

## Authentic Space Opera

by Rob Peoni – April 5, 2014

Angela Brown's performance of highlights from Porgy and Bess kicked off [Butler ArtsFest 2014 Thursday evening](#). In just its second year, the 14-day event aims to showcase the diverse talent of the university's arts department through a range of performances that offer students the opportunity to work and interact with professionals of national and international renown.

The ArtsFest's "Fables, Fairy Tales, and Physics" theme may appear odd at first glance, but the bond between science and the arts is one that dates back centuries, according to Dean of the Jordan College of Fine Arts, [Ronald Caltabiano](#). "There was a time in world history when astronomy and astrology had an extremely intimate and interwoven relationship with the arts, and particularly music," he said. One performance that Caltabiano believes fits the theme perfectly, is the opera department's adaptation of [Joseph Haydn's](#) The World on the Moon (Il Mondo della Luna).



*Photo: Nasa. The telescope in the Holcomb Observatory may not be quite this strong, but it can still capture amazing images. It's never seen an opera before. That'll be a first.*

"This piece makes that ancient connection between the arts and astrology explicit in a humorous way and an extraordinarily entertaining way," he said.

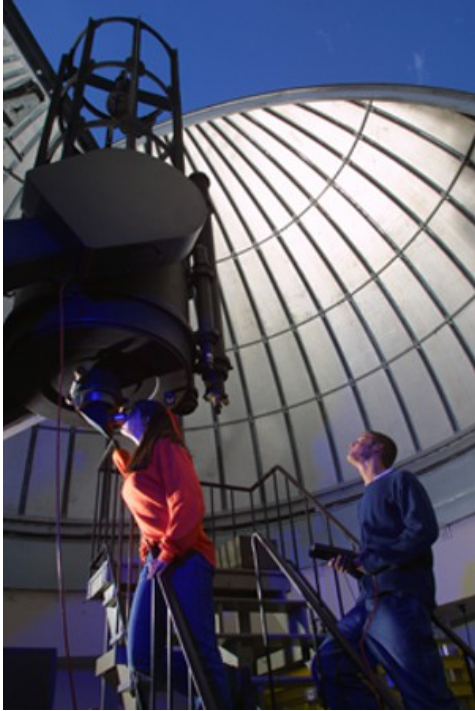
Haydn's overlooked 1777 opera centers around an old miser who finds himself duped out of his maid and two daughters in a comedic con game built upon a ruse of lunar proportions.

Caltabiano brought the idea of The World on the Moon to vocal professor and Director of Opera Theater, Tom Studebaker last spring after catching wind of Gotham Chamber Opera's 2010 performance at New York's Hayden Observatory. In order to pull it off, Studebaker and his students shrank Gotham's 90-minute performance (already down from Haydn's original three-hour set) to a mere 75 minutes.

"It is Haydn, so there are multiple places where there are repeats and that type of thing where we were able to dump some things," Studebaker said. "So, it lends itself to

being cut, but at this point we have really whittled it to the bone. It has been a real work and a real undertaking."

For a venue, Caltabiano suggested the intimate space of [Holcomb Observatory and Planetarium](#). Professor William Fisher was tasked with the role of stage director for the performance. "The first challenge was deciding which seats to take out and how to make it into a theater," Fisher said. "The next thing to figure out was where to put the stage so that having the star ball in the middle still made sense and still worked in terms of the locale and the action between people ... It's a very small space, but acoustically it's a large space. So, we're juggling those two things at once."



*Photo: Butler University. The 38-inch telescope in the observatory is in the midst of an upgrade, which will allow better observation of gamma ray bursts, among other phenomenon.*

Caltabiano expressed excitement over the opportunity to shed light on an under-appreciated work, saying: "Haydn is such a terrific composer ... but we don't know the Haydn operas. We know the Mozart operas. Thinking about this particular Haydn opera, I saw some interesting possibilities for doing a unique production."

Despite its relative obscurity, Studebaker said *The World on the Moon* is an accessible work that will resonate with listeners. "The audience might not recognize any specific tunes, but the tunes are classical," he said. "It's not a real heady or difficult music to understand or anything like that. So, harmonically it's very easy on the ears, and it's kind of a silly story. There's a lot of slapstick in it."

Caltabiano believes Butler's version of *The World on The Moon* will amount to a truly unique operatic experience that should open the audience's eyes and ears to new possibilities. "I want people to understand that opera doesn't have to be for 4,000 people at a time at the Metropolitan Opera House," Caltabiano said. "Opera is for everybody and can happen anywhere and opera is always new."

Thus far, the students have impressed Studebaker with their ability to rise to the challenge, and he looks forward to sharing their version of *The World on The Moon* with Indy residents.

"They are a really great group of kids," Studebaker said. "They're hard workers. As difficult an undertaking as this has been, they have done as they always have and stepped up to the plate and done an excellent job. I'm really proud of them."

Performances for *The World on the Moon* will take place in Holcomb Observatory and Planetarium twice each evening between Monday, April 6 and Wednesday, April 9.