

# Dancing With Technology- A Modern Epic Storyteller

## Yves Pépin

### Thea Lifetime Achievement Award

By Judith Rubin, Editor

“ART WAS A WAY OF LIFE IN MY FAMILY,” SAYS Yves Pépin. When you look at his body of work, you imagine he studied choreography, performing arts, and stage design along with mythology and history—then perhaps became a filmmaker. In fact, Pépin applied himself to economics and politics, then Arabic studies—then worked as a journalist. But all along that academic path he kept his hand in the arts—painting, music, theater. His father, an engineer by trade, was a violinist and painter. His mother, a homemaker, also painted. Six-year-old Yves took up the violin, intending to be a concert performer. But in adolescence, “I realized I was not good enough.” He switched to guitar and “started to play rock ‘n’ roll like a normal teenager. It opened up my mind.”

The academic world attracted him, but ultimately failed to satisfy—in Lebanon, he halted his post-grad Arabic studies and went off to be a journalist. “I was trapped by the real world.” He acquired the “tools of expression” through two years’ work in radio and television, followed by four years with a communications company. He founded ECA2 in Paris in 1974. It was named after an earlier company, Etudes Creation d’Ambiances, an important innovator in large scale, sound-and-light shows. Pierre Arnaud of the original ECA was Pépin’s mentor.

“We were very ambitious: we intended to integrate light, sound and architecture to express something in a global context for the modern world,” says Pépin. When human imagery and human performance were brought into the mix, the toolset was complete.

It was in the 1980s and 1990s that ECA2 conclusively defined the nighttime spectacular. Employing gigantic cinematic images projected onto the sides of buildings and other structures, and onto sheets of water or mist, enhanced by lasers, lighting, special effects and sound, Pépin’s team created shows that transformed outdoor environments and transported audiences.

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## Pépin (Cont'd)

Disney and Universal have both adopted Pépin's proprietary AQUASCAN® water screen projection system, developed in 1989. According to Pépin, the night he first tested the system, a tourist couple showed up, captivated by the image of a human face appearing in a fountain, seemingly out of nowhere. After blustering his way through an attempt to explain it to his wife, the husband turned to Pépin, who gently corrected him. "I pointed to the guy working at the pump and said he was putting a special powder in the water, and the powder was what made the image appear."

Pépin has consistently worked on a world stage, unfurling epic-scale, multimedia productions at international sports competitions, world expositions, special events, corporate events and theme parks. His millennial Fireworks Spectacular at the Eiffel Tower in 2000 captivated the public and the media, made the covers of both Time and Newsweek, and brought him global celebrity and acclaim.

High-tech media is inherent to the kind of epic story Pépin tells, and to the vividness and vast scope of his productions. "We use technology and humanity to express the relationship between technology and humanity - the connection between the cold and the warm. Scenography and technology are part of the working context, not just the means. I don't design the story, then look for the technology to express it. I refuse that way of working." He likens it to sculpture: "The stone is as important as the subject. And by working on a highly precise, technical level, we make the audience forget that they're looking at technology."

Keeping pace with technology is inherent to the approach. "We must keep an understanding of what's possible, but also ask ourselves where we can progress, innovate. I know there will be a way to do it when I push the technology and the creativity of the people I'm working with. It is always interesting to find out what more people can do, than they themselves know. It's the same with technology; artists surprise tech companies with what their own technology can do." In the 21-minute show, Life is Movement, for the Toyota Pavilion at Aichi Expo 2005, "we made something human of the robotic."

Details of Life is Movement, a "futuristic opera celebrating the relationship between humanity, machines and the environment," give an idea of the scale of a typical ECA2 production. It featured eight dancers, one trapeze artist, eight 2.5-meter-high flames, one seven-meter-diameter inflatable half-sphere, 17 giant-screen projectors, six video projectors, one 2000-square meter





panoramic 360-degree screen and more than 30 Toyota robot units. Each of the 13 to 14 daily shows was sold out over the six months of the Expo, totaling 2,650,000 visits.

The story behind the spectacular, according to Pépin, is always discovered through intuitive listening. “What I say to my team is: Don’t think we are ‘creating’ a story. We are not God. Go to the location and stay there. The story already exists there. The place knows the story we are going to tell. Our work is to be open, listen and wait until that story comes to our ears. It works if you are in a receptive mind, if you have patience. But you have to get away from the pressure of the job, to be able to listen for the story.”

Pépin has been consistently drawn to the exotic, to search within it for the universal, the common human elements - and find them. Traveling a great deal with his family as a youth, and on his own as a teen, Pépin was an avid museum-goer. “I absorbed symbols. I tried to find in other cultures the codes - the language they express.” Today, with his company ECA2, he produces events that speak in timeless, wordless tongues to global audiences. “I tell my people to be very

open to the culture in front of us, to listen. It must be instinctive. When you reach into yourself to find what is common beyond the codes and signs, you find the answer in yourself. You don’t ‘adapt,’ you don’t ‘translate.’ You don’t masquerade as someone of another culture.”

“We must never forget we are making shows,” says the former student of political science. “We are not the UN. We are in the field of entertainment.”

*In 2002, ECA2 joined Publicis Groupe, the world’s fourth largest communications group, which also owns Leo Burnett and Saatchi & Saatchi. In addition to being ECA2 Chair, CEO and Creative Director, Yves Pépin is Executive Vice-President of Publicis Events Worldwide.*

*Judith Rubin is a freelance editor, journalist and publicist for the international attractions industry. She has edited several publications for the TEA, including this one. She writes about people, technology, urban entertainment development, world expos, specialty cinema, scenics, safety and everything in between. Her articles have appeared in more than 25 industry magazines, including Film Journal International, Entertainment Design, Funworld, Urban Land, Attractions Management, and World’s Fair.*



Design and Production: Yves Pépin/ECA2  
(Clockwise beginning at top):  
Pyrotechnic Ballet at Eiffel Tower Millennium Celebration  
Opening Ceremony Soccer World Cup 98, France  
Lake of Images, Futuroscope Park, France  
Opening Ceremony Paralympic Games 04, Athens, Greece  
“AcquaMatrix” Lisbon World Expo 98

