

Award for Outstanding Achievement Awakening of the Temple

mythic kingdom: aztec on the river



by Courtney Gilbert

What happens when you take a highly skilled multimedia team and empower them to retrofit a designated U.S. historical landmark 1920s-era movie theatre with the latest technology as part of a multi-million dollar downtown revitalization?

Visitors to the historically preserved Grand Lobby of the Aztec Theatre in San Antonio, Texas were transported back to an ancient time by way of the spectacular Awakening of the Temple. It was one of three visitor experiences produced by Science North Enterprises for the \$4.5 million Aztec on the River attraction. The show opened to visitors on April 1, 2006 for a nine-month run.

With each 10-minute presentation, up to 300 visitors witnessed a spectacular multimedia show. It commenced with clouds rolling in and a loud crack of thunder overhead -- a great storm brewing, and a feast of sights and sounds to draw visitors' attention upwards. As the storyline unfolded, Aztec spirits began to awaken and the "Temple" come to life. Silk "flames" sprang up in chalices around the room.

After the storm blew over, visitors were introduced to the narrator Xochitl, which means "flower" in Nahuatl, the ancient Aztec language. "Forgive me ... I've been asleep for an age or more. I can see by your funny clothes you are new to these parts. No matter, Xochitl will be your guide."

The story continued with Xochitl speaking of a battle to come between Tezcatlipoca, the "Smoking Mirror," and Quetzalcoatl, the "Feathered Serpent." After a long struggle, Smoking Mirror would defeat Feathered Serpent. These two gods were destined to enact this battle every 100 years in order to turn the calendar and let another century begin.

The show illustrated how the sad and disgraced Quetzalcoatl then left his people and set sail upon the ocean, where his raft burst into flames and he became a star rising into the sky, identified by Xochitl as the morning star. Its light reflected across the water as a reminder of Quetzalcoatl's promise to return to his people.

Finally, a seven-foot-high, animatronic Quetzalcoatl would appear. Coiled atop an Aztec throne rising out of the lobby floor through a ring of smoke, Feathered Serpent towered above the visitors. Lighting flashed

through the room as Quetzalcoatl swiveled about and spoke in Nahuatl to the visitors, his eyes glowing. Xochitl relayed the message: "Our noble king, who has returned, says: "Rejoice, friends. We live in this world but briefly. Only friendship should fill us." It is time to enter the theater. May the dawn always return. May you enjoy a long peace."

As the Aztec Theater is an historic structure, it was extremely important to retain the original look of the lobby interior when the show was not running, and all changes in the room had to receive approval from the historical society. Among the technologies that helped the Science North technical team accomplish this were Polymer Dispersed Liquid Crystal (PDLC) screens - special projection screens that turn opaque when in use and remain transparent at other times, and "intelligent" lighting.

Retractable screens were also employed. "In order to create an immersive experience while



As Sales Service Coordinator, Courtney Gilbert (gilbert@sciencenorth.ca) is part of the Science North Enterprises marketing team, based in Sudbury, Canada.



preserving the impressive architecture, two large electric ceiling screens were installed and mounted on tracks, which allow them to spread across the ceiling space, and retract when not in use," said production coordinator Andrea Martin. "The images moving across the ceiling lent a sense of time passing, and added to the immersive quality of the show."

The pre-existing ornamentation of the Grand Lobby includes beautifully carved stone pillars that represent Mesoamerican gods and goddesses. "On our first site visit, I was in awe because the room is so architecturally beautiful," said senior producer Rob Gagné. "The space had an Indiana Jones-like feel to it. It was clear this space would be our theatrical set." The Science North team created a projection of the animated mask of Xochitl and overlaid it onto the stone faces of four pillars so that Xochitl's spirit manifests as a speaking face during the show. In order to ensure all visitors could have an equally stunning view there were four replications projected simultaneously. The space came to life, and the walls literally talked!

Lighting effects helped tell the story and transform the room into a magical space. "The lighting was a key element from a content and showmanship perspective," said Rob Gagné. "The intelligent lighting gave it a special feeling. We are proud of the complete package."

Between shows, the room returned to its normal state and the state-of-the-art special effects show tucked itself seamlessly back into the 1920s architecture of the Grand Lobby of the Aztec Theater. As one visitor commented, "From the street it just looks like a plain building, but when you come in it's like you're entering a magical kingdom." 

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