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COVER STORY

MAKING MEMORIES IN THE DARK

After a banner year, Sally Corp. is embarking on building its biggest dark-ride attraction yet.

BY TYLER WHITE
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In a warehouse at 745 W. Forsyth St. in downtown Jacksonville, John Wood's enthusiasm for Sally Corp. – the company he helped build – is unwavering.

"We create memories for our customers and their customers," said Wood during a tour showcasing the company's evolution into a trailblazer in the amusement park industry. "That plays a vital role. It's a family memory [and] it's something that's unique and unusual to them in that ride in that park."

Sally Corp. specializes in turnkey dark rides – think indoor roller coasters with interactive shooting mechanics – such as the award-winning Challenge of Tutankhamon in Belgium and more recently Justice League: Battle for Metropolis at Six Flags Magic Mountain in Valencia, California.

As Wood toured the halls of his company and stopped by models of rides and animatronic robots, it was easy to spot the pride he had in his team's work as he shared stories of how they were created with a smile on his face.

Making memories for others – much like the childhood ones Wood had of going to Disneyland and the World's Fair in 1964 – helped him drive Sally to become the go-to team for exceptional attractions.

The company started with three men named John: John Fox, John Rob Holland and John Wood. Holland, a dentist, was building an airplane and "animated mannequins" in his Westside garage along with his neighbor, Fox, when Wood came into the fold to help open their own business, Sally Unlimited, which launched in 1978.

Wood said he had no clue he was going to be getting into the "robot business" until he walked into that garage, but he always wanted to "have something that was my own" by starting or owning a business. He initially handled sales, with one Sally flier detailing the company's history stating he "took to the road to call on prospective clients – usually with a full-size animatronic character in the passenger seat."

The company has had a busy 2019 for ride launches. It partnered with Raven Sun Creative to open Reese's Cupfusion at Pennsylvania's Hersheypark in May. The month before, Sally launched its first



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Sally Corp. earned a Thea for its ride featuring Batman villain the Joker.
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Sesame Street dark ride in April at PortAventura World in Spain, which gave designers the chance to work alongside the Muppet voice actors from the show.

Sally's latest dark ride, Mystic Mansion, opened June 14 at OWA in Foley, Alabama. Since opening, the enclosed, air-conditioned ride has quickly climbed the charts as one of the park's top attractions, said OWA marketing director Kristin Hellmich.

"It really has fulfilled a lot of needs that we've had within the park," Hellmich said. "If there's a weather issue or if there is a warm day, guests are enjoying the opportunity to get to go inside of the Mystic Mansion and cool off or relax for a few minutes and enjoy the attraction."

Hellmich also applauded Sally's quick turnaround for the ride, with it taking only five months to create and construct the ride in time for the summer.

THE ART OF ANIMATRONICS

Wood said dark rides are "an old art form," which has been continually enhanced by new technology as its released over the past century. Sally initially specialized in animated music shows in the late 1970s and 1980s, but later shifted to interactive dark rides that included their high-quality animatronic characters in rides such as Zombie Paradise in Tokyo, Wood said.

The rides have since evolved to include shooting gallery mechanics, video and multimedia presentations that continue to raise the industry standard for dark rides. Sally even designed a ride in Thailand called *Scream in the Dark*, which used audio sensors to reward guests who screamed more during the ride with more targets to boost their score.

Enhancing the attraction also requires thinking about the experience before the park visitor gets on the ride: With long queue times a concern in the industry, Wood said Sally has responded by providing lengthier pre-ride shows that can make the wait times more entertaining.

Sally does work with the larger parks, but Wood said it's important to be "everyone's dark ride company," including smaller regional parks. This directs which projects the company takes on, since big park rides are a bigger time commitment. Sally does some upkeep for rides, but Wood said theme parks are made to be as self-sufficient as possible in terms of maintenance.

Creative Director Rich Hill said Sally started making higher-level dark rides typically found only at Disney and Universal parks and brought them down to the regional parks for more affordable prices. Hill and other designers work on both original and licensed IPs alongside clients to brainstorm and create custom rides that match what an individual park may need. Aside from established, licensed IPs for big parks and custom rides for smaller ones, employees also work on original IPs created within Sally in an effort to pitch them to potential buyers across the world.

"You have to kind of be a psychologist a lot of times," Hill said. "You're intimately involved with these people ... having dinners with them [and] trying to figure things out for a custom ride."

With advances in technology, Sally designers like Josh Rudloff are able to build ride presentations in video game engines that provide realistic tours of projects for customers. Small changes can be quickly made when receiving feedback from clients.

"It's a much faster process [and] it saves us so much time and money," Rudloff said.

Sally Corp. Marketing Director Lauren Weaver said pricing for a company ride varies depending on its size and scale, with smaller attractions starting at about \$2 million and anchor attractions such as *Justice League* costing between \$10 million and \$15 million.

Sally Corp employees said they find inspiration from a variety of rides, and Wood is open to reimbursing designers who wish to visit new rides at parks like Disney and Universal.



Creating rides requires ingenuity on a variety of fronts, from coming up with concepts to creating all the pieces of the final product.

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"That's our college," he said. "They know how to use what we do to the greatest success, so it's inspiring to come back and take this new creative concept and apply to a new idea that you may be doing for a customer elsewhere."

LURING REPEAT VISITORS

Wood said a successful Sally ride has to deliver marketability, capacity, repeatability and reliability. Unlike destination parks such as those in Orlando, regional parks require rides that can be ridden by customers multiple times and remain fresh.

"Their seasonal pass holders are the key to their business, and they want those seasonal pass guys out there a dozen times in the summer," he said.

In April, Sally earned its second Thea Award - the industry's Oscar equivalent - from the Themed Entertainment Association for the *Justice League* ride, which features DC Entertainment characters such as Batman and the Joker as guests sit in moving vehicles equipped with laser blasters and fired at targets throughout the roughly four-minute ride.

Attractions Magazine editor Matt Roseboom lauded Sally's work on the ride and its animatronics, notably *The Joker*, stating the company has garnered a reputation for high-quality products.

"Some would even say the quality of that ride outweighs anything else at Six Flags," Roseboom said.

Wood and Hill were both tight-lipped on details about Sally's next big project, but confirmed it will be in North America and it's their biggest ride yet.

"It's an amazing attraction that's going to be kind of the top of the industry," Hill said, "and we look forward to a lot of people riding this and having a lot of fun on it."