



Indy's **alternative** voice

Butler ArtsFest: The World on the Moon

by Scott Shoger @scottshoger – April 14, 2014

April 7 to 9, 2014 at Holcomb Observatory



The World on the Moon photos provided by Brent Smith, Butler University.

It's not quite like hearing that an understudy will be stepping in for Bette Midler for the night's performance, but it was a bit of a bummer to hear Jordan College of the Arts head [Ronald Caltabiano](#) inform the audience for Monday night's second performance of Haydn's 1777 sci-fi operetta *The World on the Moon* that technical difficulties would preclude the projection of spectacular moonscapes across the curved roof of the planetarium in Holcomb Observatory.

You see, you take away the visuals and you're just left sitting in a rather warm room, on creaky benches, as a horde of singers and musicians do their thing inches from your face. No matter; the crowd was, as far as I could tell, curmudgeon-free, and the classic planetarium projector at the center of the room was still working, so when the lights went out we still got to see a few stars across the sky (presumably, the other visuals would've been provided by ancillary equipment of more recent vintage, say a digital projector). And while the visuals might have added that extra oomph (and other attendees are welcome to speak to their impact in the comments below), the whole experience was winningly energetic in and of itself.

Here's why: First off, it's hard to resist the forward momentum, the bounciness, the bright tunefulness and melodicism of a Classical operetta, and the cast of student singers with a faculty orchestra was well rehearsed and convincing, performing an English translation from the original Italian. Beyond the music, the plot offered the kind of satisfying comeuppance for a rich and conceited buffoon, administered by a charismatic trickster, that you might expect from a comedy of the era. And the cast, with [Thomas Studebaker](#) as musical director and [William Fisher](#) as director (and both as co-producers), got plenty of mileage out of characters' pretenses and foibles without overplaying any funny business that might have proved a bit more raucous for an 18th-century crowd.



Second: It would've been a challenge to put on any sort of show in the space the size of Holcomb's planetarium, with Butler probably pushing fire code by allowing 40 guests for each performance, plus the singers and musicians. But an operetta poses additional problems: finding a balance between the orchestra and singers, trying not to deafen the front row when reaching for high notes, looking for sight lines when things get to the third act and everyone's on "stage," or rather will need to stand in the middle of the planetarium between the benches, trying not to knock over the lights or damage the valuable and fragile-looking projector.

So it could've been a train wreck. But it was anything but, and that's part of the fun of putting on - and going to - an unusual, site-specific show. You come up with your own innovative solutions, rooted in established performance practice (the harpsichord part remains the same, for instance) but unique to the situation, including goofy costumes that seemed to gesture toward '30s space serials - with noblemen dressed like attendants at a Lowe's Theater, circa well before I was born, and goofy outer-space costumes a la *Flash Gordon*, plus beer helmet.