Tech wizards honored by Oscars organizers

Tim Reid, Reuters

(Reuters) - Some of the most ingenious behind-the-scenes innovators, whose breakthroughs in computer technology and other fields were key to the making of movies such as "Shrek" and "Avatar," were awarded at an early Oscar organizers' ceremony in Los Angeles on Saturday night.

From the team who developed a system to bring to life computerized digital stunt doubles for fantastic creatures in movies such as "The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey," to the man who simply developed one of the most versatile lighting delivery systems in film production, the Scientific and Technical Achievement Awards showcased emotional speeches and lifetimes of work for those whose lives are spent behind the camera.

The Beverly Hills ceremony honored 25 individuals with nine awards. Unlike the main Oscars ceremony, which will be held on Sunday, February 24 and will only recognize movie achievements from 2012, the Scientific and Technical Awards honored those with a proven record of achievement in the process of making feature films.

The ceremony was hosted by actors Chris Pine and Zoe Saldana, who respectively played Captain James T. Kirk and Uhura in "Star Trek" in 2009 and who will reprise those roles in this May's sequel. Saldana payed tribute to the night's honorees, saying they made it possible for life in front of the camera.

Richard Mall received perhaps the greatest applause of the night, for his invention of the Matthews Max Menace Arm, a portable device which allows studio lights to be moved and positioned all over a set, often where normal lighting cannot be used because of on-site restrictions of other difficult conditions.

"I am a little humbled to be up here with all this technology, because basically I built something in my garage," Mall said to applause and cheers. He thanked his wife for all the strange noises that had come out of that garage. His invention has been sold to over 40 countries and used in more than 300 films.

The evening was also devoted to people who had invented systems such as "Tissue: A Physically-Based Character Simulation Framework," which has made huge advances in bringing to life computer-generated characters such as Gollum in "The Hobbit". An Academy Plaque for Scientific and Engineering [1] went to Simon Clutterbuck, James Jacobs and Dr. Richard Dorling for this technique.

The team of Daniel Wexler, Lawrence Kesteloot and Drew Olbrich that created the Light system for computer graphics at PDI/DreamWorks was awarded for technical achievement. Their work, which combines light, color and rendering in one, was used in "Shrek," "Madagascar" and other animated DreamWorks pictures.

(Editing by Sandra Maler)

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