

Society Adds Two New Honors to Annual Awards Show

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When the members of the Visual Effects Society gather on Feb. 21 for its annual awards ceremony, they will honor nominees and winners of two new categories.

The Encino-based society added this year Outstanding Animation in an Animated Motion Picture and Outstanding Effects in a Student Project to its nearly two dozen categories for effects work in film, television, commercials and video games.

The student award came about after prodding from Steven Spielberg, no stranger when it comes to awards and last year's recipient of the society's Lifetime Achievement Award. The society has wanted to award the use of visual effects in student work but had difficulty in pulling it off because of the time and outreach effort needed.

That hurdle was overcome when software developer Autodesk offered its assistance, said Jeff Okun, both chairman of the VES and its awards committee (and a nominee for his work on the remake of "The Day the Earth Stood Still.")

As society members are based all over the globe, it's a small wonder that three nominees for the first-ever student award would be international as well, coming from France, Germany and Australia, respectively.

Unlike the other categories, the winners of the student awards will be known ahead of time so that they can be flown in for the awards ceremony in Century City. The students will also receive Autodesk software, meetings with area effects artists and facility tours.

"We'll give them access to the industry that they would not normally have," Okun said.

The society added the Outstanding Animation in an Animated Feature Film category at the behest of its members. It joins four other categories honoring work for animated characters in film, television and commercials, and for best animated effect in a film.

In giving the new award, the society members are not choosing the best animated film but instead identifying animation that best serves the storytelling of the film, which Okun called an art form in and of itself.

With digital technology bringing new innovation to the entertainment industry at a quickened speed, other new categories are likely at future VES Awards shows.

The Outstanding Effects in an Animated Motion Picture category was added in 2007 and Okun said awards for visual effects work in 3D content and the use of prosthetics are potential new honors.

When the awards cycle ends, the society starts from scratch about rules and policies and looks at what categories should be dropped or added, Okun said.

“Sometimes we will lose a category because there are no functioning practitioners or there were no nominees,” Okun said.

The VES stands apart from other groups giving entertainment awards thanks to its View and Vote process, in which members can watch nominated clips on their computers and cast their votes electronically to a secure server.

“With a global membership it makes no sense to require viewing in a screening room in Los Angeles,” said Marty Shindler, an entertainment industry consultant who created View and Vote. “There certainly is no requirement to have paper ballots.”

Like the award categories, View and Vote gets tinkered with to make the process easier. This year the society eliminated a past-practice that required nominee submissions be on digital tape. Now they can be sent electronically. Sohonet, a British company with offices in Southern California, transfers the files to Burbank-based Technicolor for encoding before VES members can view the material.

“It is working out nicely,” Shindler said.

Burbank post-production house Fotokem hosted the selection of the nominees and Pasadena-based 1:1 Ratio managed the secure balloting process.

In past years, the VES has given its awards at least three weeks before the Academy Awards but this year finds itself doing it the night before the Oscars.

That can either be good, in that media coverage may increase, or bad, in that the winners will be overshadowed by the proceedings at the Kodak Theatre the next night.

Okun, however, is adamant about differentiating the approach taken by the VES from that taken by the Academy.

The VES breaks down visual effects into different areas, such as compositing and use of matte paintings, models and miniatures whereas the Oscars have just one category for best visual effect.

“It is rare when our choices line up and we are proud of that,” Okun said.