

The King's Astronomer

A one act play [15 mins.] by Wally Smith [Mob: 07838 029528 e-mail: silverscouse@hotmail.co.uk]

Characters:

William Herschel: Astronomer to King George III

Caroline Herschel: William's sister

Dr Richard Watson: A Fellow of the Royal Society

Synopsis:

In 1782, William Herschel, discoverer of the planet Uranus, was embarking on the construction in Slough of what would become the largest telescope in the world, a project of such international interest that for a period of time the Observatory House at Slough, Herschel's home which he shared with his sister, Caroline, would become very well known. So much so that royalty, nobility and others were regular visitors to the site.

Herschel's discovery of a new planet had given him celebrity status both in Britain and abroad, and while this had assisted in the funding of his telescope construction, the downside of this, in his view, was the need for his public appearances, depriving him of precious time at his telescopes.

Caroline (CH) and William (WH) are in the house together. The action takes place in a downstairs lounge of Herschel's house. There is one door stage right. A window provides a distant view of

Windsor castle. The furnishings are Georgian. There are two armchairs and a small side table. William is recovering from a sickness and wears a heavy long coat or dressing gown.

CH: William, William! You have not taken the medication I left for you on the table.

WH: (distracted) What? Oh yes, I'm sorry. I've been so preoccupied with last night's calculations. Lina, tell me what you consider this may be. There is a distinct variance in the magnitude of delta Orionis...though of course it may just be an aberration in the new optics I am testing...

CH: William – your medication!

WH: (reluctantly) Yes, dear sister.

CH: William, you know that I can do these calculations for you. You said so yourself and you would do far better to concentrate on getting yourself back into good health. Please take time to rest or you shall never be well enough to travel to Hanover next week.

WH: Ah, I had all but forgotten the trip to Hanover. Yet another honour: I am to be elected to the... What was it, Lina?

CH: A Member of the Royal Society of Göttingen. It is a very prestigious award – and in our home town. I do so wish I were going with you. Remember to give my love to Mama.

WH: Of course I shall. You know I would have you travel with me, but I need you to stay here and oversee the work on the large telescope. All these awards just for

discovering a planet which has yet to be officially named; and it diverts so much of my time from my observations.

CH: Be thankful, William: it is this discovery which has given you the wherewithal to be able to build the new telescope.

WH: Ah, now you have reminded me - I must check on the mirror.

[William gets up from the chair he has occupied and makes to leave the room.]

CH: William!

WH: Yes, yes, very well. (he drinks medicine) Ugh! What is this, Lina?

CH: It will help soothe your chest, and if you are to resume your observations you must get your strength back first.

[Caroline makes him sit in the chair again]

I do so regret that damp house we lived in at Datchet.

WH: I consider it was the cold as much as the damp that did for me. You remember the night the eyepiece cracked in the telescope tube?

CH: I would rather not, dear brother. I feared you would die that night, it was so bitterly icy.

WH: (tenderly) I am so thankful for your being here with me Caroline. I am not sure I could have achieved half so much without you.

CH: And you must not forget the help and support that Dr Watson has given to you. He so enjoys being a part of

this project, but he is also just as anxious as I that you are restored to good health before your journey to Hanover and before you spend more hours in the workshop.

WH: Yes, the good doctor is a true friend. I find it hard to believe sometimes that such an august gentleman as Dr Watson, Fellow of the Royal Society, can so enjoy rolling up his sleeves and polishing the mirror for an hour or more until he is dissolved in sweat. If his colleagues at the Royal Society could see him... (both laugh)

CH: He chooses to do it because he believes in you. Sometimes, dear brother, I think you have difficulty in believing in yourself.

WH: Lina, you understand me too well. I admit there have been times when I have considered resuming my duties as orchestra director. The post in Bath provided sufficient income for my needs and it was something I was passionate about. All too often people are subjected by necessity to roles in life which they detest, whereas I...

CH: Your passion for the heavens proved the stronger, *and* you discovered a planet, so now the whole world knows your name.

WH: Yes, and that almost makes me feel as though I have some sort of responsibility to do more, and which is why I am so reliant on you, Lina.

CH: Oh William, I love both you and astronomy, but you need much more in your life. [*Pause*] When are you to next visit Mrs Pitt?

WH: Ah, dear Caroline, your subtlety is a force of nature itself. Mrs Pitt has been widowed but a year and I

should think that attentions from one such as myself may be somewhat premature.

CH: I have observed you in each other's company and it is abundantly clear to me that you share an empathy of companionship.

WH: (laughing) I have always said that your observational expertise was of very high order but I would prefer you set your eyes against the heavens instead of on my romantic aspirations.

CH: (triumphantly) So, you do enjoy more than a passing acquaintanceship?

WH: (guarded) She is a very handsome woman with a calm disposition and lightness of spirit: she has a keen interest in my work, albeit without the technical understanding. And yes we have on occasions exchanged conversations on a number of subjects

CH: Oh, William, do you have feelings for Mary?

WH: I must confess I do, Lina. However, I do not want to subject dear Mary to a life ... to a man who is totally preoccupied with his work, for I assure you that I shall not be able to put aside any of my current undertakings.

CH: I know that, of course, but as a woman I can tell you that if she has a fondness for you, which I am sure she does, she will understand the importance of what you do and be entirely supportive as your wife.

WH: I feel we are getting far too far ahead of ourselves on this matter. We will speak of this at another time, since I believe I hear the doctor on his way across the yard.

[Enter Dr Watson out of breath from his exertions. The doctor is middle aged and somewhat overweight]

Dr W: How are you feeling William? Has he taken his medicine, Caroline?

WH: Now I am beleaguered with both of you! (laughs) I was about to come over to the workshop to see how the mirror was shaping.

Dr W: Relax, my dear friend, you need to get your strength back. Everything is in order. I had concerns about the thickness of one of the edges of the speculum but it is fine.

CH: May I offer you a drink, doctor?

Dr W: Splendid idea! I feel as though every bone in my body is shrieking.

WH: You are doing too much. There are others, myself included, who are well able to carry on the polishing of the mirror.

Dr W: Your return to good health must come first otherwise you will be of use to no-one. Do not forget also that you have a journey to undertake very soon.

WH: These are the chores I could well do without. The time that is squandered in their undertaking would be better used in observing.

CH: Your drink, doctor.

Dr W: Thank you, my dear. (drinks) Ah, excellent. These ales brewed in the country are of a much finer quality than those in London. I daresay the local Slough waters are somewhat purer. (takes a further drink) Now, William,

these so-called chores that you refer to are what is going to keep this project very much alive.

WH: I am not sure I follow what you are saying.

Dr W: Well, I have not been a member of the Royal Society for many years without knowing that the revelations of scientific discovery are not the sole means for advancing the cause for further research. Like it or not, William, your discovery has made your name famous not only throughout the scientific world but in the world at large.

WH: (despondently) I know this only too well. I have recently received a letter from the Empress Catherine II requesting to purchase one of my telescopes, which I know will be gathering dust after the initial novelty of it has waned.

CH: Let us not forget that you also received a letter from Benjamin Franklin informing you that you had been made a member of the American Philosophical Society.

Dr W: Absolutely. Remember, William, that while such plaudits are coming your way, your fame will also attract the funds for this and further projects. King George has pledged monies, as well you know.

WH: Ah, yes, but we all know His Majesty is not...er...in the best of health and his mind might change at a moment's notice.

Dr W: True; and which is why these trips and appearances are of such paramount importance.

WH: All this because of a planet. It is not as though it is my only piece of work.

- Dr W: And that reminds me of some other matters I had wished to talk to you about.
- WH: My dear doctor, there is an ominous tone to your voice which I am finding unnerving. Please tell all.
- Dr W: Well, I spoke to the Royal Society about your work on eyepieces and..
- WH: Go on.
- Dr W: They are entirely sceptical of your claim that you can produce a magnification of 5,400.
- WH: (angry) Well, all they have to do is to make a trip to Slough and I will give them the evidence.
- Dr W: William, I do not suspect that it is in fact your integrity as an observer or craftsman that is in question.
- WH: Then I am at a loss to understand.
- Dr W: I believe their scepticism rather emanates from elsewhere and that they are merely compounding their disbelief. Erm..their.. anxieties rest primarily with your theory on the Proper Motion of the Sun and the Solar System. Your paper was rather too much for most of them to accept. In one stroke you have taken the sun from the centre of the universe and set it on a journey through the galaxy. I had intended to send you a report about this but in view of your illness I thought better of it.
- WH: Hah, why I am I not surprised in the least! Anything which might question a belief that has prevailed for centuries is seemingly so unpalatable for them. You did, of course, furnish them with the results of those star motions?
- Dr W: Naturally, and this is where I have rather more encouraging news and why you should conserve your

energies for undertaking these trips. Support for your theory is coming in from certain astronomical circles. Tobias Mayer..

WH: From Göttingen?

Dr W: The very same...he has supplied information on the proper motion of a further forty four stars.

CH: Oh William, that is wonderful news!

WH: We shall begin correlating the figures at once using the twenty foot telescope. *[William jumps to his feet but begins coughing at once]*

Dr W: All in good time, my friend. I believe we shall also receive information from France about the observations of Monsieur Laplace. For the meantime, stay here in the warmth of this room, you are clearly in no fit state for anything strenuous just yet.

WH: (glumly) So I am to sit in my house and observe through the window the progress of construction?

Dr W: You also have a wonderful view of Windsor Castle.

WH: Ah, yes, the Castle, wherein sits my benefactor.

Dr W: And also His Grace, The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Prince of Orange...and various other nobility from far and wide, whose names I cannot recall at this moment.

WH: I hope you are not suggesting, doctor, that all are gathered at Windsor with the intention of visiting this household.

Dr W: It would seem to be a part of the itinerary His Majesty has set out for his guests.

WH: Oh Heavens, will it never cease?

Dr W: You must face up to the facts, William. You are constructing something which can be seen from a considerable distance and which has not unnaturally aroused a good deal of interest, not only from the local population of Slough and its environs but from those further afield. I would say that your fame has increased in direct proportion to the sizes of your telescopes, and with the building of this 40 foot giant it has extended your fame globally. Whether or not you desire it, and it is my opinion that you certainly deserve it, you have achieved a popularity that some of my esteemed colleagues at the Royal Society would most certainly envy.

WH: And it would appear that such popularity comes with a price.

Dr W: You have been bestowed the title of King's Astronomer for a very good reason, which is to underline the fact that you have put Britain, your adopted country, at the forefront of observational astronomy, which can only be to the benefit of the acquisition of funds for further projects and research.

CH: Dr Watson is correct in what he says, William. Your fame will, I am sure, be no transient phenomena. The seventh planet will surely carry your name.

WH: I sincerely hope that that will not be the case. I believe my naming it 'Georgium sidus' after His Majesty to have been entirely appropriate, given the support he has provided for my work.

Dr W: I fear the proposal was rather too nationalistic for our French neighbours, and I have to agree in some respects. I myself would prefer to see any future exploration of our universe conducted on an

international basis, rather than national flags flying from the soil of other worlds.

WH: Well then, can we not just follow the classical planetary lineage and call it Uranus after the Greek for Heaven?

Dr W: Now that is a splendid idea, William. I think you may well have achieved a conclusion to this debate. The name certainly sits well with the known planets and who knows, with the observations of your new telescope there will doubtless be other wonders of the universe to be revealed and maybe even more planets. I shall propose it at the next meeting of the Society. Whatever else, I am quite sure that the name of William Herschel will certainly be long remembered.

WH: Then I shall join you in your drink, doctor. I need something to take away the taste of the medicine.

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