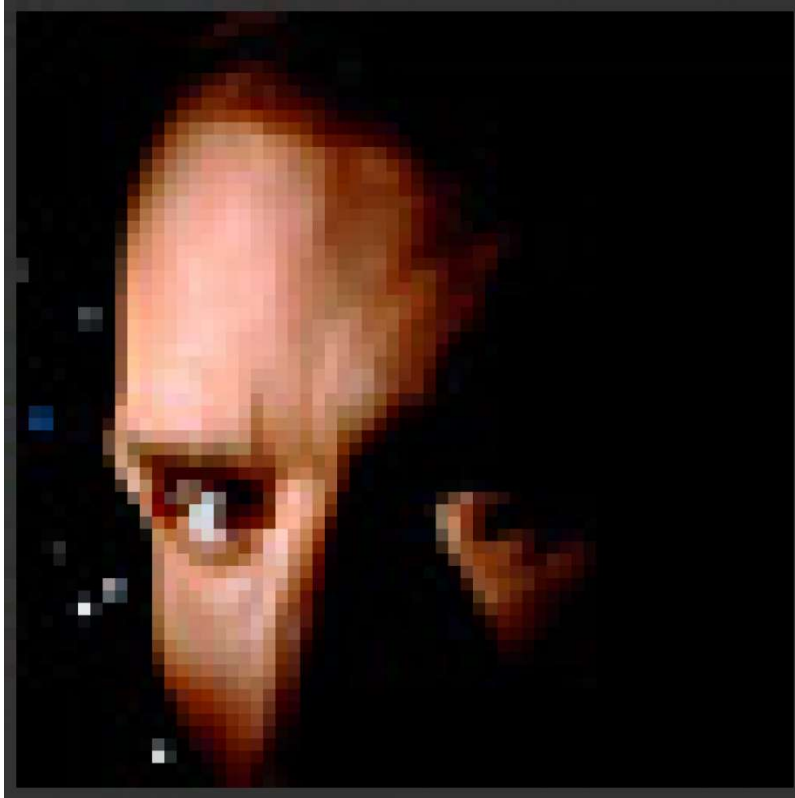


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That Science Guy is back, in 'Eyes of Nye'

By TOM PAULSON, SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

Published 10:00 pm, Monday, April 4, 2005



Bill Nye brings his wacky humor to a new series that tackles issues of the day from a scientific perspective.

Seattle's favorite "Science Guy" will launch a new television show at 8 p.m. tonight on KCTS/9 and selected other public television stations nationwide with a look at astrobiology, the search for life on other planets, and nuclear energy.

Bill Nye's latest creation, produced by KCTS after a difficult and delayed liftoff, is aimed largely at young adults and called the "Eyes of Nye." It is intended as a hard-edged but humorous look at some of the more controversial topics of the day -- nuclear energy, climate change, genetically modified foods and, of course, sex.

"We want to present important issues that can be looked at from a scientific perspective, but in an entertaining way," said Nye in a telephone interview.

The first of 13 half-hour episodes opens with Nye expounding in typically manic

fashion about how the sun is just one of "billions and billions" of stars in the universe. It's a tribute-parody to the late cosmologist **Carl Sagan**, one of Nye's professors at **Cornell University** and a scientist who greatly popularized the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence, or SETI.

Nye interviews Dr. **Seth Shostak**, senior astronomer at the **Center for SETI Research**, in the mountain town of Hat Creek in Northern California where the organization -- thanks to a large donation from billionaire **Paul Allen** -- is building a cutting-edge new radio telescope array to improve the odds of detecting signs of intelligent life out there.

The show features other top scientists in this arena, such as **Chris McKay**, a NASA astrobiologist, and **Debra Fischer**, a "planet hunter" at the **University of California**, Berkeley. But such heavyweight scientists don't make for heavy eyelids, as can happen with some of these popular science shows.

Nye is a former Boeing engineer whose name (besides meaning "new" in Danish) has become synonymous with wacky popular science ever since he became a cast member on KING/5's now defunct late-night comedy show, "Almost Live."

Some actors from that local comedy show appear in "Eyes of Nye" as part of the program's formula for injecting humor. In the premiere episode, the hilariously languid **Bob Nelson** is an irritating high school science teacher and **Pat Cashman** plays an advertising executive hoping to sell "Fizzy Cola" to the newly discovered worm people of Titan.

The "Eyes of Nye" is clearly an attempt to capitalize on the Science Guy's name recognition, to shift from Nye's mostly comedic and more kid-oriented stuff to what might be dubbed a "seriocomic" program on major issues for science and culture.

But is Nye a bit too wacky for a serious look at science? That appears to have been the view of the PBS network, which declined to distribute "Eyes of Nye." American Public Television is distributing the show instead.

"PBS wanted more serious, in-depth 'Nova'-style shows," said **Randy Brinson**, general manager at KCTS and a co-producer of Nye's new show. The rejection by PBS delayed the project, Brinson said, as did some other local production issues.

Nye blames KCTS's financial turmoil (before Brinson's management) for the delays and problems with "Eyes of Nye." Though some point the finger at Nye for cost overruns and delays, he simply noted that the station's previous general manager was fired. He said he has a good relationship with Brinson and KCTS now.

Brinson said the station isn't making any money on the project yet, but noted that some 100 public television stations plan to run it -- which may lead to further plans to expand the market (such as to high schools) that could turn a profit.

As for finding the right balance between serious discussion and comedy, Nye said he hopes his approach will bring in viewers -- especially young people -- who may be turned off by the strictly serious (and often embarrassingly earnest) approach taken by other shows.

Sure, he said, these are serious issues. But that doesn't mean you can't have a substantive discussion that includes humor.

"I find both humor and grimness in most issues," said Nye, who despite having moved to Los Angeles evidently retains his Northwest perspective on life.

In the following weeks, "Eyes of Nye" will examine the science of sports, the evolution of sex, global warming, cloning, the biological basis of race (preview: there isn't any ...), addiction, disease and pseudoscience. Nye often ends each program taking a stand on the issue at hand and encouraging viewers to get involved.

Local scientists and experts are featured in many episodes of "Eyes of Nye," such as **University of Washington** geneticist Dr. **Mary Claire King** -- who examines Nye's DNA in the episode on race and biology -- and Seattle uber-trainer and former Olympic athlete Peter Shmock on the science of sports.

For more information on the program, go to www.eyesofnye.org or www.kcts.org.

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