





mary
kay's

Night of a thousand stars

Designing an event in which the audience plays the leading role

Photography: Lewis Lee

You've never seen so many pink Cadillacs before.

Well, they weren't all Cadillacs; some were Pontiacs and Saturns. They were scattered around the Dallas Convention Center—the Cadillacs in a tasteful pale pink; the Pontiacs and Saturns in gray and black. A Cadillac XLR convertible rested in a fountain, while an Escalade rotated on a turntable. And, in front of each vehicle, groups of women posed for photographs.

We were, of course, at the Mary Kay Seminar, held yearly in July and early August. There are five waves of these events each summer, each bringing more than 7,000 Mary Kay independent sales representatives—most of them women—to Dallas for three days of recognition, product education, and motivation. The highlight of the seminar is the awards ceremony, which honors those who have reached or surpassed their annual sales and team-building goals.

This year, the Awards Night event was titled *Be a Star 07*—and, as we shall see, it was designed to make each attendee feel stellar indeed.

For those of you who aren't up on their skin care and color cosmetics, Mary Kay Inc. is the beauty empire founded in 1963 by Texas native Mary Kay Ash. Having retired from 25 years in the direct selling industry, Ash started what she called her “dream company,” putting together a modest line of products, developing a structure that relied on a network of independent sales representatives known as independent beauty consultants, independent sales directors, and independent national sales directors. The concept remains today much as it was at the company's founding—to enrich women's lives by allowing them to balance their work and family lives—and, from the first, it was distinguished by a policy of positive reinforcement.

The idea took off to the point

where, today, Mary Kay products are sold in markets as far-flung as Uzbekistan and India. Mary Kay sales for 2006 were more than two and a quarter billion dollars. Anyway you look at it, that's a lot of lipstick.

As the Mary Kay business has grown, the roster of special events has become more and more elaborate. The annual summer seminar is the big one. There's no question that the event delivers a good time, lots of learning, and plenty of inspiration for the Mary Kay independent sales force. “Are you ready for the most exciting night of your life?” asked one speaker at the opening—it was a question followed by a tidal wave of cheers. For a startling number of people in the room, the answer most certainly was yes.

This is, in part, because the event is the slickly produced result of a long-running collaboration of production professionals who have repeatedly managed to reinvent a format that is otherwise pretty much set in stone. This is an event with a set of rules all its own; there are many corporate shows that announce new products, report on the year's numbers, or celebrate the performances of high achievers. Mary



This side view of the stage and auditorium gives a sense of the event's vast scale.

Kay's Award's Night does all that but with the added glamour of a Broadway performance or a televised award show. Winners are honored at several pinnacles of achievement. Many times throughout the evening, a new category is announced, and everyone who has met that goal makes an appearance onstage. After that, the top 20 achievers are named, then the top three, and, ultimately, the queen.

Most of the members of the Mary Kay production team—including employees at the company—have been together for years, if not decades. The creative director/set designer, Peter Metz of the firm Zoom 7, has been around since the '80s, as have the producer, Nancy Hart; the technical director, Terry Cannon; and the front-of-house mixer, Jeff Jones. Zoom 7, founded by Metz and his business partner, Scott Thompson, create corporate meetings and events for clients as diverse as Kawasaki and The Pampered Chef. Still, Mary Kay's many events keep them, and Hart and Cannon, busy for a good portion of the year.

One restriction, Metz points out, is, no matter what the show's theme may be, the basic stage layout and

production demands remain the same from year to year. "The challenge is to take that layout and re-envision it, at the same time addressing the branding and positioning requests of the client," he says.

Zoom 7 typically presents the Mary Kay event staff with five to seven different designs before a final decision is made. This year's set featured an upstage wall covered with stripes in various muted blues, greens, and yellows. Carrying out the star motif was a series of star-shaped fabric pieces, made by Maine-based Transmitt Design, scattered along the upstage wall; next to them was a series of aluminum crescents. Four vertical truss towers completed the upstage look. The set was built by Dallas Stage Scenery, a firm that has provided scenic service to this production for over 25 years.

Among other things, the center-stage opening allowed members of the Friends of Tyme, Mary Kay's group of singers and dancers, to enter for production numbers that this year included a Broadway medley and a modern country music party. The set was a blend of function and frills—the ground plan was designed

to keep the event moving along, yet the overall look provided a glamorous setting for a show where everyone in the audience is a star.



★ ★ Cosmetic lighting

With five Mary Kay seminars to his credit, Jon Kusner, the lighting designer, is the new kid on the team. He says he was brought in to provide a fresh perspective—although, at the same time, he says he's learned to work within the tradition of past Mary Kay events. Collaborating with Metz, he's gradually incorporated new ideas into the lighting, stepping up the moving light package and generally adding to the production's glitzy fun, while making sure that everyone looks their best onstage.

Given that the Mary Kay show is a hybrid of corporate event, awards show, and reality programming, Kusner's experience probably makes him the right man for the project. Having started out as an assistant to Ken Billington on the hit Broadway revival of *Chicago*, he's now a member of the firm Full Flood, working for television lighting designers Robert Dickinson and Bob

Barnhart, and performing lighting director duties on such events as the Grammy Awards, Academy Awards and Miss America Pageant.

Thanks to his close collaboration with Metz, Kusner incorporated a fair amount of lighting into this year's set—and, in doing so, gave the design a multi-layered look. Metz designed four narrow vertical troughs into the upstage wall; all of them were lit from below by an automated floor unit, and two featured moving light towers. Also, the aluminum crescents were backlit with neon, a technique that made them seem to float on the back wall. The set's vertical trusses were also lit from within. Altogether, these design touches gave the set—which had a rather flat look under house lighting—a much more complex look. "Peter strives to make the environment more three-dimensional," Kusner adds.

And, of course, Kusner deployed his moving lights, creating ballyhoos, sweeping the audience, and generally adding drama to each of the show's big moments. Still, he says, "It's a lot about front light," largely because so much of the show is captured live on video and relayed to the three onstage screens, and to those in an auxiliary hall that holds overflow attendees. "Anything else you do has to bulldoze through that front light," he adds. "It's like a TV show, where we're lighting for the camera."

In many ways, the mix of lighting gear is very similar to what you might find in a Broadway production. As in the theatre, the rig is made up of a moving light package laid on top of a substantial foundation of conventional gear, including 236 PAR 64s, 113 ETC Source Four PARs, 162 Source Four Lekos in various degree sizes, seven six-cell cycs, twelve 2K scoops (for that all-important audience light), and 48 PAR 16s. There were Wybron CXI scrollers for four Source Four PARs and two Lycian 1273 truss spots, in addition to six front-of-house spots,

which were Lycian 1290s. What with all the people crossing the stage, notes Kusner, spotlights had a crucial role to play. "We hit them with a followspot, and that adds to their feeling of being special," adds Metz. The rig also included eight Color Kinetics ColorBlaze 72s. A pair of MDG hazers added visible atmosphere.

For moving lights, Kusner assembled 25 Martin Professional MAC 2000 Profiles, 20 Mac 2000 Wash units, 16 Vari*Lite VL2500 Spots, 20 VL 2500 Wash units, and 18 High End Systems Studio Color Washes. (The designer notes that this is not just a one-night show, so they keep the number of moving lights down. What with all of the rehearsals and shows, the seminar amounts to a six-week rental package, driving up costs substantially.)

"I am probably most specifically a fan of Vari-Lite because of their gobos," says Kusner. "They're more complex than what you find in the typical Martin package." He adds, "Upstaging [which has provided equipment and staff since 1992] owns a collection of the Patrick Woodroffe gobos [which the designer created for Martin's moving lights]; Jerry Swatek [a Mary Kay veteran and now the Upstaging account rep] threw them in, which made a big difference." Another reason why he chose the Martin and Vari-Lite gear, he says, is he needed units that would retain their punch in the auditorium's vast space. "The trims are obscene. The trusses are 55-60' in the air. Even the Grammy Awards isn't always that extreme." Another factor in favor of Vari-Lite, is, he says, "They support their gear. I've seen them put a person on a private jet to go solve a problem; it's the support that brings you back."

Kusner was more than happy to work with Metz's restrained color palette. "This is the first time in several years that the set has not been in the pink flesh tone family," he

says. "It was a good contrast to last year, when all the production numbers had a pink reference. This year, the company's direction to Peter was less focused on pink, so we weren't turning on pink lights in front of a blue and yellow wall."

The show's control setup made use of High End System's Hog iPC, which accommodates both the Wholehog II and Wholehog III software. Melissa Lionetti, the programmer, a seven-year veteran, ran the moving lights on a Hog II and Matt McGregor, from Upstaging, ran the conventional units on a Hog III. "We've moved towards Hog III because, in the past couple of years, we were running Catalyst and some LEDs," Kusner says. "We kept it from last year, and Matt preferred it." Also, using Hog III software and a wireless PC, McGregor could wirelessly focus the rig.

Much of Kusner's lighting was devoted to helping make the company's independent sales force look good onstage. During the musical numbers, the designer's cueing became far more theatrical, with big sweeps and saturated colors, as the performers made their way into several key locations in the audience. During the country sequence, a hot burst of white light signals a series of modified rock concert cues. Still, with a running time of more than five hours, the lighting keeps things lively without resorting to retina-challenging techniques. At different points, the event drew on both his theatrical and television experiences.



Beautiful sound

Even with years of experience with Mary Kay events, Jones and system engineer, Matt Sterling, of LD Systems, still experience challenges each year. That's partly because of the venue. "The Dallas Convention Center arena is weird acoustically," says Sterling. "It has all sorts of odd



reflections. Adding people only complicates it. We need a number of different delay times, then have to blend everything together.” He notes that he uses the EAW Smaart system to analyze the space and set up the loudspeaker system in the optimum manner.

This year, the loudspeaker system consisted of Electro-Voice X-Line arrays—two hangs of eight boxes each for the main PA, plus four additional boxes on the sides. The subs were EV X-Subs, with EAW SM200i acting as stage monitors.

the line array, we can handle nearly 360 degrees, right up to the nosebleed seats.”

Most of the sound design for the event is aimed at faithful spoken-word reproduction. A number of Mary Kay executives speak throughout the event; also, the biggest achievers take the podium. In some cases, so do their husbands and other family members. And of course, as each participant’s name is spoken, it should be instantly recognizable, allowing colleagues and family members in the audience to cheer them on. Finally,

keeps track of all of the wireless systems and makes sure that there are no conflicts.

In addition, Stiebing manages over 130 communications stations throughout the Seminar venue. These were needed in part to connect the arena with Hall A, where the overflow crowd watched the event on video, and with various stations backstage. The system of choice here was a Telex BTR-800 UHF two-way communication system.

Jones mixed the show on a Yamaha PM5D console, which he



The Friends of Tyme perform a number from the Broadway medley.

Aside from the quality of its performance, the SM200i’s curved face was an additional grace note, as it blended well into the set design.

This arrangement provided a stereo image for everybody in the auditorium, says Sterling. “We’re past doing a mono center cluster. We went totally stereo two years ago.” He adds that the line array system “is a lot more controllable. We can get audio laid out where there are people and not on the room’s surfaces. With

there are the musical sequences.

Most of those appearing onstage this year wore Countryman’s E6 earset mics, with Shure PSM 700 wireless body packs. What with a large number of wireless systems operating in the middle of downtown Dallas, one imagines that the battle for frequencies must be fairly intense. It’s an issue, says Jones, but, he adds, “This old building shields us a bit. Still, Dallas is an RF nightmare.” Alan Stiebing, of Front Line Audio,

likes for, among other things, its space-saving qualities. A fan of analog boards, Jones says that the Yamaha is nevertheless relatively easy to learn. Also, he adds, with a show like this, digital is naturally the way to go—since the production breaks down into a series of events, he can turn each one into its own page, which he can easily call up. Monitors, which were handled this year by Nicholas Lowman, were controlled by a Digidesign VENUE.

In discussing the job of mixing the show, Jones stresses his long experience with the show and the format's essentially stable nature. Nevertheless, he is dealt a number of wild cards from time to time. Among them is the fact that he's working with a number of non-professionals onstage, some of whom may never have used a mic before. In addition, when performers are out on the catwalk, they are speaking in front of the PA. "That's when I grab the EQ and hope that the PA is well-tuned," he says. Sterling notes that, throughout the evening, they're working against the high ambient noise level—the audience members are cheering and applauding throughout most of the performances.

Overall, says Jones, "Because the show is so recognition-oriented, the client likes the music and production to be loud. It keeps the energy level up and makes everyone feel special—and part of the event."



Crowning the queens

"The arena is filled with superstars right now," says a speaker, and within minutes the tributes have begun. There's the Go-Give Award, for an independent sales director who is dedicated to helping her colleagues, which is accompanied by an evocative video montage of Mary Kay events of past years. There's the Court of Personal Sales—that's the segment in which hundreds appear onstage as they are announced one by one, complete with a sweeping staircase entrance, white-gloved male escorts, center-stage handshakes, and video close-ups. There even is a presentation of makeover winners who have gotten the full hair and wardrobe treatment.

A Broadway medley, presented by the Friends of Tyme, includes showstoppers from current Broadway musicals. Always on top of trends in entertainment, this year



Two of Metz's design from past years show the continuity in the ground plan.

Mary Kay even had its own talent search to select five sales force members to perform live in this number. The medley featured confetti and an explosive burst of pyro, all supplied by Atlas Pyrovision Productions, another long-time partner on this event.

Also, three Mary Kay vice-presidents—Sean Key, Greg Franklin, and Gary Jinks—perform in a trio of spoofy music videos. And still the tributes come—the Queen's Court of Sharing, the Court of Personal Sales, and the Circle of Achievement. The upstage center doorway opens to allow a mini-stage, complete with truss and lighting system, to roll downstage for a country medley, in which the Friends of Tyme performs songs made associated with Gretchen Wilson, Sugarland, Kenny Chesney, Martina McBride, Rascal Flatts, and others. This ode to the country genre celebrates the fact that Mary Kay is an official beauty sponsor of the 2007 Country Music Awards. The sequence features a host of scooters, motorcycles, ATVs, rotating scenic flats, and more pyro displays.

There are still more awards and more promenades—one of the true logistical challenges of the entire event involves getting several hundred people backstage, lined up in the right entranceway and in the right order, so they can enter to the sound of their names. The final winners of the evening are for the top performers—those among the Half Million Dollar Circle of Achievement, and the Million Dollar Circle of Excellence.

With its length (running time: over five hours), its pomp, and its many traditions, the Mary Kay event is, to the say the least, a one-of-a-kind event. Even the production team seems a little dazed. "It's a different experience each year," says Kusner. "But it's a nice collection of people." Jones adds, "It's a unique show, and a unique client. It's not like any other corporate event." Indeed, it fulfills its task of providing a jolt of energy for tens of thousands of Mary Kay beauty consultants. As the title of one of Mary Kay's books says, "You can have it all." That includes a chance to star onstage—and maybe even earn a pink Cadillac. 📶