

Our Sky Romance

Review by Stuart J. Goldman

How do we love astronomy? Let Timothy Ferris count the ways.

Seeing in the Dark

Produced, written, and narrated by Timothy Ferris (ClockDrive Productions, 2007). 60-minute documentary. Premieres September 19th, 8 p.m. EDT on PBS stations (check local listings).

ABOUT 10 MINUTES INTO watching Timothy Ferris's *Seeing in the Dark*, I thought, "This is the TV show that we wanted to make!" By "we" I mean the editors of *Sky & Telescope*. We've often talked about our desire for a show or series, light on science, focusing on how easy and enjoyable stargazing is (the primary ingredients for the late *Night Sky* magazine). In some respects, Ferris has given us exactly that. He's taken his lifetime of experience and offers a demonstration of the various ways astronomy fulfills people's lives.

The show, based on Ferris's book of the same title (*S&T*: November 2002, page 62), isn't a science documentary, but a testament to a love of the night sky. Amateur astronomers stargaze for different reasons. Each gets a thrill in his or her own way, be it introducing city dwellers to craters on the Moon, taking photos of distant nebulae, or contributing to professional research.

Much of the program is autobiographical. Ferris explains how his cosmic interests developed, from his first spyglass to his current personal observatory equipped with a Go To telescope. How I wish I was Ferris in his youth! I certainly wasn't born at the right time and living in the right place to pack



FRANCIS KENNY

up with high-school friends for a night on the beach to stargaze.

The peek into the author's past just lays the foundation for the program. He introduces us to other amateur astronomers, from all walks of life. Some will be familiar to *S&T* readers. Ferris doesn't bring us to desolate mountaintop observatories; instead we visit city sidewalks, woodland

retreats, and in the case of astrophotographer Rob Gendler, a suburban driveway. The highest peak reached is Breezy Hill in Vermont, to chat with the telescope makers of Stellafane.

Despite Ferris's humble beginnings and the basic-but-beautiful craft of Stellafane's tinkerers, the film soon showcases the high-tech equipment prevalent in the hobby today. Modern amateur astronomy has blurred the line with professional astronomy thanks to digital imaging and remotely operated telescopes.

To show how easy it is to set up a personal observatory in the Internet Age, the four brothers of Software Bisque set out to install a computerized telescope in an empty dome at New Mexico Skies, an observing resort and "telescope farm" at which anyone can buy time on a scope for personal use. The facility was ready to go in about three hours.

GEEK SQUAD As part of the *Seeing in the Dark* program, the tech quartet of Bisque brothers (*above*) set up an Internet-accessible telescope inside a dome at New Mexico Skies (*right*). Visit www.seeinginthedark.com to register to use it.



FRANCIS KENNY

FOR THE LOVE OF SCOPES

Telescope maker Normand Fullum builds some well-crafted skygazing tools. Documentarian Timothy Ferris caught up with him at the 2006 Stellafane convention in Vermont.

FRANCIS KEENEY



But there's no brotherly bustle to assemble the telescope. Like the rest of the show, the action is unharried. The buzz of a city street crowded with sidewalk astronomers is as busy as it gets. Ferris's soothing narration enhances the sense that no matter where he takes us, it's as if we're enjoying a quiet night alone under the stars.

This mellowness is in contrast to so many documentary programs about astronomy that focus on cosmic hot topics such that they become akin to tabloid television. I loathe clips of flashy animations repeated several times — or worse, alternately shown flopped and/or played at different speeds. *Seeing in the Dark* has no such “junk

video.” That's not to say that there aren't state-of-the-art special effects. Space artist Don Davis created several mesmerizing sequences, especially a journey through the Andromeda Galaxy.

A companion website promises extra goodies (www.pbs.org/seeinginthedark), but it will launch after this issue goes to press. Among the resources that should be available is access to the remote telescope that Ferris set up with Team Bisque.

Although I watched the program on a preview DVD, I'll still tune in to see it in high-definition. Shortly after the broadcast premiere, the film will be available on standard and high-definition DVDs.

SEEING IN THE DARK / TIMOTHY FERRIS



JOURNEYING BEYOND No television show about astronomy would be complete without some dazzling imagery. Ferris engaged the services of space artist Don Davis to create some high-definition special effects.

By reading this magazine you're already a sky aficionado to some degree. So to you, this show is preaching to the choir. But if you convince other people to watch it, maybe they'll understand you a bit better.

Featured observer — and musician — Michael Koppelman sums up the attitude of most amateur astronomers when he explains how he managed to image light from a star that exploded 11 billion years ago. Seeing the universe with our own eyes, he says, is “pretty dang cool.”

Associate editor STUART GOLDMAN *missed the show's production crew at Stellafane in 2006 because he went to his high-school reunion instead.*