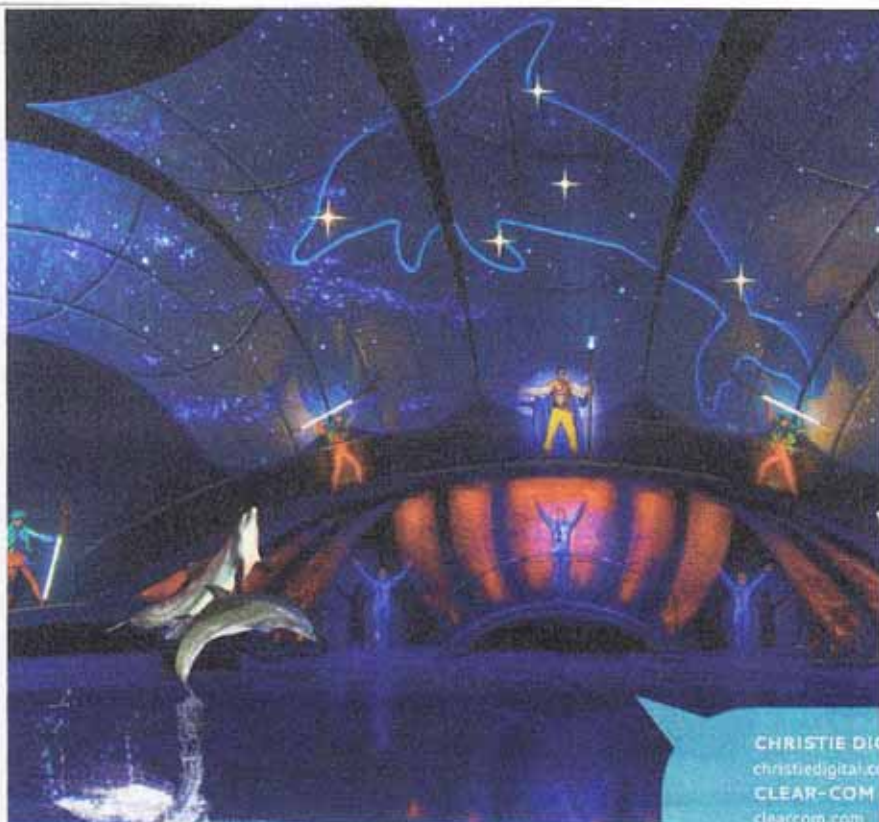


# FISH TALES

ATLANTA'S GEORGIA AQUARIUM IS A \$110 MILLION AV WHOPPER.

by James Careless



Imagine bringing together live dolphins, high-end video projection and audio systems, human actors, original music, and a full theatrical story into a single production. That is exactly what Atlanta's Georgia Aquarium has done in its new show—AT&T Dolphin Tales.

Set in the Aquarium's new \$110 million, 1,800-seat multi-function theater—equipped with a pool that holds 1.8 million gallons of salt water—AT&T Dolphin Tales takes trained animal performances to the next level. Forget leaping through hoops for fish; the dolphins work together with a human actors and trainers in this 25-minute scripted theatrical show.

AT&T Dolphin Tales is the latest Georgia Aquarium project spearheaded by Chairman and CEO Bernie Marcus. Better known as co-founder of The Home Depot—now the world's largest home improvement chain with 2,245 stores around the globe—Marcus donated \$250 million to build the Georgia Aquarium in 2003, and has helped fund its current expansion as well. Today, the Georgia Aquarium is the world's largest such facility with more than eight million gallons of water, and the biggest collection of aquatic animals anywhere.

"Bernie always does like to do things

Video is provided by edge-blended Christie Roadster S+20K projectors. It is delivered using two stacks of three projectors apiece. A seventh S+20K projects a flat image onto a center drop-down screen

big," says Heather McKeen, the Georgia Aquarium's VP of Facilities and Operations. "It was his vision to have a lot of different theatrical elements incorporated into a stunning live action dolphin show."

"There really is nothing like AT&T Dolphin Tales on the planet," adds Bettina Buckley. She is Principal and Co-Founder of WOW!Works, the Florida live entertainment consulting firm who created and produced the show. "The amount of dedication and time required by the directors, designers, engineers, trainers, and the dolphins themselves was extremely complex."

The new theater/pool facility was designed by St. Louis-based architect PGAV and constructed by Atlanta builder, Brasfield & Gorrie. AV design and integration company Electrosonic worked with WOW!Works and Atlanta project manager Heery International to install the necessary AV equipment into the new facility.

## THE NITTY-GRITTY

AT&T Dolphin Tales revolves around a mysterious storyteller known as the StarSpinner. He tells a tale of good and evil that underlines the bond between

humans and dolphins; it is all reflected by the action occurring on the stage and in the pool.

The set is dominated by the 1.8-million gallon saltwater pool, which sits at the front of the stage. Behind it is a gently arched two-story platform with connecting bridges on either side, where actor and trainers play out the story in spectacular costumes built to endure saltwater.

Above the platform are five aluminum and PVC "dolphin tails," spread out like opening flower petals. Measuring 80-foot wide and 40-foot tall across the span, and painted with Screen Goo, these organically curving tails serve as video projection screens that display original animated graphics and lighting effects.

"The video is provided by edge-blended Christie Roadster S+20K projectors," says Electrosonic design consultant Steve Coe, who designed the complete AT&T Dolphin Tales' AV system. "This is delivered using two stacks of three projectors apiece. A seventh Roadster projects a flat image

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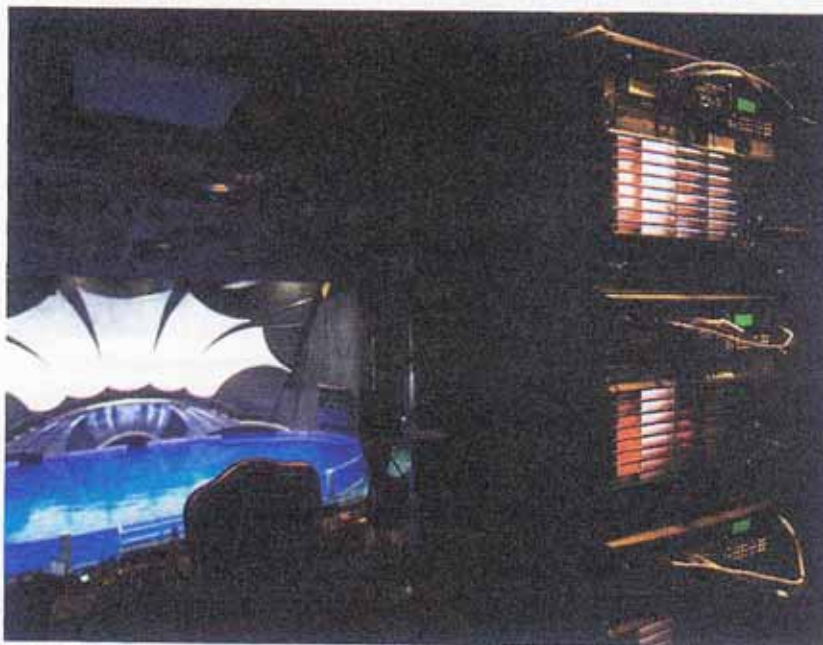
onto a center drop-down screen."

The video is fed via DVI from Green Hippo Hippotizer HD media servers and synced to a Medialon show control system that provides the master clock. The Hippotizers manage media playback, plus content masking on independent video layers. They also drive pre-show in-house advertising content. The servers communicate with each other across their 'Hipponet' LAN, which has a single connection to the main AV network.

The theater is wired for 7.1 surround sound, using an L-Acoustics speaker system with Kudo and ARCS arrays. Coe selected a Digidesign D-Show Profile mixing console with onboard 'snapshot automation'. This software stores audio information on the different actors who rotate into the show, making day-to-day setup changes quick and easy.

During the show, input from Sennheiser headset and handheld wireless mics are mixed live with the show's prerecorded music tracks. (Based on an original score performed by a 61-piece orchestra, Steve Coe mixed the final tracks in the theater

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alongside the composer, using Pro Tools HD.) The performers receive a monitor mix of the show music via Sennheiser wireless in ear monitors. Coe chose waterproof VHF wireless mics for the dolphin trainers and Clear-Com Encore theatrical intercoms for the production crew. Electrosonic also designed and specified the lobby's background music system, a nine-screen LCD video wall and circular rear-projection screens.

#### CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

The biggest challenge in staging AT&T Dolphin Tales is the performers. Despite how much they appear to be 'acting' during the show, the dolphins are just replaying simple cause-and-effect behaviors; staged in a sequence that supports the storyline. To add to the problem, the Georgia Aquarium has to have more than one dolphin trained for each role; in case one gets sick or just doesn't feel like cooperating at show time.

"It took our trainers 9-10 months to teach the dolphins what they need to know for the show," says Heather McKeen. "This training was done in layers, allowing the dolphins to string together the chains of appropriate responses. The final result is a tremendous achievement; perhaps even more impressive than if the dolphins had

read the script and were actually acting."

Still things can go wrong with trained animals of any species; especially during a live show. To minimize the risk, AT&T Dolphin Tales' AV track is broken down into time-coded segments. This allows the show's technicians to slow down or speed up sections depending on the dolphins' on-stage actions, while retaining the complex mix of video, sound and light.

"We have to balance between a complex multimedia script, and the realities of working with live people and animals," Coe explains. "Using segments of prerecorded material that the operator can manage on the fly is an effective compromise. Things happen, and we are ready to deal with them."

Then there's the working environment: Salt water can be deadly to AV equipment, especially when it is being splashed everywhere by trained dolphins. This is why most of AT&T Dolphin Tales' equipment is located away from the stage, in a rear-set control room that spans the width of the auditorium. Only the screens, speakers and wireless antennae are actually within the performance space. Meanwhile, the projectors are safely enclosed inside the projection booth.

To minimize saltwater damage in the performance area, the microphones and props are wiped down between shows, while the set is washed down twice a week. The lighting and special effects gear on the catwalk is maintained on a daily/weekly basis, while the entire AV plant is serviced quarterly.

#### THE SHOW GOES ON

Despite the many challenges involved in doing live theater with dolphins, the Georgia Aquarium has pulled it off. Since opening on April 2, 2011, the show has been packing in the crowds—and proving dolphins can do more than a few parlor tricks.

"We push ourselves do more than the norm," concludes Heather McKeen. "Launching the first-ever theatrical production incorporating dolphins is just part of this pattern. That said, AT&T Dolphin Tales is likely the most ambitious show of its kind; at any aquarium, anywhere!"