

Googling the Future: Visual Design for a Science Awards Ceremony

The Google Science Fair Award Ceremony, held each year in the San Francisco Bay Area, honors the winners of a global online competition open to students from 13 – 18 years old. The event is broadcast to millions of online viewers via YouTube.

In previous years, the event was designed and produced by Blue Flame in a Palo Alto Airport hangar. This year, it moved into a bigger venue, The Fox Theatre, in nearby Redwood City. Stefan Beese, creative director of Blue Flame and director of its newly formed Design Lab, spearheaded the project.

For the hangar, The Blue Flame team had conceived a large origami-ribbon that would function as a red carpet and provide a cohesive narra-

tive element. It would eventually grow via several folds into verticals and create a proscenium. An earlier idea had the contestants seated within the stage ribbon to bring the stage design even closer into the audience and give the possibility to call out the winners via content on the ribbon.

When the change of venue was announced, the team quickly learned that there were no plans of the historic theatre and a site survey was needed. Once this was completed, it allowed them to model the design in 3-D. The stage ribbon naturally created its own stage proscenium, and created a more intimate atmosphere while creating a larger projection surface than the upstage screen.

“The Fox is a very old theatre, with a great deal of ornamentation and what looks like two prosceniums and a thick gold frame surrounding the proscenium. I thought my design might conflict with it, but I was able to use the ribbon to create my own proscenium. We also added decking to pull the stage closer to the audience. Basically, you entered the theatre and saw a ribbon on the ground that led to, and became, the stage. The custom rear projection screen was 48' wide and 27' tall, with a 12' x 12' truss. The ribbon surrounding the stage was built out of 800' of 1.5" steel tubing skinned with Rose Brand's Blackout lining, which prevented any light bleed from behind.”

Also, says Beese, “A side stage was created that naturally morphed out of the extended stage deck to house a band backdrop wall with a 20' -deep folded triangular surface to match the origami-inspired stage ribbon. This created a tiered and dynam-



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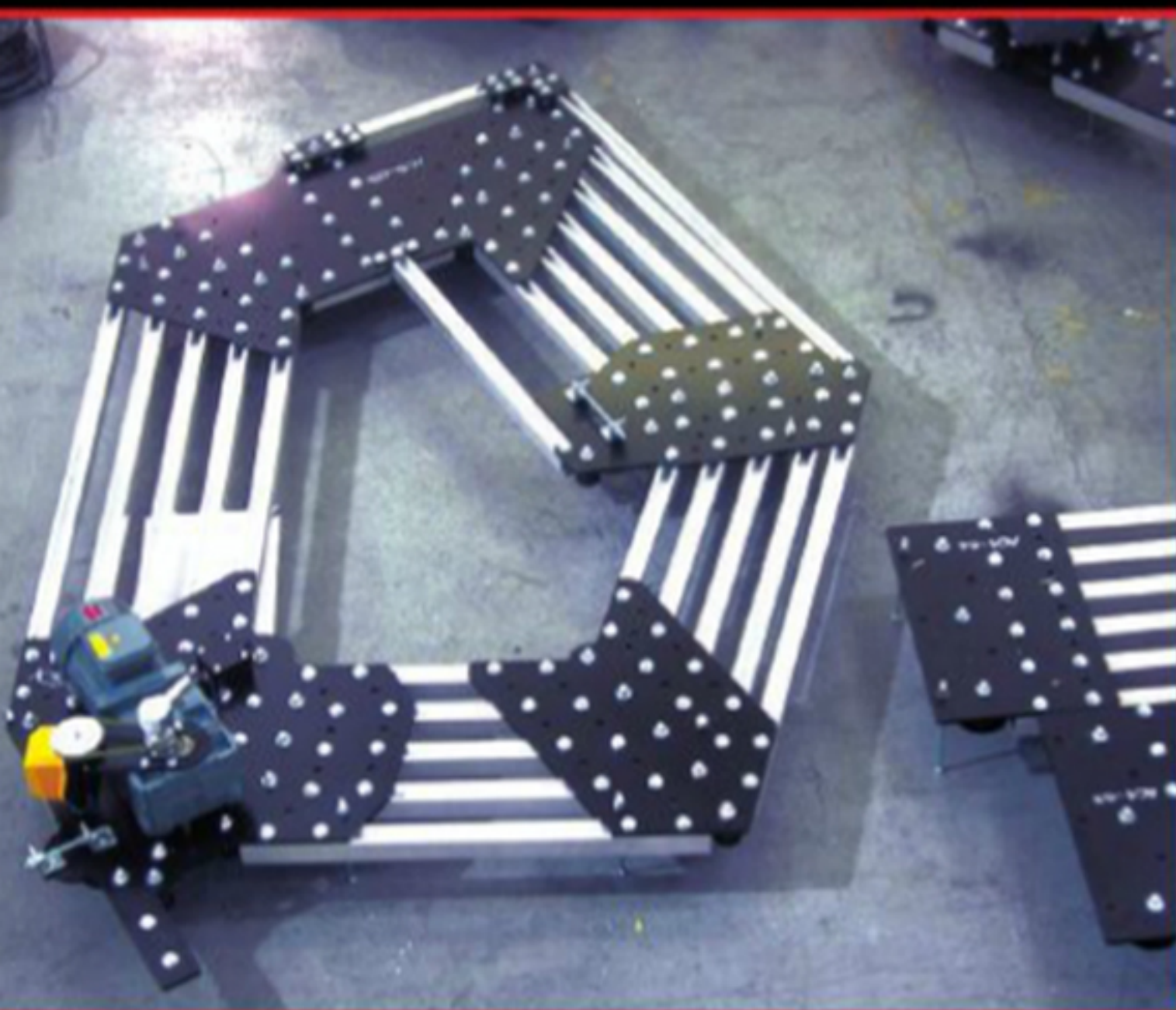
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ic forward-projecting stage setup, inviting the viewer to lean in and look, and creating multiple points of action that still lead the viewer's eye to the center stage."

The video system was driven by four d3 Technologies v2.5 quad-output media servers. Kyle Bjordahl led the projection mapping and content programming portion of the show. During pre-production, Swister + Knight worked closely with Blue Flame Production on content creation. The intention was to cater to a diverse group of speakers and to support on-stage moments that included a highly visual presentation by Danielle Feinberg, director of photography on Pixar's *Brave*. This moment featured an animation of trees growing across the ribbon, revealing a living forest on the upstage screen. Small particles hovered over the tree leaves to keep the content dynamic during her presentation. Another animation displayed a large cave-like image with a stream trickling through, the water rippling across the ribbon. For winner announcements, a wavering molecular cloud traveled up the ribbon to reveal the winner on the upstage screen. The content was rendered by Blue Flame's Design Lab onto the 3-D model of the stage design before the content was signed off and rendered in its needed resolution.

Lighting for the stage was programmed to become an extension of the video content onto the hard scenic elements. Lighting director Kandi Bloomquist worked to make sure the lighting blended seamlessly with the video content. All of the lighting needed be focused around the ribbon so as not to wash out the projections. For audience lighting, Blue Flame's lighting designer and technical director, Jason Dill, used 16 Martin Professional MAC Viper Performance units. "I knew early on that we would have to use an intelli-

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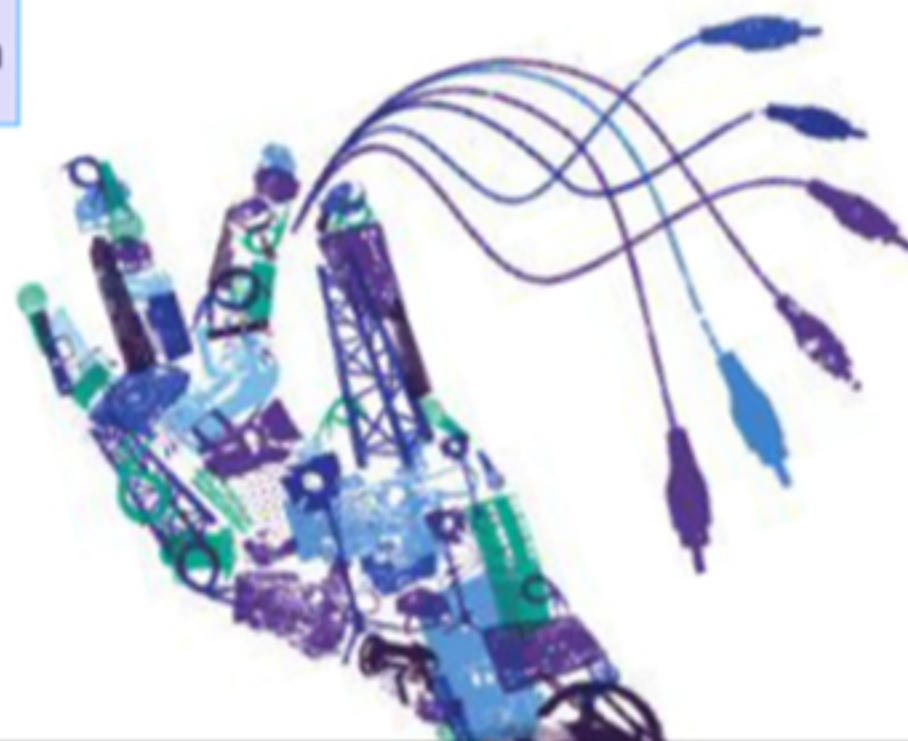
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gent framing fixture for any lighting on the band and audience," says Dill. "The truss grid that supported the flown projectors was trimmed at 40'. We also couldn't be climbing on the truss to focus any lighting or the projection team would have killed us." The rest of the lighting rig included five Martin Mac Auras, 60 Philips Color Kinetics ColorBlast 12s, and 36 ETC Source Four Lekos, all under the control of an MA Lighting grandMA2 console.

"I did the initial lighting design knowing that projections would be the main visual element," says Dill. "I wasn't going to overpower it. The Auras were chosen for their light weight and ease of incorporation into the set; they were bolted on the scenery walls; they have a great zoom and color mixing and they look good on camera. I went with the Viper Performances, even though they are new; the [Philips Vari*Lite] VL4000 had just come out, but I went with Martin because I know it better and also because of the price point. The Viper is one of the only framing moving lights with a variable frost and I wanted to be sure to frost out gobos and edges. Every fixture on stage had to be a framing fixture, to avoid light bleed on the ribbon, and the Vipers were a smart choice for that."

Dill adds that lighting and projection cues were triggered manually. "We discussed linking everything, because the d3 is timeline-based, and we could have generated time code that would sync the lighting console to whatever was happening with the d3. But we didn't, because it was a live show and certain elements couldn't be rehearsed."

Delicate Productions provided lighting, video, and audio gear. Scenic Solutions fabricated the scenery. The 2014 stage design was well received and Beese's team at the Blue Flame Design lab is already brainstorming how to raise the bar for next year's event. 📶

For more, see this month's LSA Bonus edition online and on the LSA apps.

More on the Google Science Fair

Here are some additional photos of the Google Science Fair Awards, designed and produced by Blue Flame Events.



Photo: Amy Milward

Stefan Beese, of Blue Flame, notes that because the event was seen on YouTube, it was important to make projections that were dynamic.



Photo: Stefan Beese

The entire video system was driven by four D3 Technologies 4U v2.5 quad output media servers.

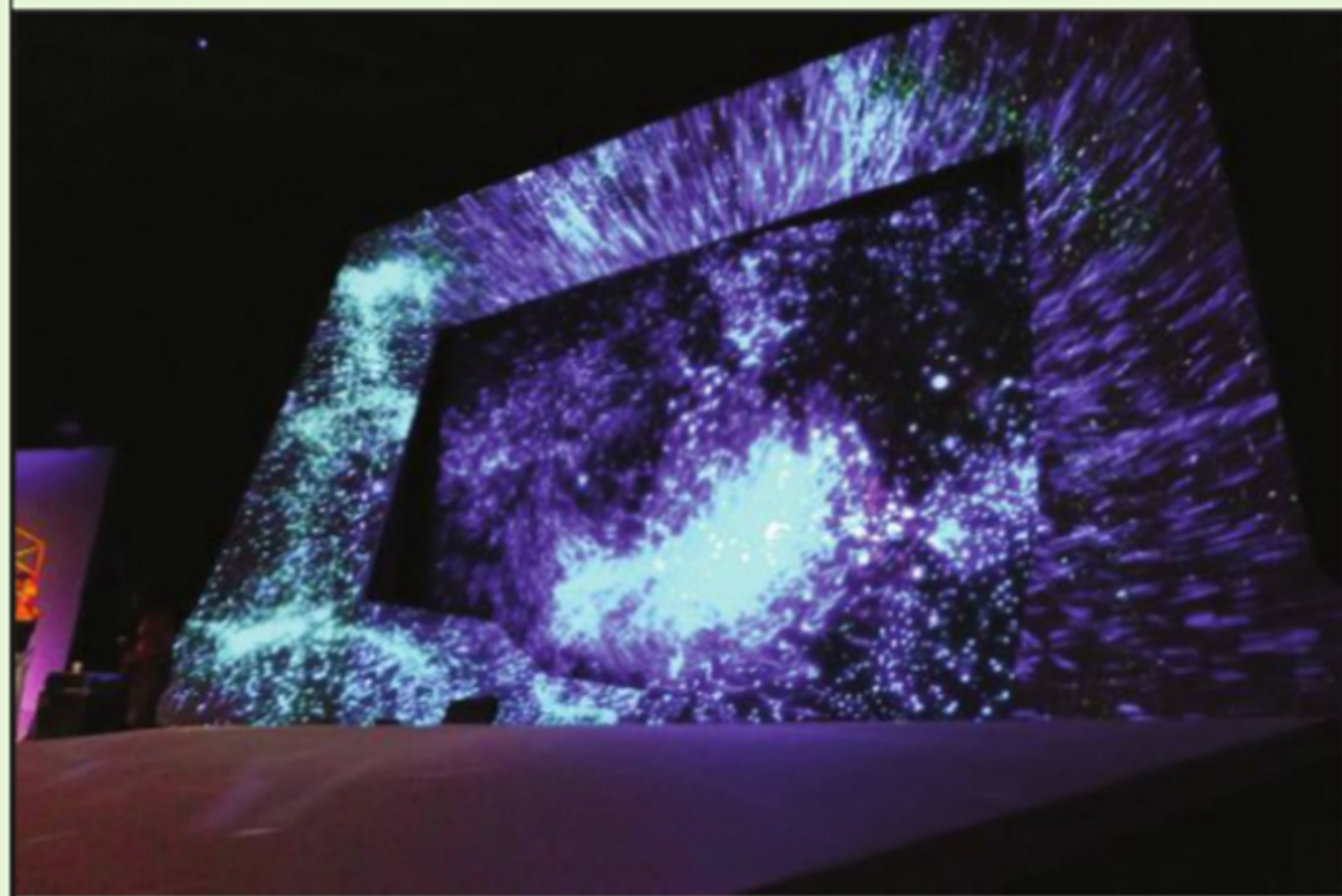


Photo: Amy Millward

Beese says that LED video panels were considered for the ribbon, but were dropped in favor of projections.



Photo: Stefan Beese

A side stage was created that naturally morphed out of the extended stage deck to house a band backdrop wall.



Photo: 2014 Stefan Beese

The stairs of the set were illuminated using Philips Color Kinetics ColorBlast 12 units. Also featured in the lighting rig were Martin Professional MAC Viper Performances, Martin Mac Auras, and ETC Source Fours. Control was via a grandMA console.