
Report for MNASSA - ScopeX 2004 Auditorium Presentations By Dave Gordon

Those that attended the Johannesburg Centre's annual showcase, ScopeX 2004 will concur: it was a wonderful celebration of astronomy. It represented an opportunity to meet and mingle with individuals who have one thing in common – the love of astronomy. For me, ScopeX represents not only an opportunity to view the amazing array of commercial and hand-built telescopes, but also a forum to ask those awkward questions that have been plaguing us about the universe. A chance to pick the brains of the learned and experienced. The auditorium presentations by specially invited and carefully selected amateurs and professionals have become an integral part of our celebration of astronomy at ScopeX.

Emmanuel Petrakakis wants to go to Mars. He says our fascination with the red planet is fuelled by the prospect of us one-day stepping onto its dusty barren surface. Petrakakis is adamant that we are past the stage of "if" and are well on our way to saying "when" we get to Mars. So it is that when we listen to an individual of Petrakakis' utter conviction and determination - that we will eventually find a solution to the almost insurmountable problems faced by inter-planetary travellers - that we are riveted and excited by the prospect.

Notwithstanding his amazing selection of graphic artistic impressions of the space craft and contraptions that will be required to complete the minimum 9 month journey to Mars, the audience was treated to an all-convincing argument in favour of just such an expensive endeavour. And when a member of the audience posed the simple question of "why?", Petrakakis' philosophical and rational reasoning was both refreshing and exciting. To sum his over-riding theme – humanity needs hope.

Following on the theme of space travel, Gerrit Penning, Chariman of the Bloemfontein Centre of the Astronomical Society presented a visually stimulating "Zoom Journey to the Stars". He whisked us on a whirlwind slide tour - from the atom to the largest stringed formations of galaxies in the known universe. When he superimposed a very tiny Earth on to a giant Jupiter, he drew a very loud "wow" from a young member of the audience, which sent ripples of laughter through the auditorium. Gerrit's passion for astronomy and his relaxed and friendly delivery endeared him immediately to the audience and I think even he was surprised by the unexpected meteor shower of questions which pelted him during open question time.

When Case Rijdsdijk speaks, nobody moves. The auditorium was filled to capacity and I noticed some late arrivals quickly scanning the capacity-filled hall and then finding solace on the stairs, just to get an opportunity to listen to "Comets". Case has a wonderful easy style of speaking about astronomy and one is almost caught leaning forwards to hear and see more of this incredibly knowledgeable individual. Without a doubt, the highlight of his talk was that of the "baking of a comet".

"I'm now going to make a comet" he announced and a wide-eyed and incredulous audience watched in total fascination as Case violently hammered at some dry ice, threw it into a disposal bag, poured a heap of red sand, a soda drink and a generous supply of water into the mysterious bag and proceeded to kneed the concoction until, like magic, he produced a dirty, fuming snowball, all ready to be flung into the solar system to begin its long parabolic journey around the Sun. "Where is the tail of Case's

Comet”, I heard someone whisper behind me. “No silly, it’s not yet close enough to the Sun”, a friend replied.

Professor Anthony Fairall, what cruel blow us Gautengers have been dealt in not having the pleasure of your company all year round. I only hope ordinary Capetonians know of the calibre of astronomer and friend of science that dwells among them. This learned man spoke about “Life in the Universe” with a passion and conviction that was both captivating and awakening. I turned around from where I was sitting to see both young and old, amateur and professional, completely captured in his spell. He spoke of life as we know it, and life as it could be. Of habitable planets and hospitable moons. Of distant suns and violent stars. When a 40-minute presentation feels like 10 minutes, and when one is left wanting at least another hour of this “tonic for the brain”, I realise I will travel a far stretch to see Tony present again.

The next presentation was a first for ScopeX – a debate. Expertly chaired by Case Rijdsdijk, our three visiting professors set the scene and prepared the audience for a mind-exploration into the topic of “Are we alone? If there is life out there, what could it be like?”

Professor Rob Veale set the biological scene, so to speak, with a short account of “The Molecular Origin of Life”. This was followed by Professor Hartmut Winkler who prepared us for the question of “Are there other planets out there, how do we go about finding them?” Finally, Professor Derck Smits teased the audience with the Drake Equation – a mathematical probability scenario which sought to approach the question of how many planets, capable of harbouring intelligent life, could our Milky Way galaxy contain.

I was almost expecting a very heated and emotionally charged debate. One which could have shown distinct danger of degenerating into a mud-slinger; a religion versus science catastrophe. How many a dinner party have I attended which has rapidly moved in just such a direction at the mere mention of such a question. Not with Case Rijdsdijk at the helm! Questions were orderly and sincere, with opinions both respected and withheld. But what I did notice is that the above-mentioned professors could not exit the auditorium for nearly three quarters of an hour after the formal close of the debate.

With sunset behind us and darkness rapidly approaching, I presented a “What’s up in the Sky Tonight”, with kind assistance and valuable contributions by Brian Fraser.

Our final presentation of the evening started at 7pm and it was our guest of honour, Case Rijdsdijk who presented a fascinating insight into the progress of the Southern African Large Telescope (SALT) at Sutherland. Having played an integral role since the project’s inception, Case’s knowledge of the finer details and the amusing anecdotes associated with the project’s progress (just look at those construction men 30 m up on the scaffolding - their safety harnesses unclipped) resulted in an amusing and entertaining conclusion to the day’s auditorium presentations.

Your society did proud justice to International Astronomy Day 2004. Thank you to every person who contributed to make it the success that it was.

Those of you that missed ScopeX 2004 – I did warn you last year!