
Coffee Talk

by Greg Scott

Lighting Dimensions, Sep 1, 2001

Stirring Illumination into a Starbucks Conference

Starbucks is a name almost synonymous with the word "coffee" itself. It's not just the coffee, but also the experience, that sets Starbucks apart from other companies. The Starbucks Coffee Company's 2001 Leadership Conference and Manager of the Quarter Awards Banquet was held in Seattle, WA, earlier this year. The conference's purpose is to share the company's vision with its store managers. This year's theme was "The Human Experience," which set the tone for the creative production design.

Presently, Starbucks is opening stores that conceptualize a 1950s-60s coffee house, an inviting, warm place, and the company wanted to reproduce the look and feel of its stores at this conference. The look of the Manager of the Quarter awards banquet was a departure from the store theme. Starbucks wanted an evening of elegance and style, much like a 1930s Siren Club featuring live big band music.

Conference producers Marty Fisher, Mark Larson, and Gary Elbaum, staff store developer Tom Rasnak, technical director John Barry, scenic designer Brad Mace, Proline A/V's Scott Anderson, and I (the LD) started pre-production meetings several months before the event. We were first presented with architectural renderings of the stores' new look and this year's budget. No event is ever successfully produced without its share of challenges—and budget and on-site production time were our biggest. The solution was to combine all funds allocated to both the conference and the banquet, enabling us to maximize the overall budget.

Setting up shop

Brad's design reflected a main stage as well as three vignettes around the room, representing different parts of a coffee shop. He used framed flats that could easily be transformed by the removal or addition of hard panels and sheer fabric. Starbucks resourced the furnishings and prop elements to be used in the new stores, including a working espresso cart. From this inventory, Brad and Tom chose furnishings for the set. Poster artwork and menu boards from stores were used on the flats. Starbucks volunteers modeled patrons and employees in the "store space," interacting with each other as attendees entered the conference ballroom.



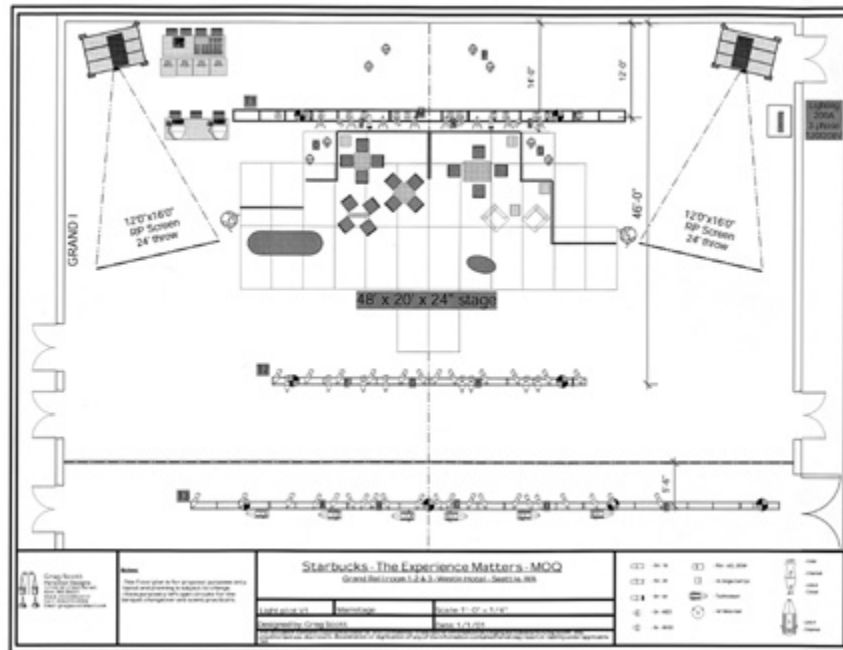
The nature of this conference allowed me to experiment with theatrical and architectural lighting. Normally, I'm bothered by having physical fixtures in plain view and usually request that everything be masked, but in this case, I used ETC Source Four PARs with barndoors at lower profiles to become part of the scenery. Desk and floor lamps also tied into my lighting system.

The show cued as if it were a play. The conference opened with a troupe of Chinese acrobats demonstrating feats of balance and skill. Information about the opener came to me late in the game. Anticipating a few last-minute changes, I added High End Systems Technobeams® for those contingencies. I pre-programmed some sweeping volleys to cover a general area in front of the stage where the troupe was performing. Without having the luxury of rehearsing the opener, luck was on my side and the programming worked fine.

Day one featured presentations from corporate staff members including chief operating officer and president Orin Smith, senior vice president of coffee Mary Williams, and Starbucks chairman Howard Schultz. Many of the presentations included interactive vignettes with stages around the room. Changes in the scenic lighting followed the blocking and mood of the "play."

Hitting high notes

The keynote guest was conductor maestro Roger Nirenberg. Members of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra were planted among attendees throughout the room. I developed the event's ground plan, drafting a layout that would reflect the way an orchestra would normally set up; the beauty in developing this floor plan was that I could strategically place the stages and seating in optimum lighting position. Maestro Nirenberg required that he and the room be brightly lit. Trusses spanned the ballroom ceiling in key areas to accommodate area lighting, conductor specials, and an audience wash. Nirenberg wished to demonstrate the relationship between a conductor and orchestra working in unison to make beautiful music. The audience's perspective as seen from the musician's point of view taught a lesson in team-building.



I wanted to light the set with rich, warm colors. "MTV meets corporate" was the picture I had in mind. Brad colored the set in tans, olives, and maroons. For frontlight and area specials, ETC Source Fours were hung in key/fill positions and Source Four PARs were used for backlight. I used Lee 176 (Loving Amber) for presentation areas and Lee 232 (Super White Flame) for scene transitions. Both colors enabled me to give the set and its "actors" the warm glow of incandescent architectural lighting. Wash lighting (Rosco 119 Light Hamburg Frost) in tandem with the other colors sculpted presenters as well as video. I shot window pattern gobos through the set and Source Four PARs colored with Lee 071 (Evening Blue) as crossover backlight. Floor lights colored in Lee 207 (CT Orange plus .3 Neutral Density) highlighted plants on the floor and sheer fabric hanging from the flats.



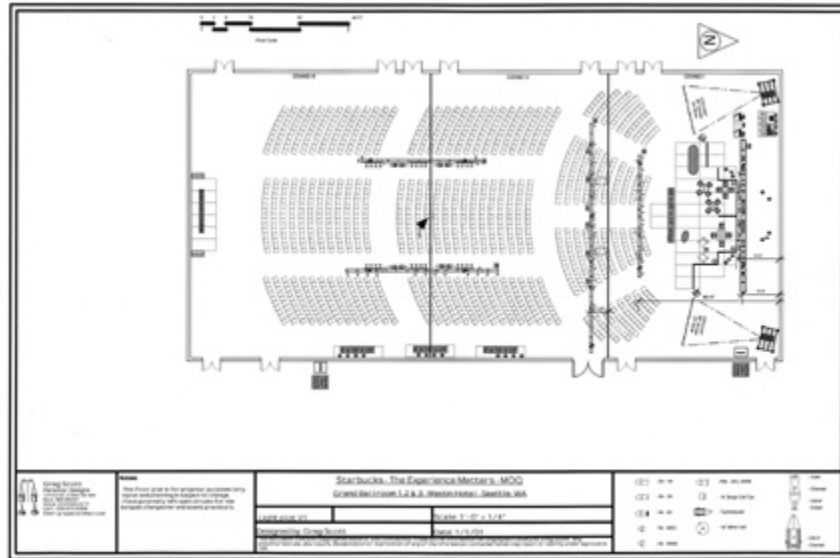
After a brief morning session on day two, the room transformation began. Knowing that we had a small window of time, we approached the conference's initial design in reverse order, using the awards banquet as a base for the leadership conference. Taking elements away from the conference revealed

the awards banquet at its core. The natural architecture of the ballroom already had the look of a Siren Club. We enhanced and tailored the room to match the theme by adding period wall hangings and properties. Panels were removed from the main stage's scenery frames, revealing a painted drop of the New York City skyline. The vignette stages were turned into a Siren Club bandstand. The main stage panels created a terrace look with the city in view.

I used banks of Tomcat ACL bars colored with Lee 201 (Full CT Blue) and Lee 170 (Deep Lavender) to brighten properties around the room and banquet tables. Lighting changes included color and refocus into the transformed club. The vignette lighting became a two-color bandstand wash of Lee 132 (Medium Blue) and Lee 113 (Magenta). Attendees entered the Siren Club to the sound of big band music and sparkles of light from a mirror ball suspended in the center of the ballroom. Altman cyc lights on the floor colored with Lee 108 (English Rose) and Lee 071 (Tokyo Blue) slowly crossfaded, transitioning the cityscape drop from early dusk to evening as the night progressed.



Awards were presented throughout the evening by region and excellence categories. Winners were seated all over the ballroom. Rather than lighting each table, Technobeams programmed to volley the audience swept across the winners as they approached the stage to accept their awards.



Artist renderings

Dinner guests were entertained by artist Denny Dent and his "Two-Fisted Art Attack." Dent used his bare hands and brushes to paint caricatures of famous artists accompanied by medleys of their music. He painted his first piece, the "Starbucks Siren," to the music of Switched on 2001. He followed that with portraits of Frank Sinatra and John Lennon. Special stage lighting was required to minimize the amount of shadow on his canvas. I repurposed Source Four PARs on pipe trees and demo specials to meet his needs. Dent's finale, a portrait of Jimi Hendrix, was also the conclusion of the evening's gala event.

Not every one-off meets expectations. Pre-production was a major factor in this event's success; close to 80% of the real work took place in those meetings. On a personal note, I was thrilled to light this show. I had fun experimenting with color and drawing upon theatrical and architectural convention, and the freedom to take chances allowed me to design this show beyond the mold of a typical corporate presentation.

I've been involved in this conference for the past two years. Starbucks places a great deal of value in the opinions of the production staff. Despite modest budgets and a few last minute "Oh, by the ways," producing this show has been very educational for the company overall. Each year the company strives to raise its standards by remaining loyal to its customer base and finding new ways to better "the human experience." It's been very rewarding to share in the creation of that experience at its conferences.

STARBUCKS LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE 2001

Producer

Starbucks Coffee Company

Marty Fisher, Mark Larson, Gary Elbaum, Laura Brandt, Mary O'Connor, and Company

Production Manager/Technical Director

John Barry

Scenic Design

Brad Mace, Tom Rasnack

Lighting Design

Greg Scott

Lighting Contractor

Seattle Stage Lighting and Equipment

Lighting Crew

Chris Hughes, Carl Olsen, Sam Raphael, Donny Seelow

A/V Contractor

Proline Audio Visual, Seattle, WA

Scott Anderson

Lighting Equipment

- 1 Tomcat 5' mini-beam truss
- 20 Tomcat 10' mini-beam truss
- 5 Tomcat 10'x1'x18" truss
- 12 Columbus McKinnon 1/2-ton chain motors
- 33 ETC 19° Source Fours
- 4 ETC 19° Source Fours with drop-in iris
- 22 ETC 26° Source Fours
- 8 ETC 36° Source Fours
- 2 ETC 50° Source Fours
- 4 ETC medium Source Four PARs
- 16 ETC medium Source Four PARs with floorstands
- 8 ETC wide Source Four PARs with barndoors
- 14 Altman single-cell cyc lights
- 6 Thomas ACL bars
- 14 High End Systems Technobeams
- 1 Jands Hog 1000
- 2 Leprecon 48x2.4K VX touring rack dimmers
- 3 Leprecon 12x2.4K VX dimmers
- 2 Doug Fleenor Design Iso Opto Control splitters

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