

Adler blends fact with fantastic

By **STEVE JOHNSON**
Tribune reporter

The old sky shows at Adler Planetarium mostly put you, the viewer, on familiar terra firma, looking up at our own night sky beamed from the giant irradiated ant of a projector in the center of the room.

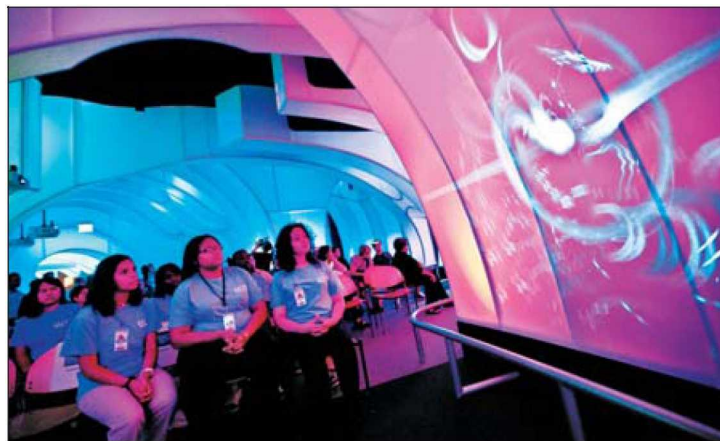
The new show at Chicago's lakefront space museum, which debuts to the public Friday, sheds the ant, the everyday, and even the Earth.

Thanks to a physical and technological makeover of the Adler's renamed central Grainger Sky Theater — and thanks to terabyte after terabyte of data coursing through new computer servers to create spectacularly vivid images — the first show in the new theater carries you across the cosmos, from the universe's post-big-bang coalescence to the black hole at the center of our galaxy and near the explosion of a supernova.

This data hog of a presentation gobbled up almost the very last minutes of available computer time in order to be ready for Wednesday's press premiere. Adler astronomer and project head Doug Roberts said he spent Tuesday night at the museum, watching over the creation of the show's last effect, a red giant star getting its mass suctioned off by a neighboring white dwarf.

But the result showcases every pixel of the domed theater's best-in-the-world capabilities, achieved with an array of 20 military-grade projectors mounted mostly in the dome's back walls (visitors now sit facing forward and up, not in the round). As you fly through star fields, or watch two galaxies collide, it can feel as if your eyes and jaw are competing to be open wider.

Call it Mr. Einstein's Wild Ride, an E=MC2-ticket attraction.



Adler visitors watch a "Deep Space Adventure" pre-show in the planetarium's Clark Family Welcome Gallery, which also features interactive exhibits.

The planetarium calls the 22-minute show "Deep Space Adventure," although it is also billed on-screen as "The Searcher." It drapes a science fiction story around the window it provides on science fact's very latest understanding of how astronomical objects and events appear and behave.

The title character, given friendly, patient voice by actor Billy Crudup, is a philosophical old alien — sort of a Yoda figure, without the vocal tics — said to be taking those in the theater on his ship to search for his lost people.

This quantum leap of the imagination is handled with good grace by scriptwriter Nick Sagan, a sci-fi writer and the son of 1970s astronomy popularizer Carl. We in the theater are able to travel so far and so fast, Sagan has our narrator explain, be-

cause of a "dark energy intergalactic jump drive."

Although his alien can get long-winded and New Age-y at times, especially in the show's take-care-of-your-beautiful-planet closing monologue/entreaty, having him on board does the job. It makes the show more than just a display of scientific know-how and visualization expertise, giving the less cosmologically inclined in the crowd a chance to connect, for instance, with the quest of this poor, lonely fellow.

Although the script does not belabor the point, the show does not stint on the science. The casual observer might think the visually intoxicating journey through our Milky Way galaxy, early on, is executed by displaying random points of light to represent random stars.

Deep Space Adventure

Where: Adler Planetarium, 1300 S. Lake Shore Drive, Chicago

When: During operating hours, beginning Friday

How much: \$28 (adults), \$22 (children 3-11) for Deep Space Adventure pass, including general admission, the DSA show and one other, and the Atwood Experience. Slightly cheaper for Chicago adults and children, who receive \$2 and \$1 discounts, respectively.

More info: 312-922-STAR, adlerplanetarium.org

Nope. This is, to the best of anyone's ability, an accurate three-dimensional model of our galaxy, all the known stars in their actual known starry places. The same goes for the show's other phenomena.

Where the artists step in is in imagining two extraterrestrial worlds, including the alien's trippy home planet, populated by flora that suggest Dr. Seuss in a darker mood. Another artist on hand: Italian composer Andrea Centazzo, who was himself at the planetarium late Tuesday, tweaking his score that gives the journey a touch of the epic.

The journey ends, though, not in space, but in Cook County, with a spectacular flyover of Chicago and back to the Adler. It's not only a way to bring it on home but a reminder, in the 3D-meets-IMAX feeling you get of actually flying through the city's skyscrapers, of just how much more this theater will be able to do.

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Adler Planetarium's "Deep Space Adventure" carries visitors across the cosmos, combining a science fiction story (written by Nick Sagan) with scientific fact.