

Past President's Message



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As I write this, I have just seen something I'll never forget. It is the new Sky-Skan 3D system at the Imiloa Planetarium in Hilo, Hawaii, run by Shawn Laatsch. Pressures of work caused me to miss the opening of the new system in January, but I snatched a few days immediately after Easter to make a visit there. It's the first such system in the world, and it's breathtaking.

With Shawn at the controls, flying the audience—in a live show—through the Milky Way, I watched as stars passed me by, the effect being so realistic that I could almost feel them brushing past me and was tempted to close my mouth to avoid swallowing one!

Leaving the Milky Way, we arrived at the Virgo Cluster of Galaxies, the enormous ensemble slowly rotating before our eyes so that we could study its members—elliptical and spiral, large and small.

Now, many of you probably know me as a “traditional” planetarian, appreciating the quality of a fine optomechanical star projector to give that true feeling of being out under the stars. My love of that kind of starry night sky has not changed and, as I am sure the several vendors of digital systems would agree, we are still “not there yet” with a digital night

sky. We are, however, getting closer.

That doesn't mean, however, that I am against or dislike digital projection, because it allows us to do so many things that simply can't be done with an optomechanical system. The kinds of shows that are possible with digital systems add so much versatility to our programming.

My experiences there prompted much discussion about where we are heading, and where we have come from. Of course, you need to see the new 3D system to have a full appreciation of what I am talking about—but could we have anticipated this kind of experience 30, 20 or even 10 years ago?

I didn't.

Often think about this—not just with planetarium technology, but in more general terms. There was a time when people lived without radio, television, or medical X-ray imaging. Of course, there are still, unfortunately, many people in the world who do not have easy access to such things. A century ago, the projection planetarium had not been conceived. I'm writing this using a laptop while sitting aboard a flight across the Pacific, with a power supply for my laptop in the seat, and access to so many movies and television programs that it's difficult to choose which one to watch—if I had time, that is. Apart from the cup of tea just served to me, there's little or nothing that I see around me that would not have amazed even the most technically advanced communities a century ago.

What is important about all of this, however, is to never forget that it is we planetarians who are the most important resource in our industry. Even the best planetarium systems in the world could never realise their full potential without an enthusiastic planetarian at the helm, and, as I so often say, the live night sky tour is such an essential part of a presentation.

Another important aspect of digital systems is their ability to handle and update datasets of solar system objects, stars, and galaxies. While I was at Imiloa, Brent Tully was visiting as a guest of Shawn and ran two sessions in which he described his dataset of galaxies, projected onto the dome in 3D. Brent Tully is, of course, one half of the famed Tully-Fisher pairing who, in 1977, produced a landmark paper on their research which showed a clear relation between the absolute magnitudes of galaxies and their HI line profile widths. The widths, of course, are an indication of the speed of rotation of the galaxy, and their study provided a new method of determining galaxy distances.

While in Hawaii, I also paid a visit, for the first time, to the Bishop Museum and was warmly welcomed by Education Director

Mike Shanahan, Planetarium Manager Carolyn Kaichi, and Steve Tierney, who ran the afternoon show in the Jhamandas Watumull Planetarium under its 9.1-m dome. An added attraction was live mid-afternoon solar viewing, also conducted by Steve. Again, the human touch was, as always, appreciated by all.

On to different things. By the time you receive this issue of the *Planetarian*, we shall be very close to the time of the 2008 IPS Conference in Chicago, in the USA. I'm hoping to see a large number of you there, and am looking forward to it immensely.

It's also our last IPS gathering before the International Year of Astronomy, the preparations for which, I am sure, have kept you all quite busy. By now, you will be aware that Council has voted “no” to committing IPS funds directly to gain formal involvement in the IYA. As I write this, I shall, as an IAU member, be attempting to secure as much direct involvement as possible without the IPS spending money that could, in the opinion of a considerable majority of Council members, be better spent elsewhere.

The IYA is certainly shaping up to be big, and it is clearly the best opportunity to promote astronomy on a worldwide basis that we have ever had. In addition, of course, it is a great time to promote our planetariums!

To me, as chair of the International Relations Committee, the IYA has another special effect: it is something that will bring the worldwide planetarium and general astronomy communities together still more closely.

On a less happy note, one issue that has been concerning me lately is one that has been brought to the attention of us all through



Dr R. Brent Tully and IPS Fellow Peter Michaud at the Imiloa Planetarium. All photos by Martin George.

Dome-I and on the World Wide Web. After years of being closed, the Moscow Planetarium faces the possibility of not being able to reopen due to financial problems. We are all aware that there are many planetariums in Russia and other republics of the former Soviet era, and that our fellow planetarians staffing those institutions are an enthusiastic group. Last October, I found myself immersed in this wonderful atmosphere when I visited Nizhny Novgorod (see my report about this visit in the December 2007 issue of the *Planetarian*).

Of course, this is not the first time that we have been saddened by the closure or bleak future of a planetarium and offered our support, and I am aware that in this case, too, many of you have sent supportive emails, which is wonderful. The officers, myself, and the International Relations Committee have been discussing this issue at some length—together, of course, with some of our Russian colleagues—and I am hoping that we can have some positive influence. I am investigating the possibility of making a visit there in the near future to discuss the issue first-hand in Moscow, and will keep you all posted.

Returning to the subject of the upcoming IPS Conference, this is the last opportunity for me to correct a serious omission from my final President's Message in the December 2006 issue! I promised in the September issue of that year to say more about the excellent work performed by our IPS 2006 Service Award recipients and, through a fault of nobody except myself, some vital paragraphs were not included.

As those of you who were present at the Melbourne conference will remember, we were all delighted that Lars Broman, Lee Ann Hennig, Jim Manning, and Dale Smith all received the highest honour the IPS can award—the Service Award.

Lars Broman is a fellow of the IPS and for many years has served and contributed significantly on the IPS Council. Lars' seat on Council has seen him representing the Nordic Planetarium Association for many years, and he was a founding member of that group. Lars has contributed his International News article



Top: The Jhamandas Watumull Planetarium at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu; bottom: Steve Tierney conducting a solar observation session at the Observatory at the Bishop Museum.

in the *Planetarian* for 50 issues now (see Page 50), and has been very active in promoting and supporting the IPS, particularly throughout his region. In addition, Lars' masters' programme in science communication is helping to educate potential planetarians for the future.

Lee Ann Hennig has been involved in the planetarium industry for a very long time and has been a highly valued supporter of the IPS. Lee Ann has been a board member of the Middle Atlantic Planetarium Association (MAPS) for a number of years, and has been very active in the astronomy education field. She is also an IPS fellow.

As well as all of these achievements, though, Lee Ann has fulfilled a very important role within the IPS as secretary since 1994. Her untiring work as an officer, contributing to all of the day-to-day business that the officers

deal with in addition to the particular duties as secretary, has been superb. For example, Council members are especially appreciative of the work that Lee Ann puts into the Council meetings, with the preparation of council packets of information and, of course, the preparation of the minutes, which all members see in the *Planetarian*.

Jim Manning is a former IPS president, having served in that office during 1995-96. He is a Fellow of the IPS, and a Spitz Lecturer. Jim has served as president of the Rocky Mountains Planetarium Association, and has for a long time contributed his What's New column to the *Planetarian*, the flagship publication of the IPS.

Jim is currently the chief executive officer of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific, having formerly (at the time of his award) been head of the Office of Public Outreach at the Space Telescope Science Institute in the USA. He remains close to the planetarium industry and the IPS. He has ensured that the planetarium world is included in materials that are produced, and continues to attend planetarium conferences.

Dale Smith's support of the IPS over a period of many years has been outstanding. Dale is an IPS Fellow, was president in 1999-2000 and is the IPS Publications chair. In this

role he has also been Directory editor, a role that was taken on even before he became Publications chair.

One particular way in which Dale has supported the society has been his dedication to spreading the news about IPS around the world. His work on the Star Partners Scheme, the *Directory* itself, and his extensive travels have been enormously valuable to our society.

Dale is a Spitz Lecturer, was president of the Great Lakes Planetarium Association (GLPA) for an extended term and is a GLPA Galileo award recipient. He is also a fellow of GLPA and served on their board for many years. He has also been proceedings editor for GLPA for quite some time.

We'll be seeing all of these fine planetarians and many, many others in Chicago. I look forward to seeing you there! ☆