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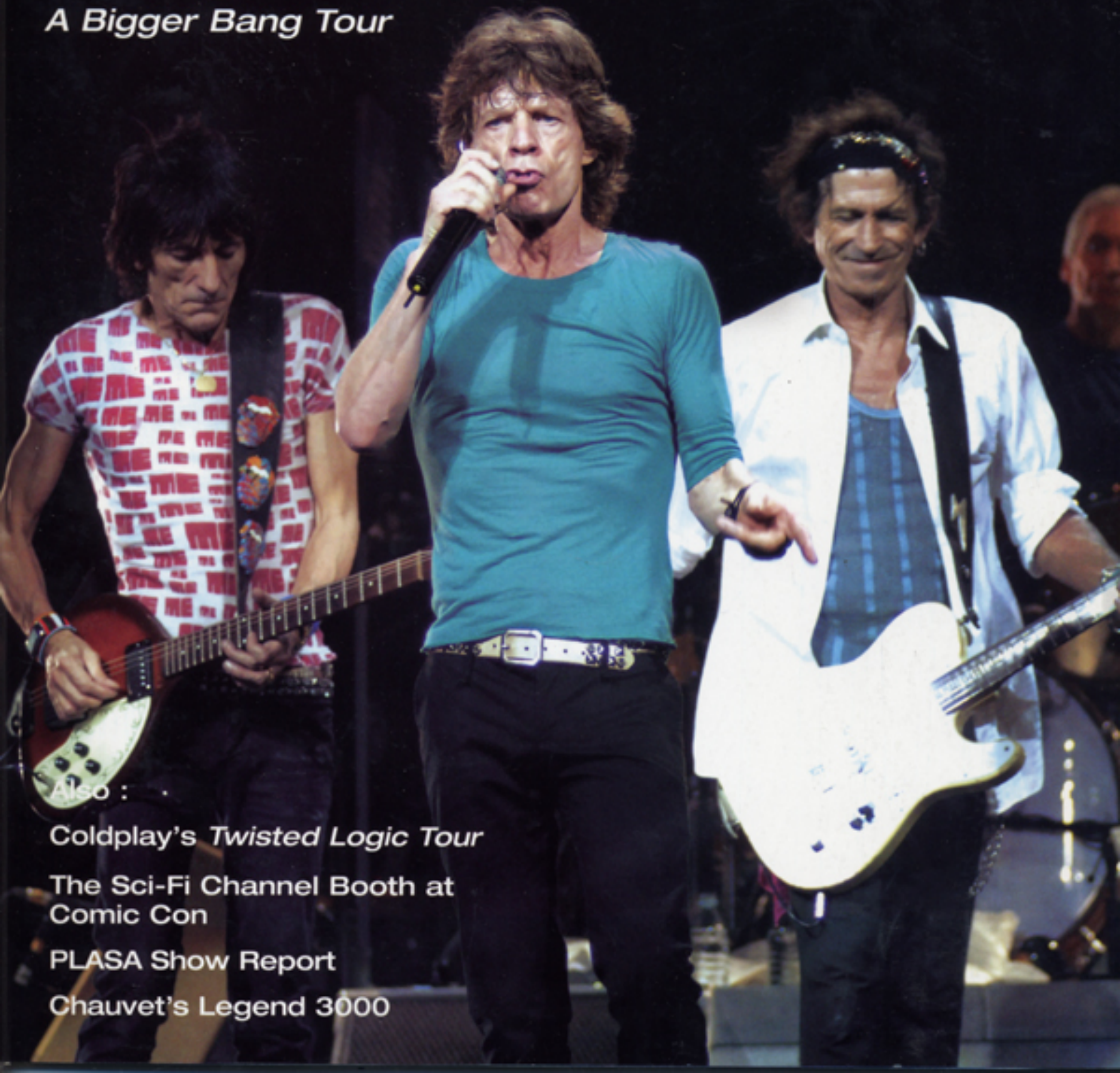

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FANTASTIC VOYAGE

The Sci-Fi Channel gets a sleek new image with an exhibit booth at Comic Con

By David Barbour

In another issue of this magazine, writer Mike Falconer referred to the E3 convention as "geek heaven." Maybe, but we're putting our money on Comic Con International, an annual get-together for fans of comic books, as the preferred owner of that title. Comic Con, held in San Diego (this year's dates were July 14-17) takes in the art forms targeted at the adolescent male in all of us—comic books, animé films, anything to do with science fiction or fantasy. It draws hundreds of exhibitors, from A-1 Comics to Yellow Nightmare Press, and includes many top Hollywood players, including Disney, Dreamworks, and Paramount. This year's guests included horror-film fan-mag publisher Forrest J. Ackerrman, novelist Ray Bradbury, actor Bruce Campbell, special-effects pioneer Ray Harryhausen, and filmmaker Kevin Smith. Events included several sets of awards, a masquerade party, art shows and auctions, portfolio reviews, and a film festival, all for a crowd of 100.000.

Naturally, if you have a property—say, a new Batman film—that might appeal to this crowd, Comic Con is the place to be. This year, cable TV's Sci-Fi Channel, building on the success of its series *Stargate SG-1* and *The 4400*, opted for a really attention-grabbing exhibit.

Says Adam Stotsky, the channel's senior vice-president, marketing and creative, "Our objective is to bring the Sci-Fi brand to life in this extraordinary three-dimensional environment. We try to fuel the imagination of our viewers through fantastical ideas. Sometimes the ideas are programming-based; here, they're experiential."

Indeed, the result, even after many changes, was sufficiently startling that surely other prominent Comic Con exhibitors are racing to their drawing boards to keep up.

A number of creative personnel were involved in the project, which went through a complex and not-always-easy design process. The story of the booth's creation reveals that the gap between concept and reality that can play a shaping role in any production. It also reveals the necessity, however arduous, of getting everyone on the same page before a project is fully executed. The players involved include an avant-garde design firm, a lighting designer from the world of live events, various technicians, representatives of a television network with definite ideas about branding, and a kind of fixer, whose job was make it all happen to everyone's satisfaction.

The sleek booth structure (this page and opposite) was designed to have a an abstract look that was suggestive of many things.

A new booth for a new brand

The Sci-Fi Channel booth was an abstract structure in fiberglass and steel. It was the work of the design firm Graft. Based in Los Angeles, Berlin, and Beijing, Graft has a portfolio that

The images above reveal some of the designers' intentions for the booth—that it be a place for visitors to congregate and for it to reflect light and projections in an attention-getting way.

includes exhibit spaces, restaurants and clubs, residential projects, and sets for music videos. It consists of three principals: Wolfram Putz, Lars Krückeberg, and Thomas Willemeit.

Production designer Stefan Beese was the project captain for Graft, with lead designer Alejandro Lillo and assistant designer Michael Hirschbichler. In addition to modifying the network's image, Beese says that the design brief included the following: "Signage was important. The office space had to be private and closed. There should be a media wall, or screens, for some kind of projection. They wanted customers to know that this was a television network's booth—thus, they wanted to showcase more than one show at time. It was to have a large seating area, a place where visitors could take a break. It had to be sturdy and unbreakable, which we achieved with the fiberglass. Also, it was to be high-tech, with screens for current promos and a computer station where the visitors could connect to the Internet. There was to be a area where talent from the shows could sign autographs. And there had to be storage space for all the promotional materials."

Most of all, says Beese, "The objective was to promote the Sci-Fi brand and to stand out amid the normal convention clutter. Their branding has moved away from battleships and such and more into the idea of fantasy and the unknown. That was an important point for us. While we were setting up the booth, people came up and asked, 'What is it? Is it a flight simulator? A new planet structure?' It doesn't look like a normal convention booth, because it's not an enclosure."

Indeed, the structure worked as kind of Rorschach blot, a suggestive blend of curves and and dips that recalls any number of objects. "The network liked that it had a kind of similarity to the Sci-Fi logo, with an arch that speeds around another arch," says Beese.

The multimedia component was key to the conception, Beese says. There were two 60" screens built into the surface of the conference room, which screened program-related media. The booth's two vertical supports, known as towers, also contained media—"one side housed three 17" LCD screens with promos running all the time. On the other side of the tower, the signing area had a 32" screen that featured images of whatever performer would be signing autographs at that time." He adds that the screens were embedded so seamlessly into the fiberglass that they were not apparent unless one looked straight at them.

In addition to the fiberglass, the overall structure of the booth was covered in a special pearl finish that, Beese says, caused it to shimmer when hit with moving lights and projections.

Beese says that the project underwent a three-month design phase, followed by four months of production. "It was a challenge," he adds. "From a structural standpoint, the ability to be a freestanding sculpture comes from the fiberglass itself. We have some metal reinforcements, but only for the conference room. It was great to see how differently people used the space; we even had kids walking on it, like in a playground."

Challenges along the way

However, the realization of this unusual structure ran into problems that conceivably could have scuttled the project altogether. That's when Jeremy Thom got involved. Thom, a set designer and production manager, is a self-described specialist in projects that are "weird and wacky," and it was his job to facilitate the booth's construction.

"It was definitely one of the more complicated things I've done in the last decade," Thom says, adding, "politically, it was definitely the most complicated." Thom's company, Jeremy Thom Productions, is located in Scarsdale, New York, just up the road from his client, Tangram International Exhibitions, the company hired to manage the build and installation of the Sci-Fi booth.

According to Steel Swift, president of the company, "It became Tangram's role to figure out how to realize the aggressive design concept in a show-floor environment under severe time constraints. We assembled a dynamic team of installation experts, riggers, audio visual specialists, and other resources to literally get the show on the road and in the air. As producer of the event, the challenges of correlating a budget for so many different resources and subcontractors were severe, especially as the parameters for what we needed to do changed three times a day."

Beese: "People came up and asked, 'What is it? Is it a flight simulator? A new planet structure?' It doesn't look like a normal convention booth, because it's not an enclosure."

Left: A key design aspect was the placement of video screens embedded into the structure of the booth.

"I started on May 1," says Thom, "The shop [the fiberglass fabricator, Greneker] planned to make laser-cut foam segments, to be cut from Stefan's 3D drawing files, and then put together, like a jigsaw puzzle, from which the molds were cast. They were feeding data files to the foam cutters, to be glued together in the workshop." But it soon became clear that the structure would be too large for the shop. It was, therefore, built in separate pieces in various parts of the workshop. "We had to cut the shop door open in order to extract what they had built," he adds.

At this point, Thom says, certain questions hadn't been dealt with, and it was becoming critical to do so: "The main debate was where the split lines in the structure would be," to ease its assembly on the trade-show floor and to allow the components to fit through the doors. "We had the issue of trucking and handling pieces that were 35' long with no handles on them—we're talking about smooth, unpickup-able chunks of fiberglass."

Thus, Thom says, "The solution was to go back to rock and roll, and put everything on wheels. We built set carts. I called in Brian Quinn, who used to run the workshop at [event production firm] George and Goldberg, and I paired him with Craig Bugajski at Festival Artists; they build floats for the Rose Parade. I asked Brian to be the brains behind the cart project and Festival to build them. Brian and Craig worked to build and cart the 4" high subfloor structure covering the entire booth, beneath which ran not only electrical and control cables but also a web of air-conditioning ducts to ensure that equipment buried in the structure didn't overheat."

Also, Thom says, "In the process of working out where the cut lines came on the sculpture, we also worked out how the pieces were physically connected to each other and where the connection plates needed to be. That way, we could use the placement of the bolt holes in the connection places—which are all internal to the structure—to build an armature on the carts, in order to precisely place the pieces on the carts without the outer surface of the fiberglass and the steel cart chassis touching and damaging the paint finish in transit. To erect the structure, we had to plan how to pick up pieces of raw fiberglass, from the inside, on chain hoists, using only the connection plates, which tied the pieces together as rigging points, roll them over and out of the carts, and position them precisely in space so that their neighboring pieces could be married up to them from their own carts. The pieces did not travel in their carts aligned to fly straight up, but, rather, were positioned so that their cross-sectional attitude suited the dimensions of a trailer door. Due to time restraints, all of these calculations had to be done using Brian's 3D model, from which we determined which of Stefan's cut lines needed to be moved to suit the available trailer sizes. When it was all done, everything fitted into the carts and the trucks considerably better than we had initially feared."

The next challenge, says Thom, was building the structure on the trade-show floor: "It weighed 7,000lbs; we had to build it from the top, by hanging it. I got Dean Hart, from Stage Rigging [a Freeman Company] in San Francisco to design and plot the rig, which had to be accurate, to allow the sculpture pieces to marry with their neighbors. We had 86 rigging points, many of them with two or three leg bridles. Mary Franklin, from Lucasfilm [another elaborate booth] declared that she had chain envy! It was an absolute forest and the rigging and bridling was unbelievable."

"Now," he continues, "we had a concept of how to handle the booth, bring it in, and fly it. We had to relay to the workshop all of the changes that these deci-

sions caused to the interior structure of the sculpture, so it could be engineered accordingly. This took three to four weeks of discussions with the engineers—after the piece was already in production."

After a test assembly was completed in the loading dock of the workshop, it was off to San Diego. "We found a couple of oversized 48' trailers for the largest sections and put the rest in five 53'-high cubes," says Thom. "We cleared with about an inch to spare on some pieces." Once the pieces were wheeled in on their carts, he says, "Then the fun began, trying to get it flown. It was a longish day—I was up for 42 hours. I wrote a schedule for a 24-hour set build, including rigging; we finished it in about 19 hours. There were delays—we had to cut the inside out of one or two pieces, because they wouldn't fit together. But, at the end of the day, it went more swiftly than in my deliberately pessimistic schedule. Then it was just a matter of finishing details."

Actually, a whole new set of challenges were about to come into focus.

Lighting comes into play

Paul Dexter, of Masterworks Lighting, designed the lighting and projection sources for the booth; his brief was to bring the booth alive with ever-changing color, movement, and projected scenes. "That's what we tried to do, using the [High End Systems] DL.1, with the structure as a projection surface," he says, "and also with the movement of the [Martin] MAC 2000 Performance units. The changes were quite dramatic. You'd be looking at something shaping and taking form, then, suddenly, it was shifting to something else."

Moving lights were, of course, a key to the design. "It was a challenge to locate the fixtures in such a way that they could handle the entire structure," Dexter says. "A moving light could handle more than one location. Because of the angle, height, and close proximity, the truss couldn't be rigged over the floor and outside the booth space to get a nice frontal shot, which made it a challenge to cover the entire structure. Because of this, there was a lot of compensation; I had a truss structure that was quite simple initially, but it was broken up to accommodate straps, beams, and points for the booth structure and assembly process. I saw some very creative rigging—in one part, there were four points in a 2' radius."

For his moving lights, Dexter chose 20 Martin Mac 2000 Performances and 16 High End Systems Studio Beams. "I chose the Performances because of their shutter capability," he says. "I knew I had to get in tight to isolate certain areas and also not to spill onto other areas that had projections. As far as the Studio Beams, I love the intensity and quality of light that comes out of them."

One idea that was scrapped involved the use of Kino Flo fluorescent film and television units to light the structure. "But," says Dexter, "as things evolved, the creators chose not to draw attention to the truss structure. In fact, we went to great extremes to cover the truss configurations above with Textilene."

Dexter says that his approach "was very different" from his typical work. As a designer with experience in concert touring, he adds that his approach "was a matter of interpretation of the client's wishes and being able to translate that into the lighting scenes." He often uses varied colors and his design method is founded on the idea of creating contrasts. For the Sci-Fi booth, he describes his palette as "more like a slim selection. It was a real challenge. They wanted me to use their corporate colors, which are dark purples and blues. I could use anything from teal and light blue to UV and dark blue, and also white. That was pretty much it, in addition to the patterns and accents that we used. I got a little bit of amber in, in some instances. Even then, the client was concerned—like I shouldn't be doing it."

"What Paul faced was the edict, from on high, that the booth had to be the corporate color," says Thom. He adds, "The original concept on the Catalyst was, we could store a zillion different images and call them up at any time. That went by the wayside because the client wanted a loop tape. It would have been nice to have something that was ever-changing. Paul went through some long debates about what to use."

Using the High End Systems Catalyst, Dexter, working with programmer Chris Merriman, created approximately 27 minutes of content, which was projected on the surface of the booth via 14 DL.1s. The content was, largely, abstract, and was used to add texture and visual allure to the booth. "We used a selection of stock footage from Catalyst and some from Chris's archive," says Dexter. "We also used footage created and designated for the projectors by [Charles Hellwig, of] Sunset Media, and downloaded it into the DL.1s. There was plenty of footage to choose from, which made the result different than what was originally expected."

Programming the lighting and media took place over 12 hours, while many creative issues were still being worked out. According to Merriman, "About a week and a half out, I went to Los Angeles for a couple of days to meet with [Sunset Media]. That's when I started noticing that what looked good on the computer monitors might not take that well on the set." Thom adds, "Sunset looked at the booth as a conceptual art project. It's not that they weren't clever or appropriate; it was all carefully planned and plotted. But the images were far too intricate and they ended up washed out when projected on the sculpture. The old theatre maxim, keep it simple, was, sadly, forgotten." Besse adds that a scheduled test run at the fabricator's facility, with the projectors embedded in the structure, didn't happen, because of building delays.

Concerned about content, Merriman adds, "I burned Paul and the client a DVD of stuff that I thought would fit the show, and said 'Let's incorporate it.' But when we got onsite, the client said that we had to stick with blues and purples." As a result, a number of things, such as fire effects and cascades, were thrown out. "I had footage of DNA unraveling," says Merriman. "We got a little of it in, but most of it wasn't in the right colors. And if you color-corrected the image for purple on the spot, some of it turned into mud."

Anyway, Merriman says, during the overnight programming process, "Paul and I sat there with Stefan and we built a base look, between midnight and 4am. Then we sent the client away and Paul and I laid the lighting on, for about 45 minutes. He asked me to make it look as good as possible, and we worked on that for five hours. We were stuck with a lot of blue on purple, although we got some amber in when we could."

Nevertheless, as it went through many changes, the booth, already striking in its design, benefited from the lighting/projection treatment, which went a long way to fulfilling the original design brief of creating a kind of living, breathing structure.

As mentioned earlier, there were other video components. Buried beneath the fiberglass structure were three Panasonic 7400 projectors showing more of the Sunset/Merriman images on the underside of the structure. The beams were bounced off front silvered mirrors and through reinforced glass portholes in the structure. In the conference room, two 61" plasma projectors showed a collage of various Sci-Fi channel shows. Also, a trio of LCD screens in one leg of the booth ran short clips from Sci-Fi shows in a 35-minute loop. Content for the video was accessed from Doremi hard drives. Sound was provided by a number of Bose marine speakers that were built into the booth's walls. All the lighting, sound, and projection gear was supplied by AVW-TELAV, a Freeman company. Bill Carlson, exhibit sales manager for AVW TELAV, was in charge of the project, supplying and coordinating, with Thom, the installation of rigging, lighting, sound, and projection gear.

By any standard, the Sci-Fi booth was a stunning success, pulling in passers-by and fulfilling the client's desire to freshen its identity. In fact, what's a bit ironic about this project is that it was so daring, so original, and so successful that many of the participants express a certain sadness that it wasn't more daring, more original, and more successful. "The client was absolutely delighted," says Thom. "Nobody but us saw the shortfall." That's because the booth was such a significant departure from the Comic Con norm, that even in a slightly scaled-down version, it still astounded.

"It blew everyone away," says Thom. "It was completely unlike anything else on the floor. Next year, I hope we're going to a bigger booth, with more space around it, so it can be seen in isolation. [The 2005 booth covers 60' x 30'.] It's a magnificent piece; its function is to suck you in off the aisle and ask, 'What is it?' It created a lot of buzz." Will many more exhibitors at Comic Con take a cue from the Sci-Fi channel and get more creative with their booths? Only a visit to next year's show will reveal the truth.

This page: Design drawings reveal the booth's abstract structure. Opposite, a view of the booth, showing its relationship to the trade-show floor.