animation finesse, he ended up pioneering the field.”

Lasseter will not be the only VES honoree from his cutting-edge animation studio: Morris recently left Lucasfilm to join Pixar as a producer. While his contributions to the industry are notable, the VES tapped Morris for work he has done for the organization during the past nine years. “Jim was a founding chair of the society, and he always aimed it in the right direction,” McGovern says. “He put in an incredible amount of time to get the VES to the level it’s at today.”

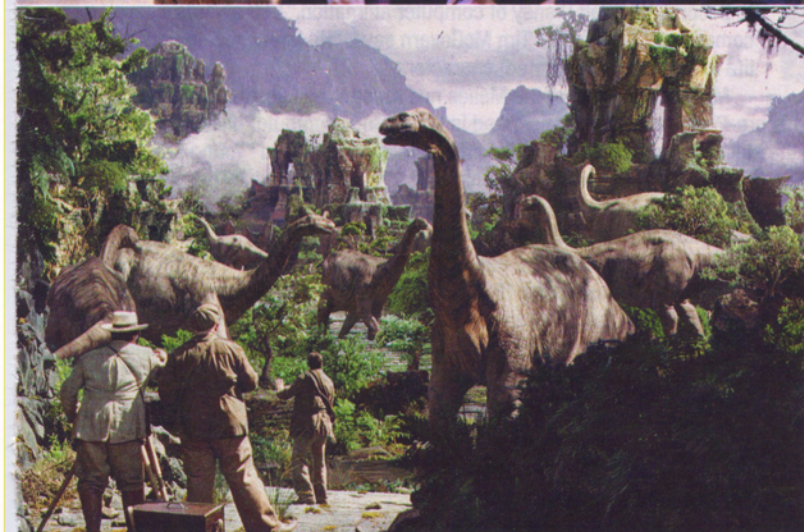
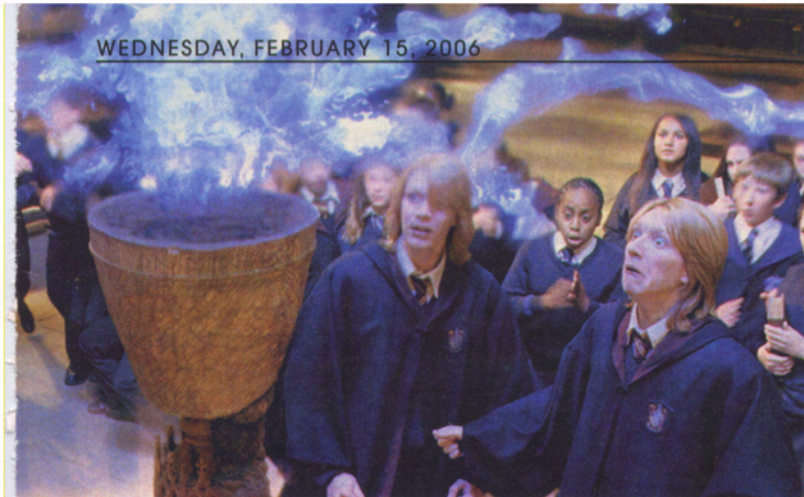
Despite rigorous entry requirements, the VES has grown from 900 to 1,300 members during the past two years. The board hopes to expand the ranks to 3,000-5,000 during the next few years, according to VES executive director Eric Roth.

“VES is represented in 16 countries,” he says. “We believe there are many-thousands more potential members worldwide, but we’re not in



EPIC EFFECTS

From top, Warner Bros. Pictures’ “Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire,” Universal’s “King Kong,” Buena Vista’s “The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch & the Wardrobe” and Fox’s “Star Wars: Episode III — Revenge of the Sith” will compete in the outstanding visual effects in a visual effects-driven motion picture category during tonight’s fourth annual VES Awards.



a hurry to have, say, 15,000 members. We want the most talented artists, technologists and practitioners in the field."

Reaching out to that global community is a priority for the organization because 40% of its membership lives outside the Los Angeles area. Last year, the VES debuted an online awards ballot, allowing all members to view and vote on the nominees.

"We had a huge increase in votes when we went to online view-and-vote," Roth says. "No matter where you are in the world, you're a part of the society, and as a result, more people recognize that winning the VES Award is a really cool thing."

To emphasize the VES' global reach, the organization soon will add a regional chapter in the San Francisco Bay Area, with a London wing to follow soon thereafter. The regional chapters will host screenings as well as educational and networking events.

"This is an opportunity to have local entities tied to the headquarters here in L.A., so that we are able to share resources at the local level," Roth says.

The VES board also is working with studios on the issue of credits and their placement within movie and TV crawls.

"We're actively engaged in trying to advise the studios on the issue of credits," Roth says. "We're working to determine how we can make it easier for everyone concerned. We have no ability to mandate, but we're trying to find a way to do it that benefits the membership."

But the globalization of the visual effects industry remains the VES' largest issue going forward. "The delivery of entertainment knows no boundaries," Roth says. "It's like weather — it doesn't stop at the border — and our membership is increasingly global. We have to work very hard to address their diverse needs." ■

Set Piece Highlights of tonight's VES Awards

- The Visual Effects Society recognizes 20 awards categories and received more than 300 submissions this year.
- The society treasures its senior-most visual effects practitioners. Craig Barron, Joe Letteri, Dennis Muren and Dean Wright are booked to bestow honors tonight.
- The best performance by an actor category is on the cutting-room floor. "Even though we appreciate the talent it takes to act in front of a greenscreen, we never got many submissions for it, so we eliminated it," Tim McGovern says.
- Tonight's ceremony will be pared to 54 minutes and broadcast in six weeks on television's HDNet.



ANIMATION AUGUR

CGI pioneer John Lasseter to be honored during the fourth annual VES Awards

The Visual Effects Society will present its Georges Méliès Award for Artistic Excellence to animator John Lasseter tonight during the fourth annual VES Awards at the Hollywood Palladium. Lasseter, a founder of Pixar Animation Studios and the director of eye-opening films like 1995's "Toy Story" and forward-looking shorts like 1986's "Luxo Jr.," is widely considered a father of computer-generated imagery's transition from a scientific achievement into an exciting and versatile art form.

"John Lasseter was born at the right time and at the right place to become the Walt Disney of computer animation," VES awards committee co-chairman Tim McGovern says. "He knew how to bring life to (computer-generated) characters."

McGovern adds that the Méliès nod recognizes Lasseter's groundbreaking work dating to his pre-Pixar days, when he worked in Lucasfilm's computer division, under Dennis Muren, on the stained-glass knight in 1985's effects Oscar-nominated "Young Sherlock Holmes." "It was the first computer-animated human-type character," McGovern says. "They invented opacity mapping. They were making fully animated shorts that made sense, and even though they were slugging it out with very technical software, these were films by artists, rather than computer scientists. John was one of the first who knew what we had (with CGI)."

Auguring the future of animation, Lasseter made the 1988 short "Tin Toy," which became the first computer-animated project to win an Oscar. Later, in transforming "Toy Story" from what McGovern says was expected to be a B-movie into a revolutionary success, Lasseter proved that CGI's laborious and often unpredictable production could be fashioned into a timely, cost-effective methodology.

Lasseter continued to advance the art with his direction of 1998's "A Bug's Life" and 1999's "Toy Story 2" and through his development of talent as an executive producer on 2001's "Monsters, Inc.," 2003's "Finding Nemo" and 2004's "The Incredibles." He is now directing Pixar's upcoming Buena Vista release "Cars."

— Gregory Solman

VES VISIONARY

Founding chairman Jim Morris to receive the Board of Directors Award

Well in advance of George Lucas completing his "Star Wars" magnum opus or Pixar Animation Studios signing a deal to become part of the Walt Disney Co., the Visual Effects Society tapped Jim Morris to receive its Board of Directors Award tonight during the fourth annual VES Awards. His selection proves the society's futuristic vision — or its fortuitous timing.

Morris, a feature-film producer at Pixar and founding chairman of the VES, was associated with Lucasfilm for 17 years — the last 11 as president of Lucas Digital Ltd. — and oversaw two of the industry's most prolific and advanced companies, Industrial Light + Magic and Skywalker Sound. Under his management, ILM and Skywalker were instrumental to such movies as 1992's "Death Becomes Her," 1993's "Jurassic Park," 1994's "Forrest Gump," 1997's "Men in Black," 2001's "A.I. Artificial Intelligence," 2002's "Gangs of New York" and "Minority Report" and 2003's "Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines," as well as Episodes I and II of "Star Wars."

"Jim worked his way up from the trenches, which is really important — you don't see enough of that anymore in Hollywood," says Uth TV CEO Carl Rosendahl, founder of Pacific Data Images and current chairman of the VES board of directors. "Secondly, he's fundamentally a really great guy — honest and interesting, with tons of integrity. Those two things together gave him management credibility that was well-earned. Finally, he loves the industry; his work is combined with passion."

Morris was ILM's executive in charge of production when Steven Spielberg was making 1991's "Hook," James Cameron was directing 1991's "Terminator 2: Judgment Day," Ron Howard was lighting 1991's "Backdraft" and Robert Zemeckis was finishing 1990's "Back to the Future Part III." As a visual effects producer when he joined ILM in 1987, Morris worked on Cameron's effects Oscar-winning 1989 release "The Abyss" and on Spielberg's 1989 drama "Always." Before joining the effects industry, Morris worked in advertising as a commercial producer for several top agencies.

Last year, the VES gave its inaugural Board of Directors Award to Cinefex magazine publisher Don Shea.

— Gregory Solman

