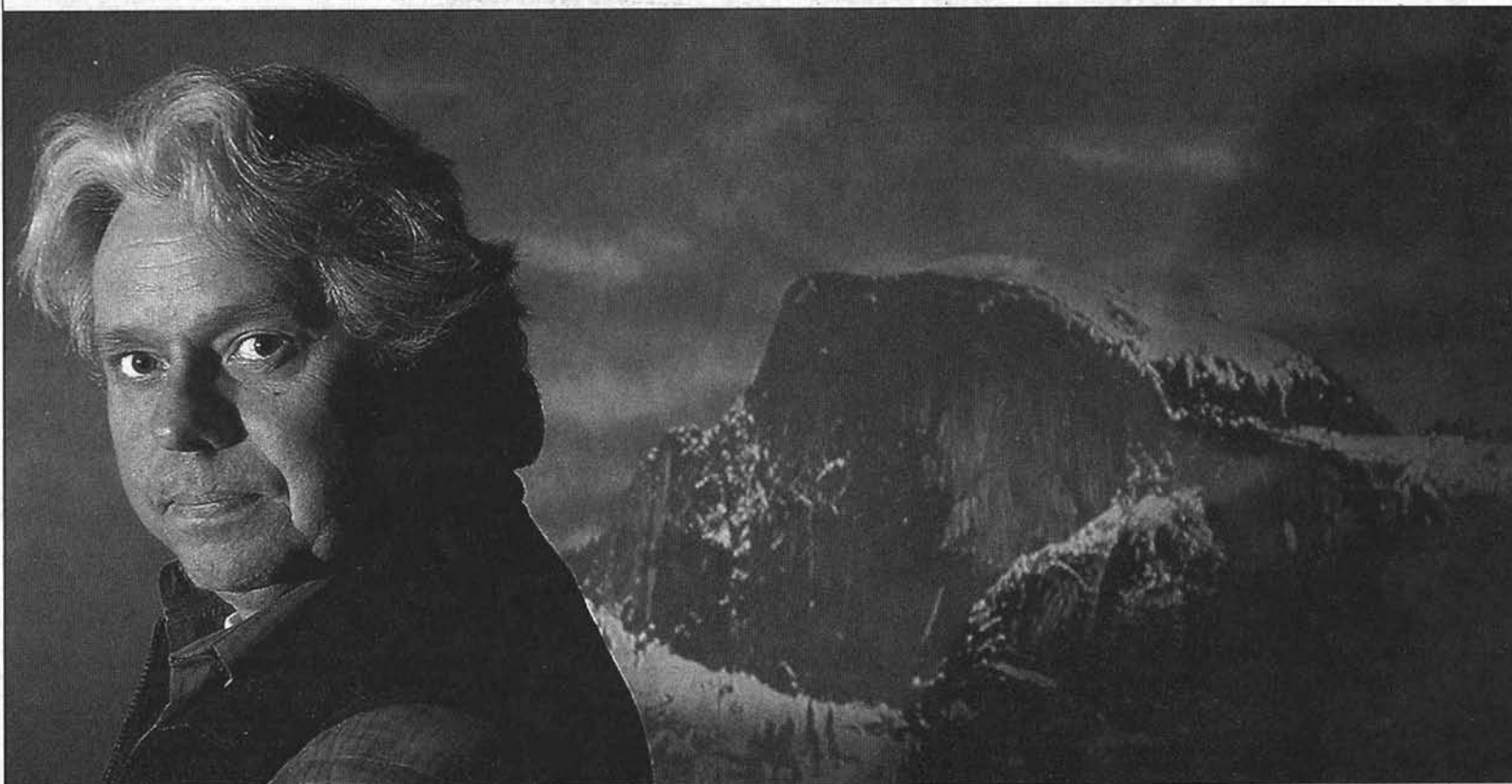


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Movies



RICHARD HARTOG / Los Angeles Times

"It's supposed to be a transcendental experience. . . . It's a transitional device to actually being in the park," David Vassar says of his documentary "The Spirit of Yosemite."

For His Film, You Really Have to Be There

One of a handful of site-specific documentaries, David Vassar's 'The Spirit of Yosemite' screens only at the park.

By VICTORIA LOOSELEAF

The lush imagery is almost hallucinogenic. The sounds, crisp and vibrant, also make for a rich sensory experience. And for those seeking a mini-history lesson, that's part of the mix too. In a mere 23 minutes, David Vassar's documentary film "The Spirit of Yosemite" packs a powerful cinematic punch—but one that can only be experienced at the park itself.

Talk about exclusivity. Mainstream commercial filmmakers aren't satisfied unless they cram the fruits of their labors into as many theaters as possible. Many documentary filmmakers, meanwhile, are happy to land brief runs in a handful of theaters before heading to an afterlife on cable TV. Occasionally, however, filmmakers get a genuinely unique assignment: a film that is intended primarily to be shown

in one specific location, indefinitely.

"Spirit" was such an assignment for Los Angeles-born Vassar, who shot the film in 36 days stretching over a two-year period so he could capture the visceral changes of the four seasons.

Produced by Greystone Films, it was commissioned by the Yosemite Fund and the National Park Service, and recently won the award for best non-broadcast program at the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival. Specifically made to introduce visitors to the splendors and natural wonders within the park's 1,200 square miles, "Spirit" was shot on 35-millimeter film and is presented on state-of-the-art, high-definition digital video. Such high-tech visuals warrant the optimum in acoustics, so it's no surprise that the accompanying surround sound neatly completes the package. Indeed, the 131-seat Yosemite Valley theater was renovated for the film, which

premiered last spring and has been screening up to 16 times daily since—and will continue to do so for the next 10 years.

Coincidentally, Vassar made his first documentary at Yosemite, in 1970, when he was a student at Los Angeles City College. This led to a summer job of presenting slide shows and evening programs to park visitors.

"During my three summers" there, the filmmaker recalls, "I had the opportunity to deepen my relationship with the park, which was one of my intentions in making the film. You're going to learn a little about the [history of] the park, but mostly it's the drama—like a baptism—where your capillaries pop and you're open to the rhythms of this vast, beautiful [land]."

Vassar adds that he wants the visitor, after viewing the film, to be in a receptive mode. "It's supposed to be a transcendental experience, a meditation. It's a transitional device to actually being in the park. It's nature. It's not Disney World—there wasn't an art director."

Vassar knows about art direction, at

least in the commercial arena. Though his curriculum vitae includes a Silver Hugo from the Chicago International Film Festival for his multimedia production "Replenish the Earth" and an Oscar nomination for his 1980 full-length documentary "Generation on the Wind," to pay the bills Vassar worked for a number of seasons as a director of the television series "Unsolved Mysteries." In addition, in 1995 he wrote, produced and directed an episode for Time Life's "Lost Civilizations" on NBC, with the series earning an Emmy.

As for Yosemite, it's hardly a lost civilization. Abraham Lincoln helped see to that. As Vassar's film recounts (he also wrote the narration), while the Civil War was raging in 1864, the president signed the Yosemite Grant for the express purpose of preserving and protecting the park. Today some 4 million people visit annually. But if you're one of those who haven't journeyed to the California setting, it's likely that you may have gazed upon

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Yosemite:

Theater Was Renovated for Documentary

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one of the many photos that have captured the park's grandeur, especially those by Ansel Adams.

Adams' iconic imagery—including awesome shots of Half Dome and El Capitan—actually posed a challenge to Vassar: How would he shoot Yosemite in a new light?

With that in mind, Vassar and his director of photography, Christopher Tufty, opted for a languid, hypnotic style. Particularly memorable is the shot depicting the full tapestry of season changes, beginning with a lone bird of spring and ending with the sublime magnificence of a winter snowfall.

"As a filmmaker, it's really nice to know that people are going into a theater and you don't have to start off with a big bang," Vassar says. "In TV it's very formulaic. You have to get the show going in the first 10 seconds or the [viewer] will flip the channel."

With a budget of about \$600,000, the director's work was a labor of love. Shooting in Yosemite's back country required 21 mules to move 2 tons of gear for the 12-person crew; helicopters were used for aerial photography.

Vassar has always been drawn to the great outdoors. In 1985 he went to the Grand Canyon with saxophonist Paul Winter, and their collaboration resulted in "Canyon Consort," a film portrait of the musician made as the group rafted down the Colorado River. In July 1999, Vassar was one of three directors hired for the documentary feature "Running on the Sun," a chronicle of the grueling marathon that begins in Death Valley and ends 36 hours and 135 miles later on Mt. Whitney.

Although Vassar's niche may be

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STEVEN SMITH

"The Spirit of Yosemite" will screen at the park for the next decade.

the documenting of spectacular settings, other filmmakers also make films for specific markets. Rhys Thomas produced, wrote and directed a 22-minute film commissioned by Nashville's Country Music Hall of Fame. It plays around the clock in a continuous loop, also in a custom-built venue. Then there's the granddaddy of documentary filmmakers, Charles Guggenheim, who is no stranger to the niche concept.

Guggenheim's Washington, D.C.-based Guggenheim Productions has made hundreds of site-specific films, including documentaries about Ellis Island and St. Louis' signature arch. The latter

film, which started screening in 1966 and still runs today, was nominated for an Academy Award.

Guggenheim, in fact, has been Oscar-nominated 12 times, winning the statuette four times, most recently for 1995's "A Time for Justice," the story of the civil rights movement.

Two years ago, Guggenheim produced a film for Pasadena's Norton Simon Museum, with his son, Davis, directing. Made for \$800,000, "The Art of Norton Simon" includes shots of many works from the industrialist's famous collection, among them Degas' best-known sculpture, "The

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Yosemite: Film Captures Park's Four Seasons

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Little 14-Year-Old Dancer." There is also archival footage, with one memorable scene showing the deal-loving Simon making calls on a rotary phone. The 30-minute, 35-millimeter film premiered in November 2000, and, according to the filmmaker, will run indefinitely in the museum's 290-seat venue.

"They put it in a first-class movie theater, and they tell me that about 20% of the people who go to the museum see the film," Guggenheim says. "That's very good attendance."

With these kinds of documentary films, you not only get to enjoy

the experience of a park, a museum or a hall of fame, but you can prepare for the experience beforehand on celluloid or relive the memory afterward.

In many cases, home videos and DVDs are also available for purchase.

But nothing quite takes the place of the real thing. Says Vassar: "If you grew up in California, going to Yosemite was a rite of passage. In the '90s, when the dot-commers were trekking to Nepal and other exotic locations, they forgot that the most beautiful place on Earth is just five hours from Los Angeles."

As for the five weeks Vassar spent making his film, he notes wryly, "It may [have been] a low day rate, but it was a day rate in heaven." □

"The Spirit of Yosemite," Yosemite National Park, Yosemite, Calif. For park information, call (209) 372-0200. Free. "The Art of Norton Simon," Norton Simon Museum Theater, 411 W. Colorado Blvd., Pasadena. Daily, noon-6 p.m., except Tuesday. Friday, noon-9 p.m. (626) 449-6840. \$3-\$6.

Victoria Looseleaf is a frequent contributor to Calendar.