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# The Lion Roars



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The New Lionel Layout – a Labor of Love



# Like Getting Paid to Play

by Roger Farkash

as told to Mike Mottler RM 12394

When visitors walk into the T W Design shop in Dallas to see what's under construction on the shop floor, they often ask, "You get paid to do this?" Whether it is a 20-foot-tall bottle of whiskey playing a 12-foot-long guitar or the latest model train layout, Roger Farkash, Creative Director of T W Design in Dallas, always replies, "Yes we do, and we enjoy every minute of it!"

In a business enterprise, it doesn't get any better than that. Roger blends art with technology in a whimsical, wonderful way with a talented team of people. The T W Design staff and crew have been with him for many years. In fact, this is the company's 27th anniversary, and he has employees who have been with him for 26 of those years. It's like a family, and they have a lot of fun doing what they do.

## The Lionel Account

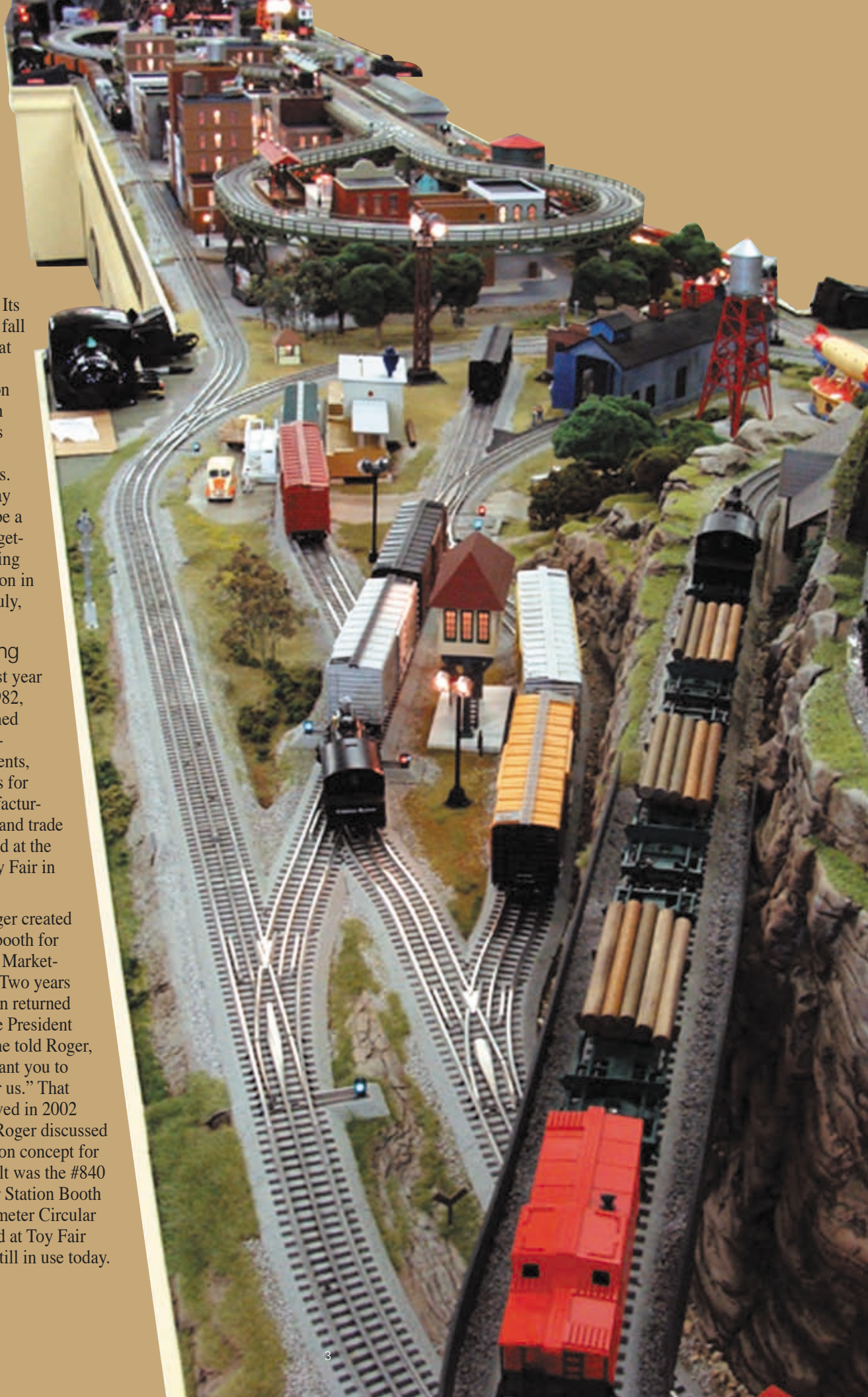
LCCA members might recognize T W Design (TWD) as the name of the company that designed and built the now-famous, Lionel-sponsored, Christmas-theme operating train layout in the New York Transit Museum on the Main Concourse level of Grand Central Terminal in New York City. According to Roger, "The GCT layout is a high-mileage display. It's been shown all over the country, at the York event, and at LCCA Convention sites. It was originally meant to be used only in the museum at GCT during the holiday season for a two-month run, but Lionel® has been generous in sharing the 'Wow!' of it with hobbyists and families nationwide."

TWD has recently completed one of Lionel's most involved layout experiences to date – the 40-foot layout with display walls and towers with trestles and 36 operating trains. Its debut was at the fall 2008 train meet at York, and it was a stellar attraction at Lionel's booth at recent World's Greatest Hobby on Tour locations. The entire display and layout will be a major attention-getter at the upcoming LCCA Convention in Sacramento in July, 2009.

### The Beginning

Since its first year in business in 1982, TWD has designed and built toy displays, environments, and backgrounds for major toy manufacturers' showrooms and trade show booths used at the International Toy Fair in New York City.

In 1999 Roger created the Radica Toy booth for then-Director of Marketing John Brady. Two years later – when John returned to Lionel as Vice President of Marketing – he told Roger, "Eventually, I want you to build a booth for us." That opportunity arrived in 2002 when John and Roger discussed a new presentation concept for Lionel. The result was the #840 Industrial Power Station Booth and 80-inch-diameter Circular Layout presented at Toy Fair 2003. Both are still in use today.





TWD was also the designer and contract builder of various reproduction Lionel dealer displays that were built in 2004-05 for a Dallas-based retailer. Since 2006, TWD has produced a new generation of retail displays for Lionel, including displays for Fortunoffs, Dillard's, FAO Schwartz, Newark's Gateway Center, and the Macy's Santa Land Display in NYC.

### Built for the Road

The skill set of the TWD group transcends experience in creating trade show displays. "The T W in our name stands for Theatrical Warehouse. Our roots are deeply embedded in the theatrical tradition," Roger explained. The work of building a set for the stage and then breaking it down into small pieces that can be transported in a tractor-trailer rig or a bobtail is the basis for their enterprise. A display must be able to withstand the rigors of the road, be quickly assembled on location, and yet be relatively lightweight and durable. The GCT layout display fits into six very large crates; all of them fit on a 24-foot bobtail.

Despite the transportation and logistics challenges, TWD has never had a problem that they couldn't handle. "We realize that we have only one opportunity to get it right, and that's opening night. If it doesn't work, we're out of luck, out of a job, and probably out of a career," Roger said. His goal is to make sure that when it gets to the site, it works and works from the first time they turn it on until the day they turn it off.

The TWD crew carries a good selection of back-up electrical components and at least one spare transformer on every installation. Because of careful design and rigorous construction methods, the product is very reliable. Lionel's FasTrack™ is used on the layouts – it's durable, easy to assemble, and fits together perfectly.

### Prelude to a Dream

Roger explained the process of development of a display as an unfolding adventure of discovery. "Lionel's directions are quite



accommodating to me as a designer. They give me a lot of leeway creatively with general directions like, ‘We’d like to see this many trains running and we’d like to have this kind of theme.’ They leave the specifics to us. That’s pretty darn neat in terms of a client business relationship, and Jerry is very inspirational.”

At the first meeting about the Grand Central Terminal display, Roger was impressed by something Jerry emphasized to him as his goal for the company – to put a Lionel train around every Christmas tree in the country again. “When he used that phrase, I knew we would have a Christmas tree on the display. It is the archetype of his dream.”

Roger noted that a client with lots of strong opinions about what to place on a layout could pose specific challenges. “In a few cases, the request may not be inclusive or exciting. It’s our goal to expand the client’s thinking; to include options and ideas that turn a layout into a train experience.” However, with Lionel, we started with their affirmation, ‘We love what you do. Do it for us. Just provide two loops of track.’”

“When we presented our concepts, their reaction was, ‘Wow, this is cool! Can you add this?’ It was easy for TWD

to incorporate those requests. They gave me a list of products that they wanted on the table, and we got it to fit in a very exciting way. We have often heard, ‘This is more than we expected.’”

### The Sequel – Better than the First

“It’s a challenge to outdo your own work, but it’s also exciting,” Roger said. “The new Lionel layout was meant to be an immersive experience. It was designed as a walk-in booth that presented Lionel trains running in all directions with a curtain of sound, the scent of smoke fluid, and the delightful ambiance of the hobby. I wanted to present the whole experience of what it is to play with trains.”

Each layout we create for Lionel has multiple levels of finish. This current layout has a simplistic area, and it is a deliberate design decision. A novice could walk up to that portion and say, “I can do that!” Other areas are highly detailed with grass, trees, and figures, and an experienced modeler could say, “Wow, I could do that!” This layout is highly interactive. Lionel’s demonstration folks can hand a Legacy™ controller to visitors who can actually run the trains. Push buttons on the layout are placed around the perimeter so that guests can trigger the accessories into action.



## About the Geometry

The overall length of the layout is 40 feet, but it can be broken down into three complete, separate displays. The two end sections are approximately 7-1/2 x 12 feet, and the center section is 5-1/2 x 16 feet. The layout has multiple levels – a pair of subway loops at the bottom of the center section and three stacked loops on the mountains at each end. The uppermost loop is for S-gauge trains. The center section has a perimeter loop that connects to the two ends, or it can be joined as a single loop on the center table itself. Many of the accessories in Lionel's current catalogs are placed in the layout as well as some of the classics.

Despite its complexity, the TWD crew can set up the basic elements in about four hours. It usually takes another four hours to put all the display products in place – trains on the tracks and buildings in their designated spaces. From time to time, we will refresh it by changing the accessories and putting the newest train sets on its towers. The graphics on the back panels can be changed.

## Roger's Roundabout Path

Inasmuch as there is no academic program with a major in Lionel Layout Building, I asked Roger to describe his training and preparation for the work he now does as Creative Director of TWD. Since boyhood, he has been involved with toy trains – a second-hand Marx wind-up train, his first Lionel train (an orange-striped Pennsy 250), and a James Gang Train Set bought for his son-to-be when he was just an image on an ultrasound screen.

"I've always been involved on a 'work in progress' on someone else's layout. I doodled with ideas and built some small layouts for myself and for the toy-related business. My career interest was in theater and set design – building scenery and stage elements. I went to college originally to study art, and I got involved in film making at first. It had a theatrical flavor to it. An opportunity came to take resume shots for actors

and actresses, and that led to photographing stage sets for their archives. I took photographs of some of the sets at the different theaters in town, and I often thought, 'I can do better than that.' Someone overheard that remark and challenged me to prove it."

"I enrolled in courses at Avila College in Kansas City in the 1970s. I also took courses through the Associated College and Universities program. I graduated with a split degree – one in fine arts and the other one in theater. From there, I went to the Santa Fe Opera Company and built stage scenery for the operas. I eventually worked my way to Houston and then to Dallas where I did graduate work at SMU. That's also where I re-connected with Dorcie whom I had met in Santa Fe and who was now studying dance at SMU. She and I wed and have been inseparable since 1979. She is now the President of T W Design and attends to the business operations and marketing programs for the company."

## Love this Job

His theater involvement, the work he did for toy companies, his connection with John Brady, and the introduction to Lionel brought him full circle to applying a lifelong interest in trains with a love of theater and skill in design. "I love working with Lionel, if you haven't gotten that message yet! It's exciting to collaborate with the company that has been part of my life for 50 years. I enjoy doing the LCCA Convention, and I hope we are included in many more of them. The officers I've worked with are super people, so it's a joy to do that show although it's a busy time for me. I've met train collectors and operators and become friends with some of them – a wonderful fringe benefit." 🚂

*Editor's Postscript: Visit the T W Design website at: [www.twdesign.com](http://www.twdesign.com)*

*Photographs provided by T W Design*

