

# Patriot Games

[by Andrew Stone]

And you thought *you* loved Fourth of July fireworks. It's a wonder **William Schermerhorn**, the whiz who coordinates that spectacle (and all the others) for Macy's, doesn't actually *explode* from excitement.

It's hard to imagine William Schermerhorn as a struggling actor selling underpants at Macy's, but that was his job when he first met Jean McFaddin, the store's former parade director. "Jean was my mentor," Schermerhorn says. "She hired me in 1983. I was selling Calvin Klein underwear in the store, and she convinced me I wanted the job." Her faith in Schermerhorn paid off: Twenty-two years later, he's vice president and creative director of Macy's Annual Events, responsible for choreographing the Fourth of July fireworks, Thanksgiving Day Parade, Santaland, the holiday parade at Universal Studios in Orlando, and all other grand pageants organized by the world's largest and most famous department store.

And this year, as always, he's giving America the birthday party it deserves.

Schermerhorn was born for the job. "My birthday's on the Fourth of July," he grins. "I had red, white, and blue all over my bedroom as a kid." Armed with this patriotic pedigree, not to mention a sunny disposition, he starts planning the pyrotechnic feast six months in advance. "In January, I start thinking, *What will the mood be in July?*" he says. A daunting undertaking, but he's up to the task. "I love the great American traditions," he says.

Schermerhorn, who collaborates with Pyro Spectaculars by Souza to make sure the fireworks explode in perfect heart-stopping, eye-popping rhythm with the score, is thrilled that the displays get better every year. "The fireworks keep changing," he says. "The happy faces, stars, and shapes are getting so much bet-



A real Independence streak: Nobody knows firecrackers like William Schermerhorn.

ter. The colors are brighter. It's art on the river, only there for a moment."

He admits that his first love is live theater. Schermerhorn even did summer stock shows as a kid—an experience he likens to producing Macy's events. "This is always a small summer-stock operation at heart," he says.

The theme of this year's celebration is "American Medley," choreographed to a program of standards performed by Skitch Henderson and the New York Pops. "We're doing a musical

play," Schermerhorn says. "We start with pure patriotism and end with pure patriotism." Along the way, the fireworks shoot and sparkle to a score of favorites like "Yankee Doodle Dandy" and "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," plus new classics like "Song of a Nation," written by Schermerhorn himself, in collaboration with composer Doug Katsaros. "I think of the music as the glue that keeps the show together," he says. In years past, he collaborated with Katsaros to score the entire spectacle, treating the firework shells "like dancers in a show."

As a writer and lyricist, Schermerhorn has also developed projects and songs for everyone from Bob Hope to Harvey Fierstein to Jon Secada, and now has two musicals in the works, *Beyond the Dream* and *The Music Boys*, as well as a project with celebrated performer Michael Feinstein. "Macy's enjoys being a part of the Broadway community," he says. "Wherever I can celebrate Broadway, I will." This philosophy is especially evident in the store's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Chock-full of talent from the Great White Way, it's the main (and possibly only) exposure many Americans have to New York's latest and best theater offerings.

But for now, Schermerhorn has only firecrackers and crashing cymbals on his mind. On Independence Day, "Everyone becomes a kid," he says, "even the most jaded New Yorker." So, as the colors burst overhead and everyone on your roof, in your penthouse, or hanging out your windows is transfixed, remember Bill Schermerhorn, sitting in a production truck somewhere, showing you a great time, the biggest kid of all. [G]