

IN UNITY THERE IS [GIANT SCREEN] STRENGTH

GSCA is working to reprogram the industry, starting with an inaugural spring conference that drew 350 to Universal City in Los Angeles.

BY JUDITH RUBIN



United at last under the umbrella of GSCA, delegates rubbed elbows at the Universal City Hilton last March in a slightly self-conscious way, with no one finding quite the event, the organization,

or the hierarchy to which they had been accustomed. It was the same people faced with the same issues—but a lot of prior assumptions and ways of doing things are being deeply questioned, if not thrown out altogether.

As GSCA Charter Chairperson Andrew Gellis described it just minutes after the March 29 board meeting that elected him and other officers, “We’ve successfully compressed two organizations into one: legally, emotionally, and spiritually. What happens next is in our hands. This is a call to everyone to make it great.”

The inaugural conference of the Giant Screen Cinema Association took place March 29–31 and drew 350 people engaged with the making and exhibiting of giant screen films. Roughly half were exhibitors, mostly institutional. The other half were producers, distributors, and suppliers. The vast majority

(298) were from North America. European delegates numbered about 36 and represented 10 countries (England, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Austria, Greece, the Netherlands, and Finland). Other countries represented were Japan, South America, South Africa, Australia, Singapore, and Kuwait. Eight members of the press attended.

The location—Universal City in metro Los Angeles—and the spring dates of the conference were adopted from the former Large Format Cinema Association (LFCA), which was dissolved at the end of 2005 along with the former Giant Screen Theater Association (GSTA). GSCA’s next meeting, set for September 18–20, 2006, in Galveston, Texas, U.S., takes place at what had been the customary time of year for GSTA’s annual gathering.

This first meeting was the result of many months of earnest effort from both prior entities to consolidate resources and regroup to build a better industry association and a better industry. Years of combined experience among the two prior organizations stood them in good stead. “GSCA will make \$125,000 from this conference,” announced conference committee co-chair Patricia Keighley of DKP 70MM Inc. Keighley’s energetic and capable presence was a continuous



PHOTOS COURTESY TIM SASSOON FOR GSCA

positive note at GSCA, along with the contributions of other steady, dependable conference hands, including (but not limited to) Jeannie Moore (former LFCA executive director), Gretchen Jaspering (GSCA president), and Tammy Seldon (GSCA conference and meetings director).

MIKE LADDIN'S KEYNOTE

To assist everyone in the process of breaking down old patterns and forging a path of common cause, GSCA invited management and marketing consultant Mike Laddin of LeaderPoint to be the keynote speaker. Laddin assisted the LFCA/GSTA unification committee in its efforts to conceive GSCA. His luncheon address was a classic “think out of the box” business therapy session, designed to open minds and stimulate creativity. Laddin cited instructive examples of business successes and failures and drew parallels to the giant screen industry. His talk was well received and, judging by the number of times people referred to it in subsequent sessions over the next two days, hit its mark.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

To further engage delegates in building and directing the new organization, a roundtable session was led by

Top Row: (Left) Gretchen Jaspering and Tammy Seldon. (Center) Ammiel Najar, Mike Sullivan, and George Casey. (Right): Lawrence Kaufman and Ray Zone. Middle row: (Left) GSCA Chair Andy Gellis. (Center) Patricia Keighley. (Right) Alex Page and Dick Vaughan. Bottom Row: (Left) Judith Rubin, Jeannie Moore, Michael Kerr, and Chris Reyna. (Right) Greg MacGillivray and Alan Markowitz.

Chris Palmer, president of the MacGillivray Freeman Education Foundation. The audience was divided into small groups and discussed three questions: (1) What must the industry do to ensure a big future? (2) What can we identify as issues and positive solutions for those issues? (3) How can GSCA contribute to the solutions? Results were delivered verbally to the room, then in writing for GSCA's further consideration.

Overall, the responses reflected the desire to work and grow together and make the most of the industry's strengths. Some of the proposed ways to do that included the following: (1) achieve more powerful branding and differentiation of the product; (2) exploit more fully the medium and its content; (3) explore ways to bring in fresh audiences; (4) keep membership up to date on changes in technology—and adapt to them; (5) find a common way to identify the industry; (6) reinvest



in core business: strong and original stories for educational nonprofits; (7) strike a balance between the two content streams and two types of exhibitors; (8) create a strong public relations presence for the industry, across the board; (9) collect and disseminate information in an accurate and timely manner; (10) assist filmmakers in raising money to make films; and (11) create a catalog of exhibits that tie into films.

GSCA KODAK VISION AWARD: HOWARD HALL

The first GSCA Kodak Vision Award was presented with appropriate fanfare to Howard Hall, acclaimed for his cinematography and direction of underwater documentaries in 2D and 3D. His latest work, *Deep Sea 3D* (IMAX), was one of the new films screened at the conference.

The Kodak Vision award recognizes vision, imagination, and leadership in filmmaking. It is awarded to cinematographers, producers, and filmmakers whose work embodies artistic achievement and a commitment to excellence. LFCA joined with Kodak in 1999 to create a Kodak Vision Award specifically for giant screen cinematography, and GSCA has continued the tradition. (A slate of additional awards is now being formulated by the GSCA conference committee for presentation at the next meeting in Galveston.)

Prior to Kodak's Bev Pasterczyk presenting Hall with the award, there were film clips and conversation. Hall began his giant screen career as director of *Into the Deep* (IMAX, 1994)—still an evergreen classic and now showing at the Smithsonian. For the 1999 title *Island of the Sharks* (WGBH), he built a special underwater housing for the camera. His memories of *Coral Reef Adventure* (2003, MacGillivray Freeman Films) include a barracuda biting through the light cables and Hall getting the bends. When he first got the call for *Into the Deep*, Hall didn't at first believe he was really speaking to Graeme Ferguson, suspecting that friends were playing a prank.

Commenting after the awards, Ferguson praised Hall as a "really superb observer of the underwater world."

NEW FILMS AND TRAILERS

New films screened at the Universal City IMAX Theatre were *Deep Sea 3D* (IMAX), *Roving Mars*

Kodak Vision Award recipients Rodney Taylor (2003), Howard Hall (2006), Kodak's Beverly Pasterczyk, Graeme Ferguson (2005), and Reed Smoot (2001).

(Buena Vista), *Greece: Secrets of the Past* (MacGillivray Freeman), *Wired to Win: Surviving the Tour de France* (National Geographic), and a rough-cut version of *Hurricane on the Bayou* (MacGillivray Freeman). Following each screening, the distributor offered tips for marketing the film. Cherie Rivers of the Boston Museum of Science, who coordinates new film presentations on behalf of the GSCA conference committee, noted that applications to show new films at Galveston are due soon and that forms are available on the GSCA Web site (www.giantscreencinema.com).

Conference co-chair Rick Gordon of RPG Productions expressed the desire for a mini-festival of film trailers at Galveston to help acquaint exhibitors with the full range of what is available and to celebrate the films. Trailers of titles already in distribution are eligible for screening at GSCA.

FILMS IN PRODUCTION AND IN DEVELOPMENT

To qualify as a film in production, the production process must be underway and there must be specific 15/70 footage available to show. Films in development are in earlier stages of incubation. There were 12 films in production presented from 7 different production companies, and 21 films in development from 11 producers. The session was sponsored by DKP 70MM Inc.

FINDING THE MONEY

This first-day session touched on themes that would recur throughout the conference: finding ways to help producers get sponsorship, overcoming barriers between industry segments in order to work together for mutual success, and identifying target groups that need to be present at future conferences.

Appropriately seated in director's chairs for the Future of Sponsorship panel, moderated by Mary Jane Dodge of M.J. Dodge and Associates, were speakers Wit Ostrenko of the Museum of Science and Industry, Tampa, Florida; Bob Kresser of K2 Communications; Patti Collins of MacGillivray Freeman Films; and Emily Loeks of Celebration! Cinema in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Kresser spoke of the need to make giant screen film become a standard line item on corporate budgets. Relevance is essential: "If content is not strategically relevant, forget it." *Bugs!* (SK Films) and its sponsorship by Terminix, which will carry over to the sequel, was cited several times.

"Insect movies are actually part of Terminix's five-year plan," said producer Phil Streather.

According to Collins, the list of things sponsors may expect include film credits, additional content, public relations exposure, a presence in the theater, special events, tickets and hospitality, and customized programs. Also discussed was the sense of sometimes competing interests between museum sponsorship and film sponsorship. The need to reconcile those led to a mention of differing interests that can exist within a single museum and how these can obstruct a sponsor's need for exposure. Commented Ostrenko, "Get the development people to this conference."

COMMITTEES

The six GSCA committees held individual meetings at the conference to begin to outline goals and actions. These committees are still in the formative stages and are actively seeking members, ideas, and participation. To get involved with a committee, simply contact the chairperson.

Conference

Looking ahead toward Galveston and other future conferences, for the time being at least, GSCA will continue to meet twice a year, one compelling reason being the opportunity to showcase new films close to their release dates. In 2007, the spring meeting will again be in Los Angeles, and the fall gathering will take place in Vancouver. According to Rick Gordon, who co-chaired this committee for Universal City and now heads the Conference Awards Subcommittee, there's been a deliberate effort to move things around a bit to help create a fresh approach and to define the two meetings in a way that minimizes repetition and makes each a must-attend. To that end, Galveston will feature a fresh slate of award honors and a tech session, among other things. Professional development sessions for Galveston are still in the making, and members are encouraged to submit ideas and proposals. "The best ideas often come from outside the committee," remarked Gordon. **Chair:** Patricia Keighley, DKP 70MM Inc., pkeighley@imax.com.

Member Services

The benefits of being a GSCA member include access to relevant industry news, access to research results, conferences, opportunities to exhibit, and opportunities for promotion. It's the job of the member services committee to further define those benefits and leverage

them to bring in dues-paying members, building a global organization that has something substantial to offer subgroups as well as the majority. The committee will work with GSCA to help identify potential new members and categories thereof. **Chair:** Andrew Oran, FotoKem, aoran@fotokem.com.

Marketing and Sponsorship

This committee's mission is to promote GSCA and the giant screen industry as a whole in order to encourage growth and awareness on the part of members, sponsors, media, and the public. According to chair Terrell Falk, they have identified two immediate goals: (1) create a forum for marketing ideas, such as a series of hands-on, best-practices seminars; and (2) brainstorm ideas and incentives to maximize attendance at Galveston, such as a multi-conference registration discount. The committee sees the GSCA Web site as an important potential resource of stored information, which might include templates to help members implement various marketing events and strategies. **Chair:** Terrell Falk, Cinemark USA, tfalk@cinemark.com.

Education

Two noted producers of educational films, California-based Greg MacGillivray and UK-based Phil Streather (Principal Large Format) head this committee. Aiming to increase participation from museum education departments and school districts, the committee is endeavoring to attract 50 educators to GSCA Galveston and to have doubled that number a year later. "We will integrate the educators with the filmmakers. We will make them talk to each other," says MacGillivray. The anticipated results: better partnerships between filmmakers and exhibitors, better educational programs that develop organically, and earlier awareness and better marketing of the films. **Co-chairs:** Phil Streather, phil@plf.cc, or Greg MacGillivray, swilson@macfreefilms.com.

Industry Development

The committee's mandate is to diversify and increase annual funding sources and establish sustainable funding for investment in mission-related film development and production. To that end, the committee will consider creating an annual fund to provide bridge-financing towards film development and production and actively monitor and lobby funding sources around the globe. **Chair:** Toby Mensforth, Smithsonian Business Ventures, tmensforth@si.edu.

Publications and Communications

This committee is striving for a balance between electronic and print publications—possibly a combination of e-newsletter, Web site, and glossy magazine. Each would play a part in sharing

information with the membership, the industry, and the public, allowing members a forum for expression and promotion, and supporting GSCA gatherings.

Chair: Kim Cavendish, Museum of Discovery and Science, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, kcavendish@mods.net.

THEATERS—THE SEVEN HABITS

A panel of theater directors shared business tips in the Seven Habits of Highly Successful Theaters.

They were Derek Threinen, New England Aquarium; Robert Perkins, Destination Cinema; Mark Bretherton, Sydney Imax Theatre; and Gordon Stalans, Tennessee Aquarium, plus moderator Toby Mensforth. The big seven are as follows: (1) run the theater like a business; (2) know your key performance indicators; (3) penetrate your market; (4) make every show count; (5) upsell; (6) fish where there are fish; and (7) live your numbers.

"We can no longer afford mass media advertising," said Perkins. In an industry that has long practiced guerrilla marketing, savvy exhibitors know how to make the most of electronic media and communications. Perkins relies on market research and consumer surveys to build one-on-one dialogue with customers. He outlined strategies for boosting attendance through third-party ticket sales and passes to schoolchildren and described successes in marketing and positioning theaters at Hearst Castle and Niagara Falls. A new \$500,000 sign enabled the latter theater to compete visually with other regional attractions. Bretherton, who runs a commercial stand-alone theater, stresses the need to make each and every show a profitable one. "Thirty extra admissions per day is \$131,000 per year. Don't leave that money on the table." He looks for a 60 percent margin and suggests spending no more than 15 percent of gross box office on marketing.

"Entice the visit, extend the stay, enhance the profitability," said Threinen, an advocate of upselling. In his aquarium, he does that with a default combo ticket that includes the theater and ties into the exhibits. Threinen recommends partnering with online travel-based partners such as Expedia and Travelocity. He also recommends boldness in pricing. "Keep raising those prices as long as the consumer can handle it."

"Survey, survey, survey," was the mantra of Stalans. He uses the Internet to build a database and hook customers on the intimacy and immediacy of e-mail correspondence. He also cites physical realities: "Keep your theater clean, and it will help you compete with the home theater." E-mail doesn't erase the value of in-person interaction: "Turn cashiers from ticket sellers into experience planners." And establish a relationship with the press: "Cultivate the media and PR opportunities will fall into your lap."

THE FUTURE—FROM PERFS TO PIXELS?

In the wrap-up session, Greg MacGillivray and Leon Silverman (Laser Pacific Media) predicted the future of

the industry in the year 2010, under the wise moderation of Diane Carlson of Seattle's Pacific Science Center and with much commentary from the audience.

Silverman sits on the SMPTE education committee and is also active with the American Society of Cinematographers and the University of Southern California. He talked about the impact of technology on the creative process, the formidable competition presented by in-home entertainment, the inevitability (and expense) of digital cinema, the importance of storytelling, and the desire for shared public experience. He encouraged the industry to embrace today's tools: "The technology of film itself keeps getting better and better," he said, citing Kodak's new 5201 daylight stock, Zeiss lenses, and improved processing that makes 35mm footage more eligible for use in giant screen cinema. "Our generation has the task of taking cinema of today and creating the cinema of the future."

"The product is there—it's up to us to make a profit," commented John Lundin, head film buyer of Cinemark, a commercial chain with some 3,400 screens, including six IMAX and four digital. He spoke of the increased crossover of films between the two basic markets, Cinemark being a very active host of daytime school groups for giant screen films as well as appropriate 35mm titles, such as *Chronicles of Narnia*. "There used to be distributors who wouldn't book films with us because we were commercial. Now we have a deal with everybody."

"Institutional theaters will continue to be powerhouses of the industry," said Greg MacGillivray, demonstrating loyalty to the giant screen industry's founding community. MacGillivray, who is undertaking his first 3D project, urged theaters to "stick to your mission and show nonfiction films." He reminded the group that many existing theaters are domes. "Half of the audience that saw *Everest* saw it on domes. It would be nice if 15/70 could be improved even more for the dome."

Referring to his company's exit polls, MacGillivray said, "We have something people love: keep with the formula. Twenty-four percent of the public attends a large format screening once a year. We can grow that number higher: let's get out there and do it."

Digital evangelist Walt Ordway commented on current incompatibilities in the digital cinema network and efforts by studios to get manufacturers to adopt a universal format. "In the future, 3D content will be JPEG," he said.

Carlson paid tribute to a successful event, citing "a new organization and a new spirit, and an industry that fosters good word of mouth by providing excellent, unexpected customer service." n

Judith Rubin (judy@judithrubinetc.com) was charter publicist for the Large Format Cinema Association and founding editor of the LFCA newsletter, Original Cinema.