

A Brief History Of The TEA's Thea Awards

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The Thea Awards were created to bring recognition to achievement, talent and personal excellence within the themed entertainment industry. Now recognized internationally as a symbol of excellence, the Theas are given out annually at a ceremony that has become the industry's premiere event.



With the 1991 inception of the Themed Entertainment Association, founder, Monty Lunde's goal across the board was to bring recognition and prestige to the people of our industry. After guiding the TEA through its first critical years, Monty's next priority was the creation of an awards program. The first TEA Awards Committee was comprised of Bob Rogers, Pat Scanlon and Barry Howard. In early 1994 they met in a single session at Monty's Restaurant (an ironic coincidence, no relationship to Mr. Lunde) in the west San Fernando Valley. The choice of an honoree was easy: industry veteran, Harrison "Buzz" Price would be the first recipient of the only award to be given out that year - the TEA Lifetime Achievement Award.

The name of the award is a play on three words: the first is "Thea," the Greek goddess from whom all light emanates. Thea was the mother of Helios (the sun), Eos (the dawn), and Selene (the moon). The second key word is "Theater," a word which derives from the goddess Thea. The third word, of course, is TEA, the name of our association. The original Thea and AOA (Award for Outstanding Achievement) trophies were designed by Barry Howard and Jeremy Railton. The new Thea, which debuted in 2001, was designed and updated in 2004 by Zofia Kostyrko.

The first year's ceremony was produced by Ron Miziker of Miziker & Company, and the event was coordinated by Jana Love with Monty Lunde serving as Chairman of the Awards Committee and master of ceremonies. It was held at the Biltmore Hotel in downtown Los Angeles and was attended by over 200 people. The evening was partly a tribute and partly an affectionate "roast" of Buzz, although at least one speaker came with the impression that it was a "men-only smoker" and mortified the guest of honor and the ladies present with his presentation. Overall, the balance of the evening was magnificent. Many of us were so astonished by the sight of each other in tuxedos and evening gowns that we agreed to do it again the following year.

Nineteen ninety five was our second year. Our single honoree was Walt Disney Imagineering's Marty Sklar and again, the evening was held at the Biltmore, but in a bigger room with about 350 people in attendance. Again, the format was a series of speakers, roasting and saluting the honoree. One of the highlights was a long parade of "Marty's former secretaries" in which half of the ladies in the audience participated (Marty has a reputation for high turnover among his administrative assistants).

Thea's third year (1996) was a major turning point. That year, the Awards for Outstanding Achievement (AOA) were introduced, turning the Thea Awards into a multi-award event. Ten AOA Awards were distributed and several breakthrough traditions were established that have come to characterize the Thea Awards:

- The objective of the Thea Awards is simple: To find excellence and celebrate it. It is not a judgment of winners and losers. The achievements selected for awards are chosen because they represent the excellence found throughout the themed entertainment industry. This simple philosophy guides the entire Thea process.
- There are no surprise announcements, no secret names in envelopes, no division of attendees into winners and losers at the Thea Awards. Everyone walks in a winner and leaves as a winner. This Thea tradition brings our industry together for a completely positive evening.
- Membership in the TEA is neither a requirement nor a consideration in judging. Excellence is our only standard.
- Within the AOA Awards there are no set categories. The TEA is free to honor several achievements in the same category or skip categories, as the year's achievements warrant.
- The AOA Award honors the entire achievement and everyone who worked on the achievement, rather than individuals, such as Best director or Best Art Director. We ask the owner of the achievement to designate the individuals who will come to the podium to collect the award on behalf of all the people and companies who contributed to the achievement. These two Thea traditions remove the TEA from the impossible task of trying to determine or arbitrate credits (an issue in which the TEA has no legal standing - at least not yet) and its spreads the sense of honor



and accomplishment to all who worked on the achievement. Thus the Thea Awards become an event that brings us together rather than one that tears us apart.

- To receive a Thea Award, the owner of the achievement must publish credits. In this way, the Thea Awards established the very first standards and requirements for credits in our industry. This tradition was immediately embraced by Disney, Universal and many of the large companies that had previously resisted publishing credits. The creation of our industry's first credits may be Thea's greatest accomplishment to date.

Also noteworthy in 1996, as a variation of the usual Lifetime Achievement Award, the TEA gave a special AOA for Outstanding Individual to Monty Lunde, the founder of the association. In 1997, two additional special categories for the AOA Award were created: Excellence on a Limited Budget (assuring annual recognition for one or more achievements created for less than \$5 million) and the Thea Classic Award, honoring one achievement each year that has stood the test of time.

The Thea Awards Gala has become THE social and networking event of the year within our industry. In spite of limited budgets, our all-volunteer production teams comprised of enthusiastic TEA members have created a series of great awards shows - each one topping the previous.

Highlights of the 1999 show included an amazing live performance by Victor Kee from Cirque du Soleil and a glossy special effects musical number contributed by Walt Disney Imagineering in honor of their 1999 Thea Classic winner, The Haunted Mansion. Both the 1999 and 2000 galas were held at the Regent Beverly Wilshire Hotel.

In 2001, the Thea Awards moved to the Alex theater in Glendale and changed from a dinner show to a theater show, more like an Academy Awards. And in 2002, the Theas were held at the historic El Capitan Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard. In 2003, the 10th Annual Thea Awards Gala was held at the Century Plaza Hotel, inaugurating a new approach and format that emphasized the award recipients and the worldwide industry, and provided a far richer networking environment for attendees.

Beginning in 2005 with the 11th Annual Thea Awards Galas, the event moved to the Disneyland Hotel in Anaheim, again emphasizing the recipients and the opportunity for quality networking throughout the evening.

The Thea Awards are now internationally recognized as the equivalent of an Oscar in the themed entertainment/experience design industries. Each year, over a hundred highly qualified achievements from all over the world compete for between 12 and 18 awards. Traditional awards include:

- The Thea Lifetime Achievement Award
- The AOA (Award for Outstanding Achievement) - Any Category
- The AOA on a Limited Budget - Any Category
- The AOA in Breakthrough Innovation
- The Thea Classic Award (for an achievement, usually an attraction, that has stood the test of time)

But the overriding objective remains to find excellence and celebrate it - a search for projects that call attention to the excellence that exists throughout our industry.

As we look to the future, the Thea Awards will continue to grow, evolve and change, never forgetting their original objective of bringing recognition to achievement, talent and professional personal excellence within our themed industry.

For 2009, the Thea Awards Gala again will be held at the Disneyland Hotel in Anaheim on March 7. We hope to see you there to celebrate our industry and our peers accomplishments!