

The Spotlight Falls on Thomas A. Walsh, Longtime Art Directors Guild President

Article by Scott Essman and Chelsea Beebe

Production designer Thomas A. Walsh has reached career plateaus to which few art directors can ascend. Born and raised in Los Angeles, California into a show business family, it was pretty clear from the start that Walsh would end up working in some facet of the industry. In 1977, after receiving his Bachelor's of Fine Arts in Theatre Design from the California Institute of the Arts, he began his entertainment industry life as a union stage propmaker and scenic painter.

Walsh has never believed in sticking to just one form of media or even one genre, but instead believes that in order to be the most successful and well-rounded in one's career, you must strive to reach outside of your comfort zone. Walsh has always firmly stood by the principal that you should "engage in projects which are of value to [your] craft in particular."

Since then, not only has Walsh worked on dozens of Emmy, Tony and Academy Award-winning and nominated projects, but he also served as the president of Art Directors Guild (ADG) for ten years. "Art directors have seven constituent branches: art directors/production designers, set designers, illustrators, scenic title and graphic designers..

Although Walsh no longer sits as president of the ADG, he considers himself "a minister without a portfolio," Walsh said he still remains a very active member, particularly helping young, fresh talent get their first break into the industry. In the ADG's first year hosting a new program targeted towards young talent, from 91 applicants, 4 aspiring art directors were ultimately accepted into the program. "It is a very transparent and constructive program," said Walsh. "These younger people are coming in because they want to. They are catalysts for the future leadership for our organization. Everything is changing so fast, and everyone is scared."

Walsh believes that, today, it is even more challenging for young talent to break into the industry because a vocal minority of art directors who have been in the business long enough are not willing to make it easier for these new comers; this older guard believe that because they had a difficult time getting into the union and getting established, the same dues-paying period should be applied towards the next generation of art directors. To this shortsightedness Walsh responds, "if we don't represent the most creative majority of the workforce we cannot have the most dynamic and central presence in the future of the workplace."

Along with this program for new talent, Walsh is also actively involved in The Art Directors Film Society—a program designed to honor and celebrate the careers and achievements of designers who have made significant contributions to the advancement of excellence in the design of motion pictures. The society gives both industry and non-industry film lovers the chance to take a closer look at the design process of feature films from the designer's point of view. Currently having completed its 16th season, The Art Director's Film Society recently held an event in tribute to art directing legend, Harper Goff. Goff was not only Walt Disney's first choice in designing Disneyland, but he also designed remarkable sets for many successful films including 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, The Vikings, and Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory (1971).

When asked about the importance of having these events in order to pay homage to the industry's great names, Walsh said, "We are in collaboration with the Motion Picture Academy who are part of an oral history collection of all the principal crafts represented by the Academy. This is an industry that doesn't value its past [as much as some facets of the business]... we have to chronicle the story before it's gone."

Ever increasingly, art direction in contemporary film projects utilizes digital technologies: something Walsh is not necessarily opposed to, but believes is taking over the industry in a way that does not always allow for the best stories or storytelling. "Only a fool would dismiss digital technologies—they are here to stay and give us all sorts of possibilities that we could never before consider," Walsh explained. "These are tools, and with any craftsperson, you use the right tools for the right purpose."

As Walsh described, having these new technologies and the ability to tell stories set in worlds that cannot exist in reality is an certain asset to the film industry; however, because these technologies are being so overused, many stories which do not require this type of technology are not receiving the chance to be told, simply because studios do not believe these films have the potential to make as much money. This is also one of the primary reasons why the format of television has changed so dramatically over the years as this technology has continued to develop. “They will always need physical sets just as they will always need physical actors,” said Walsh, “or then you are making an animated movie... filmmakers are telling their stories in television with something as good as if it was a feature. They are still trying to figure it out and monetize it. No one format will be the dominant format. The biggest problem is that filmmakers who are passionate about making movies don’t manage the studios. It seems that too many only have a passion for making personal fortunes and amassing power and privilege, none of which will endure the test of time like a good story made well does.”

Alas, the passing sands of time will determine the directions in which the Art Directors Guild will head; however, the one thing that is known is that Thomas Walsh will continue to passionately lead and mentor current and future art directors regardless of what transpires within the industry.