

By the WAY #21

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Welcome to 2009! The years are certainly flying by - only ten years ago, the specter of Y2K was looming airplane screening was a literal breeze and no one had considered the digital TV changeover (if they even know what digital TV was). Who knows what the next ten years, or even the next couple of years, will bring?

Commentary

A couple Fridays back, I had the distinct pleasure to attend an Austin Film Society special event at the local IMAX theater. It began with a showing of the movie "Space Station 3D" (previously shown in Austin a few years ago). Following that, Richard Garriott presented his home photos, videos and commentary about his recent visit to the International Space Station.

Last October, he was the fifth "space tourist" to pay their way on a Soyuz capsule to visit Earth's only manned orbital outpost. As some background, Garriott is a local Austinite, and son of an astronaut who flew on Skylab and an early shuttle mission. He created the Ultima computer game series and, later, founded Origins Systems to continue that series and expand into other computer entertainment. He lives in a house that would be many folks' fantasy place. It has turrets, hidden passageways, and underground areas and is packed with memorabilia from space programs, scientific achievements and rare books. I've not been there, but reports of some parties (think Halloween) whet one's interest.

On that Friday, he was still getting reoriented to his usual routine, only being back in Austin a couple weeks, after spending extensive time debriefing after returning to the planet. This was his first presentation to a group outside of the space agencies and "family/friends". So, there were a few technical glitches and places where he mentioned that he should have put a shot of "X" here or "Y" there. It only added to the freshness of the session and his obvious enthusiasm to share his experience with others.

For his trip to the space station, which he commented was much more cluttered than when the 3D movie was filmed, he spent over a year in preparation. This included learning Russian, taking outdoor/water survival training and having surgery to correct a weakness in his liver (as I recall) that could be fatal in the event of sudden decompression. He recounted the differences between the camaraderie of the Russian space travelers and friendships within the US astronaut corps he experienced as a child. One interesting tidbit, the Soyuz capsule does include a gun as part of the standard inventory. It is not meant to be used in space, but in the event of an off target wilderness landing to protect against wildlife and attract attention from searchers.

One interesting aspect of his trip was that he didn't go solely as a paying tourist. He worked with companies to sponsor experiments and produce educational shorts. As part of his father's legacy, he duplicated crystal growing experiments last performed on Skylab (basically doubling the number of space grown crystals). Also, he took a series of photographs of Earth to compare with a similar survey by his dad and emphasize the changes mankind is making to the planet.

His photos and slide shows documented these activities, with couple examples of the Earth survey shots that'd just been matched. But, his trip wasn't all work and sightseeing. He recounted his homage to his father's joke with Mission Control in Houston where he'd taken tape recordings of his wife to respond to their inquiries - in this case, he took computer recordings. As an added bonus, he premiered the first science fiction movie filmed in space. It is definitely a "B" movie in acting (mostly Russian cosmonauts) and plot, though (as can be expected), the production values are superior (apologies, I've forgotten the title and it didn't show up in a quick Google search).

In the Q&A session, after the audio-visual presentations and commentary, Garriott was very frank and open. He made the comment that he'd talk about anything, leaving out little in the way of details. A stance with which, apparently, he will go into depth on topics that other space travelers have glossed over. The one item that stands out is about using the toilet. During the general discussion, he gave PG answers but promised that anyone who wanted to wait until afterwards, he'd get into the details. A small crowd was gathering as I left.

During the entire evening, and from what I saw afterwards, he was extremely supportive of the space program and very willing to share his avid interest in scientific exploration. In my impression, he is what an ambassador for space exploration should be, exuding enthusiasm and fully committed to the possibilities that are

available. He even expressed a desire to return to space, even knowing the lengthy time needed to prepare, the uncomfortable (and disorienting) training and the physical discomfort he had due to weightlessness during his entire time onboard. Unfortunately, according to news reports, the future of space tourism or, in his case, a subsidized opportunity to perform scientific experiments is in jeopardy.

I would hope that he would have the chance to, again, experience space flight and be able to conduct experiments that he chooses. Then, return to Earth and share his experiences with the rest of earthbound humanity. It can only be a win-win situation with the “tourists” paying their way (plus extra to help subsidize the entire program), paying the costs of their experiments and providing a means for the follow-up research on their findings once they return. Presuming the travelers meet all requirements, the experiments are properly vetted and there are no substantive security/safety concerns, this public/private use of excess capacity and capabilities can only enhance humanity’s knowledge.

As a coda, I’ve seen news reports where he has taken, at least a portion, of that night’s presentation into schools and given the next generation of Americans a personal account of space flight and the possibilities that exist in orbit and beyond. Hopefully they’ll be inspired to pursue careers to expand humanity’s knowledge, support scientific pursuits and exploration.

Texas Spotlight

In Texas, the biennial legislative session is in full swing with the usual jockeying for position, filing of bills and proposing important legislation for all the citizens of the state. Of course, many legislators file ceremonial resolutions honoring this person for their retirement or a City for their annual Cheeseburger festival (that was one from last session, honoring Friona’s first annual festival). However, every so often one of these bills appears to be window dressing on the surface, but in actuality really makes sense.

In this session (the 81st), one bill grabbed my attention from the moment I saw the synopsis and almost made me laugh. HCR (House Concurrent Resolution) 16 was filed to replace the Brachiosaur Sauropod, Pleurocoelus as the Texas State Dinosaur with the Paluxysaurus Jonesi. On the surface, it appeared to be one legislator trying to honor a favorite (or locally found) dinosaur instead of another set of remains.

However, upon reading the bill, I fully support the resolution and hope that it passes without dissent or substantive negative discussion. In this case, during the term of the 75th Legislature, the remains used to substantiate the recognition of the State Dinosaur were identified as the Brachiosaur Sauropod, Pleurocoelus. However, subsequent investigation in 2007 by a grad student in Southern Methodist University, determined that the remains were of a new, previously unidentified, species. It was dubbed the Paluxysaurus Jonesi as it was found along the Paluxy River near the Jones Ranch site. Additionally, a number footprints in various dinosaur track ways across the state have been associated with the new dinosaur.

So, this resolution actually makes sense and corrects an inadvertent mistake made in a previous legislative session. Further, it strongly supports the process of scientific discovery and endorses “the insightful work of Texas-based scientists”. And, it promotes what is, so far, a dinosaur that has only been found in the Lone Star State.

Information gleaned from the text of HCR 16 filed during Texas’s 81st Legislative session.

Late Note: The Austin American Statesman has a very good article on this resolution in the February 2, 2009 issue, beginning on page B1.

LOCs

Send them in!

Doug Kent (Continuing the Holdsworth discussion from last issue): If you want to see if Holdsworth is truly of your taste or not, I’d say the best work to listen to would be “Believe It” by Tony Williams Lifetime, Uk by Uk, and both “Velvet Darkness” and “Metal Fatigue” by Allan Holdsworth. Sometimes you can find them on eBay for cheap. Despite his synthaxe fascination, I will always prefer his guitar work.

PS, for some reason it completely skipped my mind that I also enjoy his work with Jean Luc Ponte such as you find on “Enigmatic Ocean”.

[WAY] I’ve listened to a bit more Holdsworth without changing my opinion; however, the selections weren’t from anything you’d mentioned this time around. I’ll keep looking for them and give them another chance.

Review

Slumdog Millionaire

The movie, at the time I saw it, was a sleeper. I'd heard decent reviews and a few so-so comments. It wasn't taking off at the box office; however, it sparked some level of interest in me. The couple I usually enjoy movies with was split, so only two of us saw it in a theater roughly 1/4-1/3 full in early January. While waiting in line to buy tickets, we chatted with some ladies in line for "Frost/Nixon" who'd already seen it. They heartily recommended it and insisted that we stay through the credits.

I must say, it exceeded my expectations and, in my opinion, was the best movie overall that I'd seen all year (yes, I saw it just after the first of this year; but it is a "last year" movie). In recommending it to a neighbor, I highlighted the cinematography, the compelling storyline, the final homage to Bollywood and the movie's edifying undertones and moral statements. However, I had to hedge a bit for her on the torture scenes, though well-balanced, the underlying societal violence and the malevolent, though shockingly real, Indian version of Fagan and Sykes.

There are so many things to take from the movie - hope and love can endure, faith sustains, the pointlessness of violent inter-religious strife, the strength that comes with belief in yourself and your ability to transcend obstacles, the consequences of societal oppression and greed, to just name a few. Yes, you can watch the movie and fully enjoy it just for entertainment; however, for those who take the time to reflect on it, there is much to think about and lessons to learn.

My favorable impression of "Slumdog" was only enhanced when I learned about how the movie was made. The filmmakers went into the streets of Mumbai, actually filming the residents and their reactions as scenes played out in real time around them. It gives the audience a true look into the reality of the Indian underclass and avoids the sterility of overly scripted and rehearsed scenes.

This movie certainly deserves the Oscar this year and I'll be cheering it on!

One last note, this is a movie that is better suited for the big screen rather than a home TV. If possible, watch it while it is still in the theaters; but, if not, the video I'm sure will be nearly as satisfying.

Books Finished: Selected Poems (Walt Whitman) B-; Intellectual Devotional B; Daily Guideposts 2008 A; Intellectual Devotional: American History B+; Holy Bible/Lamsa's Translation from the Aramaic of the Peshitta (Not Rated); Cooking with All Things Trader Joe's B+

Movie Watch: Milk A-; Let the Right One In B+; The Curious Case of Benjamin Button A-; Slumdog Millionaire A+; Valkyrie B; Frost/Nixon B+; Space Station 3D B; Doubt C+

Observation

Have all dentists moved beyond putting in fillings to only do crowns? Recently, I changed dental practices due to insurance reasons. The previous dentist did consent to putting a filling in when they thought a crown would be better. However, the new dentist wanted to immediately replace that filling with a crown. And, when I lost a small portion of an amalgam filling, there was no discussion of replacing it. Only, "this is the price for a crown" and with no amount of prodding would they consider a filling. Needless to say, I've not put the crown on either tooth (surface loss only, no significant chance of fracturing) and will be looking for a new dentist.

However, that may not be easy. With my first choice for a new dentist, when I had to change plans, I never even went to the first appointment. After reading the "office rules", that I was required to sign, included language that specified I would do any treatments or procedures they recommended, I quickly continued my search.

Playlist for this issue: CBS Evening News (both local and national), "Two and a Half Men" (rerun), Country Music Television (CMT) videos, "Touched by an Angel" (rerun)

