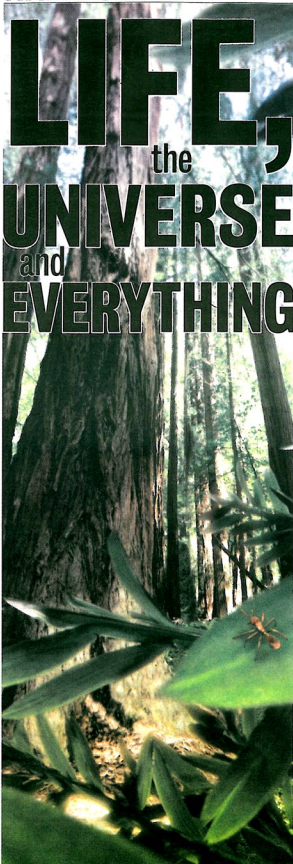


November 7, 2010

NIGHT OUT



LIFE, the UNIVERSE and EVERYTHING

By Janos Gereben
Special to The Examiner

The California Academy of Sciences' new planetarium show, "Life: A Cosmic Story" is an enormously ambitious undertaking.

The aim is nothing less than to explain the origin, nature and interconnectedness of life in the universe — in 25 minutes.

To an impressive degree, "Life" succeeds.

Opening with a scene in the Muir Woods redwood grove, the camera — computer simulation, actually — dives into the cells of a single leaf, showing life at the microscopic level. In a dizzying sequence, those building blocks of life are followed back to the Big Bang and the creation of life, almost 14 billion years ago.

Stars ignite, galaxies coalesce, and entire worlds take shape, including Earth.

The show explores the two most likely scenarios for the voyage from amoebas to such present-day miracles as the Giants' championship: one at a ruling, deep-sea hydrothermal vent, the other in a primordial "hot puddle" on a volcanic island.

Just one of the many fascinating sequences shows Earth all covered by water, then with the single supercontinent, and in its current division.

There is also a fleeting factoid about plant "pollution" bringing on the first ice age, in one of the many compressed scenes

the viewer would like to see further explained — but "Life" moves on, inexorably.

Kudos to the filmmakers for repeated attempts to say and show "how do we know what we know."

Narrated by Jodie Foster, "Life" is directed by Ryan Wyatt, the Academy's director of Morrison Planetarium and Science Visualization, in consultation with the nation's top scientists at Mountain View's SETI Institute, NASA Astrobiology Institute, Ames Research Center, and numerous prominent research scientists elsewhere.

Wyatt narrates a live segment in the middle of the film, showing recent development in the search for life in the universe. Up-to-date to the point of reporting on events in recent days, this part of the show covers an exciting aspect of exobiology and extraterrestrial research.

Against billions of years of evolution, it was only in the past 15 years that scientists discovered planets around stars other than the sun — and in this infinitesimal period, 490 of these extrasolar planets were identified and "seen." Some, as Wyatt shows, were spotted and later disappeared, at least from the view of Earthlings.

"The core concept is that all life on Earth is related, having evolved from a common ancestor," Wyatt says. "Taking an even longer view, we see that life's origins begin with dark matter and the first stars — our pedigree — billions of years in the making."



SCIENCE GUY Ryan Wyatt, right, directed "Life: A Cosmic Story," the new show at the California Academy of Sciences' Morrison Planetarium. Left, California redwoods represent just some of the extraordinary scenery in the show.

IF YOU GO

Life: A Cosmic Story

Where: Morrison Planetarium, California Academy of Sciences, 55 Music Concourse Drive, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco
When: 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sundays through late 2011

Tickets: \$19.95 to \$29.95; free on third Wednesday each month
Contact: (415) 379-8000, www.calacademy.org