

'Astronaut's View' a global perspective

Images from shuttle humble the viewer

By Dan Rice

"We set out to explore new worlds, then looked back at an even more startling sight. On the way into space, we discovered the earth." With these words narrator William Shatner introduces us to a most thrilling vision, "An Astronaut's View of Earth," debuting Tuesday, March 17, on PBS.

Produced, written and directed by Joseph Blatt, "An Astronaut's View" is the literal height of planetary perspective. The out-of-this-world experience is further elevated by background music composed and performed by the Talking Heads' David Byrne, which appropriately rings both global and extraterrestrial at once.

The program begins with a brief history of aerial photography, which had its start less than 150 years ago. Camera-carrying hot-air balloons, kites and even carrier pigeons whetted our fascination with views of Earth from space.

Today NASA has loaded the state-of-the-art IMAX film system into our highest-flying craft, the space shuttle. Providing 10 times the image size of conventional motion-picture cameras, the IMAX camera is the largest in the world, but in zero gravity astronaut Kathy Sullivan has no trouble maneuvering it within the ship. (IMAX films are shown on wrap-around screens in specially built theaters in many American cities.)

The IMAX feature "The Dream Is Alive," which has been described as the closest thing to living and working with the shuttle crew, was followed last year with a second shuttle-shot film, "Blue Planet," a once-around-the-block trip that will forever change your mind about geography.

"An Astronaut's View of Earth" includes portions of "Blue Planet" and gives insight to its production. "Blue Planet" producer Graham Ferguson had to plan each shot

carefully from the ground in Houston; the small supply of heavy IMAX film aboard the shuttle didn't provide for many second takes.

Sullivan and fellow crew members Charlie Bolden and John Blaha widen our views of Earth with historical, geological and personal commentary. In the midst of such beauty, as Sullivan relates, anything ugly, like pollution, sticks out. The Blue Planet is marred by the brown haze enveloping large cities. The warm hues of nurturing soils are rapidly being overtaken by cold patches of lifeless concrete.

The marvel of seeing the entire western hemisphere at night turns to sadness when it is revealed that the continental outline is made up not only of city lights, but also of fires destroying our rain forests.

Still, astronaut Bolden finds hope in this global panorama.

"The perspective that you get from space is that it (Earth) is happy...it is one. There are no dividing lines between peoples and nations."

Share "An Astronaut's View of Earth" and take a thoughtful look at the big house we all live in."

BITS AND PIECES

Hayley reflects on 'Roots,' leaves 'Queen' unfinished

Less than a month before his untimely death due to a heart attack, 70-year-old author Alex Haley recalled the beginnings of his novel *Roots*.

"I was 6 years old and my grandfather had just died, and my grandmother — my mother's mother — was ridden with grief. And she had invited her sisters to come and spend the next summer with her.

"And the sisters came. Each evening after supper, they would go out on the front porch and rock.

"And they would talk. They talked about their family history. They were just full of love, night after night after night. They couldn't get enough of recalling their father, Tom Murray, their mother, Arina, their grandfather, Chicken George, and so on. And his mother, Miss Kizzy, and her father, the African, in Spotsylvania County, Va.

"I heard these stories so much they just simply became a part of my memory bank. I grew up with that in my head. And I don't think I thought (again) about the stories told on the front porch for nearly 40 years.

"Then in the '60s, there was so much talk about Africa and black people and such as that, somehow my mind went back to the first time I'd ever heard about Africa. It was that African, who was in the family. That was what started me going."



Alex Haley

At the time of his death on Feb. 10 of this year, Haley had just concluded an agreement with CBS to write another miniseries, *Queen*, which was to have been based on the life of his father's mother, who was the fair-skinned daughter of a slave and her master.

Haley was philosophical about his acclaim. "There's a saying that people who make culture generally don't realize they are doing it. They're just doing what they do. If I could plead anything, that would pretty much be it. I was doing what I do, and what I love to try and do."