

Message from the President

By Ivan Dryer

As your new president, I first want to thank you for giving me the opportunity of serving ILDA, and to pledge my best efforts to further its aims and expand its influence and membership. The outside world needs to know more about us and what it is that we are about.

Next, I want to thank the outgoing President, Dick Sandhaus, for the excellent work he did on our behalf for the last year. Dick was an articulate, witty and effective leader. I feel fortunate that Dick and fellow incumbent, Joanne McCullough, will be joining me and the other new Board members, Steve Heminover and Bob Yazell, to help us over the rough spots and maintain continuity.

I'd like to give thanks now for the help I know I'll receive over the course of this year from ILDA's wonderful Executive Director, Barbara Inatsugu. Just the brief time I have been interacting with Barbara has seeded a growing appreciation of her administrative skills and devotion to the organization. She is the President's indispensable right arm.

During this year of my stewardship I hope to see ILDA grow and continue to mature. I hope also to see greater recognition of our craft and art. More publications should become aware of what we're doing. The Public Awareness Committee and I hope to make some inroads in the next



months. Your entries in the awards competition could provide an excellent pool of images that, with your permission (and with your source credit) could become a stock image library for promoting the industry.

In addition to spreading the word about ILDA (watch for the September issue of *Laser Focus World*), I'd like to see us address some important matters confront-

ing our industry. One issue is safety regulations. Are they impeding the growth of U.S. companies, as one trade magazine recently suggested? At this November's general meeting we will have a lengthy session dealing with this question.

Another issue is that of music rights: who owes what to whom for music in laser shows and displays? This has long been a gray area, and at another session in November we will have someone on hand to help us sharpen this fuzzy landscape. We are also actively building on the momentum initiated last November and are encouraging the participation of more planetariums as both users and producers of laser shows. This appeal is being made at planetarium conferences and in publications.

A major concern of mine is how we are perceived and treated by the outside world. Like Rodney Dangerfield, I believe we don't get enough respect in the marketplace—laser effects are usually lowest on the producer's list. I think our fees have always been generally lower than those for other graphics technologies (e.g., computer animation), especially considering equipment investment, the fragility of our "light bulb," and the growing level of software sophistication involved.

Some of our clients often do not consider "laser people" to occupy a lofty position in their vendor hierarchy (have I put it delicately enough?). Perhaps much of the foregoing can be laid at our doors and is a product of the earlier immaturity of our industry. But I think most of that is behind us and that our job is to continue to act as professionally as we know how while providing the highest quality service. Then I think our collective image will improve to match the increasingly high level of our laser imagery.

Finally, a word about who we are. As purveyors of craft and art we are first craftsmen and artists. I like to think that most of us who have come to use lasers for a living haven't done so just because it's profitable, or just because it can be glamorous, or just because the technology is exciting. Instead, I like to think that those pure colors dazzled our imaginations and struck some chord within us that left us helpless to resist, so that we follow those colors in spite of the hardships and disappointments. We are fortunate to be making a living at what we love.

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Ron Hays: Reflections on a Light-Filled Life

Multimedia Pioneer Brought
Visions of Light to Life,
"Star Wars" Concerts Leave
Lasting Legacy

By Ivan Dryer

Ron Hays, an Emmy Award winning artist who pioneered multimedia displays that combined music, lasers and special effects, died this April in Marina del Ray, Calif. A memorial was held for Hays, who had AIDS, at the Dickson Art Center at UCLA on Sunday, May 5. It would have been his 46th birthday.

I first met Ron Hays in 1976 at an event called "Laser Day" held at the Charles Hayden Planetarium in Boston. The purpose of the gathering was to showcase the wares—and, it turned out, the philosophies—of several laser/visual artists vying for a contract at the Planetarium. In his brief talk that day, Ron stressed, as he always did thereafter, artistry. The most incredible technology, he said, is worthless unless used in the service of an aesthetic principle, a devotion to craftsmanship, an insistence on quality. All of us were in rapt attention. The hallmarks of any meeting with Ron were his eloquence, humor, and a genuine, unforced charisma.

Shortly afterward, Ron introduced his first major film work, "Prelude and Liebestod." It is one of the seminal expressions of visual music and still, I think, one of the most powerful. He showed me the "book" in which he story-boarded the entire piece before a frame was shot. He told me he had locked himself away for months at MIT where he was a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Visual Studies. Ron received a grant to finance the production and persuaded Leonard Bernstein to record the score with the New York Philharmonic. He then came to Hollywood and searched out

the best effects artists he could find. Following the book, he converted his vision to film. He oversaw its editing and transfer to video. It was shown on national television. It became a staple of festivals and libraries. It's one of my fondest possessions.

In the late seventies Ron produced what were probably the first large-scale multimedia events: the "Star Wars" concerts with lasers and large-screen video at the Hollywood Bowl and elsewhere. Ron fulfilled an aspiration shared by many laser artists: 50,000 people were being mesmerized by a multimedia display set to classical music. Alexander Scriabin, the composer who dreamed of such events at the turn of the century, would have been very proud.

Scriabin would have beamed at what was perhaps Ron's greatest triumph—a massive 1985 event for over 500,000 people on the Ben Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia. Giant images covered the facade of the Philadelphia Art Museum. A row of searchlights miles long formed a canopy over the Parkway leading to the museum while lasers located in several locations danced among an intense fireworks display set to music from a full symphony orchestra.

The same grand panache got Ron's ideas into the '84 Olympics closing ceremony and into many films and television programs. He had plans a models for the largest-ever symphony tour with visual effects. And he chose a venue to permanently showcase his art, an idea we shared and pitched more than once. We had often discussed working together, and I regret that it never came to be.

One time in my living room, after airing some monumental scheme, I blurted out that I thought I understood the message of "Prelude." Its "protagonist" is a mysterious white sphere that is seen several times spinning serenely among splashes of color and form. The music climaxes and the sphere is transmuted into an intricate and prismatic

mandala. I suggested, perhaps too boldly, that the sphere represented an individual soul or consciousness that is transfigured in death. Ron merely smiled. I may have imagined that he nodded.

That was a long time ago. We were ripe with dreams and ambition. Everything seemed possible. Everything that is, except this. This has removed, from our sight at least, one of the great lights of our generation. "But surely," some might say, "new ones will appear and the darkness will be temporary." We can hope so. Still, I wonder if we'll see a light like that ever again.

The Ron Hays Memorial fund has been established at Freeman Hospital Foundation, 333 No. Prairie Ave., Inglewood, CA 90301.

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Lasers and Planetariums: Day One

By Ivan Dryer, President

Audience of Two Launches World's Longest Running Planetarium Laser Show

I saw a laser for the first time in November of 1970 in a lab at Caltech. Dr. Elsa Garmire showed me what the laser could do with a piece of crumpled mylar and a translucent plastic disc. Although I came to the lab to make a film of her laser art, I instead made a decision that changed my life: I decided then and there to approach a former employer, Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles, about doing a laser and music show in their planetarium.

Two weeks later, I was giving a demonstration for observatory officials. It consisted of a single laser and a motorized "mylar wheel" projecting a red lumina against the planetarium's starfield. We put on a classical album and sat down for a few minutes. The minutes went on and soon we turned the album over and stared transfixed for another half hour watching this writhing scarlet organism suspended somewhere beneath the stars. Everyone was inspired by this simplest of laser displays, but not enough to bring in outsiders. Not yet.

100 Invitations, Two Replies

In June of 1973 we arranged for a more ambitious demonstration at Caltech using a 1-watt krypton laser loaned to us by Spectra-Physics. We sent out over 100 invitations for the demonstration of our new four-color technology (including home-made scanners). Only two people showed up: the new director and associate director of Griffith Observatory! They liked what they saw and decided it was worth a test.

And so, on Nov. 19, 1973, the world's first planetarium laser show, *Laserium*, lit up Griffith Observatory's 75-foot dome. It seemed unlikely to be an auspicious beginning: the projector was completed at 5:30 am and the only promotion was a brief appearance on a local morning show. The first night, however, we had two half-full houses (about 300



each show). By the end of our trial run of four Monday nights, the second show on Dec. 10 turned away about 500 people. The observatory's director was moved by our success. He gave us the green light to continue the performances. The result: nearly two decades of continuous laser shows.

Uneasy Marriage

Planetarium laser shows have now been seen by millions of people and play continuously in dozens of cities around the world. Last year, ILDA established the Committee on Planetariums and Science Centers to, among other things, strengthen a marriage of planetarium and laser professionals that has been uneasy from the beginning. But that seems to be changing: laser shows are becoming an integral part of the agendas of more and more planetariums, large and small. And I believe ILDA is playing a major role in the increased comfort level on the part of the planetariums towards those formerly suspect "laser intruders." Planetariums now tend to interact with laser vendors in the same fashion as their other suppliers—as professionals engaged in a mutually beneficial transaction.

The funny thing is, this enterprise was begun by individuals less interested in business than in aesthetic expression. The fact that it could make real money came as a surprise. Now that an atmosphere of glasnost appears to exist between our two communities, the basis of our relationship is primarily economic. I would urge more of our planetarium and science center colleagues—as well as our own membership—to consider the genuine cultural and artistic contributions being made by laser artists around the world. I believe that the artistry of our performances supersedes the technology in lasting importance.

What follows are excerpts from an essay I wrote in 1971 to argue the case for the first shows at Griffith Observatory. I still feel the same way today.

"The most powerful communicative, and therefore educative, forces in history have been the cinema and television. With the expansion of screen size, improvements in sound reproduction as well as advances in technique, the film medium has become in itself a greater spectacle than any story it is used to convey.

"And giant three-dimensional displays by laser holography may be less than a decade away. The trend is toward a total environment to surround the viewer with the presentation and thus totally involve him.

"The planetarium has been doing just that sort of thing for years. It has not only vividly communicated objective scientific facts, but programs such as those at Griffith Observatory have provided a subjective experience of things and places that cannot yet be experienced in person.

Other Worldly Experience

"Hundreds of thousands of people rode to the moon from there on their imaginations before Neil Armstrong even conceived he would do it. This mental teleportation to other worlds has to be called art.

"It is nothing more nor less than involving people with ideas and feelings that are bigger than and far beyond their day-to-day concerns. That, we think, is the highest form of education. And that is the same kind of thing we propose to do—to not only entertain but to stimulate and perhaps even inspire the viewer to states of mind that are beyond his normal routine and thus, hopefully, to make him richer for the experience.

"Nothing should be more evident in the last half of the 20th Century than that we must restore technology to the human uses of helping us live more comfortably and more meaningfully. And nothing could now be more important than its use in art to rekindle wonder and delight in the midst of our darkest anxieties." ♦