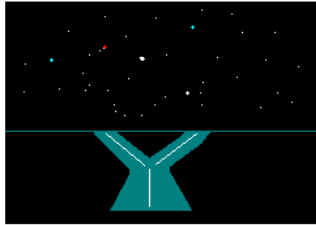


The planetarium  
By Marco Ruocco  
(March 2, 2002)

The sky darkened as the black clouds converged on the town. It felt almost like evening, even if the clock tower, hardly distinguishable in the opposite square through gusts of windblown rain, still sturdily kept track of time (and according to it we were still in mid-afternoon).

The cardboard posters hanged on the kiosk in the street outside of the Museum were bent and damp for the pounding rain. On them, many of the cultural attractions that the town offered were usually advertised in bold characters and friendly tones hopeful for some participation. However, those few passers-by still walking openly in the street enduring the weather did not seem to notice them that much. At a closer inspection, it seemed that other extraneous fliers overlapped the museum posters, so that most, if not all, of the notices were in practice reduced to meaningless fragments of aimless sentences.

The black, white and blue symbol of the Astronomical Society (founded in a surprisingly recent 2002, as it was written on a tag at the bottom), representing a road that divides in two under the multitude of stars of an evening sky, was glittering in a corner. Unnoticed to most first sights, and probably spared by the confusing effect of the clutter on the kiosk, it seemed to present rather courageously indeed the only clear alternative to moving sales and political propaganda.



Astronomical Society  
Founded 2002

“COME EXPERIENCE THE PLANETARIUM! NOW THE CHOICE IS YOURS IN AN EVENING FULL OF AWE WHILE LEARNING ABOUT THE STARS: ENJOY THE SHOW WATCHING THE SKY MAGICALLY MOVING, OR INSTEAD PREPARE YOURSELF TO ENDLESS NIGHTS OF STARGAZING! ONE-TIME SHOW ONLY, MONDAY AT 6 PM”.

The rain was falling in buckets and the sky was resonant of thunder. The flashes of lightning were very frequent, and the wind was strong enough to bend the smaller trees in the square and move the leafy branches of the oaks in the park besides the museum. Other passers-by rushed along the protected walls of the buildings, the streetlights faded for long instants then relit, and then for a while nobody moved, only torrential rain and thunder and lightning, and then more rain.

The Planetarium hallway had a rather non-sumptuous look, with almost barren white walls, except for a few signs informing on administrative matters of remote importance to the mortal man. The dark tones of the air were well tuned with the natural turmoil outside. The hallway was a connecting corridor that from the museum entrance led to another, longer corridor with big windows directly facing the encircled park.

Holding his closed umbrella still dripping for the rain, Abel indulged at the windows: the frantic movement of the branches of the oaks was oddly muted, while the thunderous sounds filled the air in every direction.

Abel was one of those few courageous or positively insane persons that stopped at the kiosk in the pounding rain just enough to find out about the Planetarium show. He had been in a Planetarium before, in another town, a few years ago, and he just remembered enough of his experience for giving it another try. Slightly engrossed by the restless scene at the windows, Abel was awakened by six wavy distant tolls that broke through the other noises. Interrupting his train of thoughts he hurriedly continued towards the last section of the corridor that led to the Planetarium Hall.

The door of the Hall was ajar, and a fast paced, resolute female voice was already speaking from within. Seemingly she was already providing the usual introductory information before the show. He was worried to be late, and quickly prepared to squeeze into the room without being noticed. After rushing to a seat close to the door, Abel discovered, to his great surprise, that in the wide and dimly lit circular hall, there was no audience listening to the female voice.

At closer inspection, in the first circle of seats, another man in a flashy green shirt sat, but Abel could not see his face since the man was showing him his back, in a particularly laid-back posture with an embracing arm bent over the back of the next seat. He seemed to be watching in a different direction with respect to the woman, and he seemed to stay still in his curious posture.

The voice was coming from a slightly risen platform, close, but slightly aside, to the big spherical projector that was higher in the very center of the room. The woman wore a dark red dress, and she was in the middle of an animated explanation of the illustrative power of the planetarium.

She was still talking excitedly but firmly “...therefore please make sure you understand that this is an important occasion for you to see how the heavenly sky is like. You made a first good choice in coming here this evening, but you are still free to imagine how things are like in reality. However, we need to agree on the fact that this Planetarium is powerful enough to see stars and planets very clearly”.

She stopped for a few seconds reading silently some documents she had with her. The man in green, with another laid-back gesture, half-raised his hand as for scratching his nape and then returned to his usual posture. In the meanwhile Abel noticed that there was no sound of thunder, and everything was silent. She waited some more and then, clearing her voice, she continued: “We will try to proceed without unanimous agreement, even if it seems that today we don’t have the same level of attention as we would like. Remember that this is a one-time show, there are no other chances to see the beauty of the stars and of the planets”

Finally, the lights were turned off and the projector cast the entire heavenly sky on the vault of the Planetarium, and it was immediately clear to

Abel that it was the most realistic display that he had ever seen. The simulation started with a view of the early evening sky, and the colors along the circular line of the horizon reminded him of many sunsets as he saw them around town. His enthusiastic previous experience with a planetarium came to his mind reinforced by these new sights.

The woman began to describe the sky: "Now that we all agree on using this amazing show for the purposes of this evening, which is a special evening as you may know, we may now open our eyes and watch the wonders of the heavens. The evening sky in this season shows many interesting constellations. We may start from a setting Orion, distinguishable for the shiny belt and the bright nebula in the middle, relict of a dead star. Then you can see a rising Scorpio, showing the red Antares that defies the mighty planet Mars god of war in an endless struggle for supremacy. As you can see there are countless stars that just await to be noticed, each one tells a story and even more that that..."

Abel was understanding only half of what he could hear, a bit carried away by the view, a bit surprised at the vaguely fantastic words of the woman that had the same enthusiasm in engaging the two spectators as if she were in front of a crowd eagerly waiting for her to talk. He considered that she was attractive, and even if the figure at a distant remained a bit vague, her voice was expressing some energy suspended among words.

And she continued: "If you wonder at why there are so many stars in the sky, think about how many people live on the Earth. You probably know that

Plato said that we are all born under the light of a star. There is a star for every person, even if more people are born under the closer and more powerful stars, because their light arrives to our planet more strongly and more convincingly. Early in the age of a person the question of whether we are from Sirius, or the Pleiades, or Procion, might come to mind. However, this is just a way to explain greater problems. In making your choice you have to decide what to believe in”

“Strange show”, Abel thought, “although after all I heard many stories of the kind”. The woman was even more attractive to his eyes, but he could not figure out for what in particular. He now felt the presence of the man in green as disturbing, still in the laid-back posture but now seemingly attentive to what the woman was saying.

“We now turn to the planets, orbiting our Sun and all lined up in the sky in this magnificent view. Mercury, Venus, Mars, they are all distinct bodies. The light reflected by a planet is very important to us humans, for reasons you might come to know. Comets come from the outer solar system and bring new kinds of light within the System. What is new is unknown, and maybe dangerous. You need to be careful. However, evil light from the exterior of the Solar System might replace the light of within the Solar System. So to speak, the false Green tends to replace the Blue and to take away the warm Red. It’s a danger but we must be realistic about it. It has always happened that way, but things might change”.

Abel was trying to make sense of what he just heard. The tone was of absolute seriousness and firmness, without being with the obsession of insanity. Only, she seemed to get worried for some reason. The man in green laughed softly but distinctively and the woman started, commenting harshly "Here the story repeats itself, if a decision is not made". He realized: she was referring to them in the audience. His impulse was immediate: "I am hearing you!" he said in a half-voice. Silence fell for a long moment, then quickly the woman considered in an understanding tone: "Please do not interrupt the presentation ...". Then she went on "Let's move on another topic. Venus can be seen as a bright object at the sunset hour in the west..."

The vault of the sky was shining, like a cloudless starry night when there are high winds. Abel considered the strangeness of the situation, of her words, of his reactions, and concluded that it was as strange as the notice outside of the museum talking about some choice to be made in the course of the show.

The woman in red passionately continued: "Look at the sky. Somewhere the Bug dwells and reproduces sending bursts on non-light to all the Worlds of the universe. You might have encountered the earthly interpretation of it. For sure blue light evaporates and red light is entangled. Don't you think it is your task to do something about it?". She paused almost waiting for an answer, her chin half raised and solemnly still for a moment.

The woman finally concluded her speech: "Now that you have been exposed to all of this information about the planets and the stars, and to glimpses

of the universe, the choice is all yours, whether to stay exposed or to get back to where you were before. You might have understood only a small part of what you heard, but isn't always like that at the first exposure to anything?"

Without further explanation, the lights came back on, but nobody moved. Only when the woman stepped down from the platform Abel rose from his seat and considered where to go. The woman quickly disappeared through a door on the back, and the man in green left the room from another exit. The hall was still and without sound. Abel exited the room from the same door from which he entered, walked back through the hallway and stepped down in the street, where it had stopped raining. It was still late evening, and the clear sky was glancing through wide openings in the clouds.

While finding his way home avoiding the huge puddles on the curbside he considered the choice he was supposed to make. The planetarium show looked as mysterious as meaningful to him. But on the other hand nothing had been really explained. "They lost me if there was something there" he thought.

The particle of the Exterior hit and was bounced back. Venus lowered on the horizon in a jerky movement, as late evening was approaching and long shadows were cast in gradual steps on the landscape. Soon afterwards, the first stars appeared slowly tracing almost regular circular motions in the sky. Somewhere the woman in red felt the presence and the memory of the man in green, and suffered in silence the sensation of being oppressed by some extraneous force, hoping for a beam of blue light. The wind still moved the



branches of the oaks in the park of the museum, but the stars were not glimmering in the black sky, but were instead still as stone, like small points of projected light. Only projected light until a different decision will be made.