



DN-R File

William Alexander, director of James Madison University's planetarium, says area residents no longer have to go to Richmond for a realistic look at the cosmos once the newly-renovated planetarium reopens on campus this weekend.

Planetarium Set To Open Saturday

Two Shows Will Play Starting At 2:30 p.m.

By **HEATHER BOWSER**
Daily News-Record

HARRISONBURG — For the first time in about three years, folks can take a quick tour of the Milky Way, courtesy of James Madison University.

On Saturday, the university will reopen its newly renovated, pumped-up planetarium for free shows to the public.

The school closed the old John C. Wells Planetarium in 2005 because it didn't have funds to fix up its old star machine, which had gone kaput. But after the school reallocated funds and several groups kicked in some cash, the facility was fixed up and reopened.

Now, thanks to a \$1.3 million upgrade, the starry room has the

technology to show "full dome" movies in conjunction with the traditional "star talk" about the constellations, officials said. The experience feels more akin to a mini-IMAX theater than the sleepy-eyed stargazing shows of the 1980s.

"It's something different to do and it's here, in Harrisonburg," said William Alexander, planetarium director and assistant professor of astronomy. "You don't have to go all the way to Richmond."

And, he said, JMU's setup is more advanced than most planetariums in the nation. Only about a half dozen are equipped with the technology to play the movies.

"Astronomy is a great vehicle to attract people to science," Alexander said. "You'd have a tough time to get this many people interested in a physics experiment."

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Movies To Be Featured

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Check It Out

Here's how to get your free peek at the stars:

Starting this weekend, Alexander will show two movies every Saturday through December, with the exception of the Saturday after Thanksgiving, when the facility will be closed.

The free event takes about 50 minutes with a 25-minute movie and 25-minute star talk related to the movie.

■ At 2:30 p.m., JMU will show the movie "Legends of the Night Sky: Orion," a cartoon about the Greek mythology behind one of the most famous constellations. This movie is geared for children and families.

■ At 3:30 p.m., Alexander will play the movie "Black Holes: The Other Side Of Infinity," a computer-generated animated movie about the novelty and complexity of nature's most massive occurrences. This movie is better suited for teen and adult audiences.

The room, located in Miller Hall just north of the Quad, accommodates about 60 people. Tickets are required and will not be distributed on Saturdays.

The movies are expensive — about \$5,000 each — so JMU will be showing only these two shows during this semester. JMU owns 14

See The Stars

Starting this weekend, JMU will open its planetarium for free shows every Saturday through December, except the Saturday after Thanksgiving, at 2:30 p.m. and 3:30 p.m. The earlier show is geared toward an audience for children, the later one is more for adults.

To reserve tickets, call 568-7960.

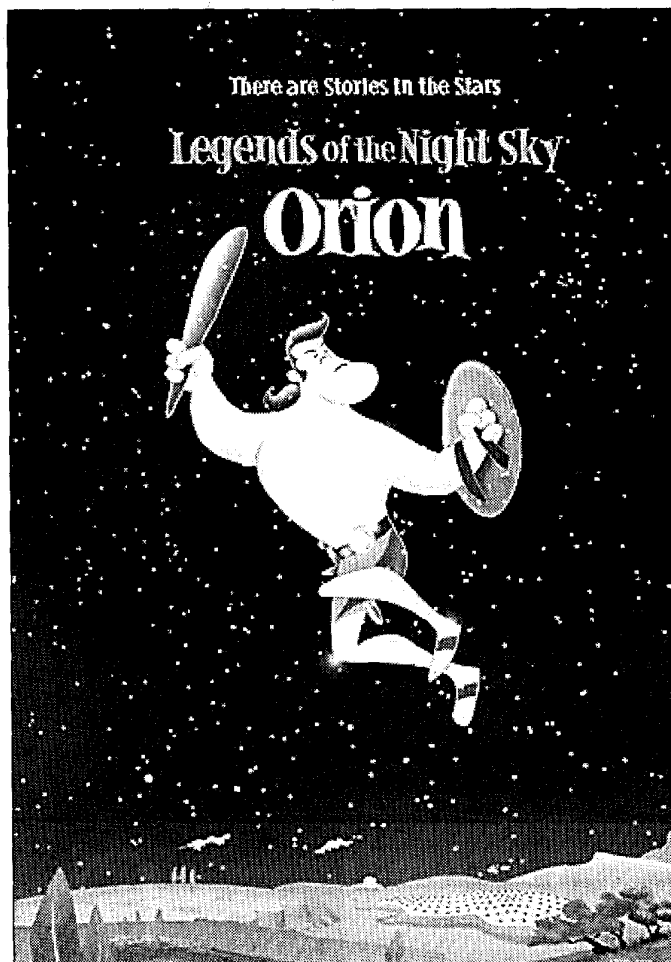
For more information, e-mail planetarium@jmu.edu or visit www.jmu.edu/planetarium.

shows, so they will not repeat movies for about two to three years, Alexander said. Next semester's schedule and movie titles will be released in early Decembers on the planetarium's Web site.

Alexander will emcee the shows himself until JMU student interns are trained on the complexities of the equipment and knowledge of the stars.

"I thought the show was very, very cool," said Evan Witt, a JMU senior from Long Island who watched "Black Hole" on Wednesday. "I work with Big Brothers Big Sisters and I'd love to bring [little brother] Ben here to see this. It feels like you're at a theme park on one of those magic motion rides."

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Courtesy Art

"Legends of the Night Sky: Orion" is a 25-minute cartoon movie about the Greek mythology behind one of the most famous constellations. This movie, which is geared for child audiences, will be shown at JMU at 2:30 p.m. every Saturday through December, with the exception of the Saturday after Thanksgiving.