



Funny side of space

In space no one can hear you laugh but a new planetarium show should have them rolling in the aisles

Moonstruck, the new planetarium show at the Life Science Centre in Newcastle, is notable for several reasons.

It has been narrated by Life's first ever comedian-in-residence and is, as far as director of communications Ian Simmons believes, the first humorous planetarium show anywhere.

"It's one of the fruits of Helen's appointment," says Ian who is clearly of the view that you'll learn more if you're laughing.

Helen's as busy as she is brainy and funny. This year has seen her chairing the popular Bright Club science comedy events at The Black Swan in Newcastle while during August she has been at the Edinburgh Fringe with her new Robot Woman of Tomorrow show, "a mix of technology, heartbreak and sexy robots".

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planetarium show about the moon to mark 40 years since humans last visited it, she seemed an absolute natural as a collaborator on the project," says Ian.

Moonstruck director Elin Roberts, head of public engagement at Life, worked with planetarium technical co-ordinator Chris Hudson on Moonstruck, the 11th home-produced planetarium show in the Life portfolio.

It was a challenge, she says, recalling a 19-hour filming session at Cullercoats to catch the tides.

But the aim was to create something original and a team effort was required. Other contributors were StoryCog's Jonathan Sanderson, the Dove Marine Laboratory, illustrator Dr Tom Whyntie, a particle physicist, and Tony Davies from the Cluny Studios.

"Although we've created

Moonstruck for our own use, it's got a pretty wide appeal," says Elin. "You just need a planetarium to show it in."

Moonstruck explains that the brightest and most visible object in the night sky - and a source of myth, superstition and even romance - is in fact recycled sunlight which takes eight minutes to saunter past the Earth before reaching the moon and bouncing off.

"From Earth," says Helen in the show, "the moon looks glaringly bright, almost white. But up close it's more like... well, Tarmac actually."

"The illusion of the moon as a gleaming white ball is just that, an illusion caused by looking at a dark object that is very brightly lit by the sun."

And the filming of the tides? "We needed to explain in the show how the moon affects the tides," explains Elin. "The Earth and the moon are sort of trapped together, each pulling on the other."

"The effect of its gravity gets weaker the further you move away from the moon. Water forms a bulge that we see as a high tide."

When we see the tide rushing in and out from the coast, it is easy to forget that it isn't the water that's moving on top of the Earth, but more that the Earth is moving under the water. Bonkers!"

And is it really over 40 years since the moon landing? "Following Armstrong and Aldrin's first footsteps, 10 more men walked on the dusty surface in only four years," says Elin. "Then, nothing. Nobody. Forty years ago we had the technology to take men to the moon and return them safely to Earth, yet only in the last few years have we thought to put wheels on suitcases."

Moonstruck opens on September 5. All activities, including Planetarium, Science Theatre and 4D Motion Ride admission, is included in entrance ticket price to Life Science Centre www.life.org.uk

