

# A SIDEWALK ASTRONOMER

A FILM ABOUT ASTRONOMY, COSMOLOGY & JOHN DOBSON

## THE NEW YORK TIMES

### FILM REVIEW; A Stargazer Who Exhorts The World to Gaze With Him

By **DANA STEVENS**

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"Come see the moon," John Dobson entreats passers-by on the streets of San Francisco as he encourages them to peer into his telescope in the opening frames of "A Sidewalk Astronomer." "Come see the moon!" With similarly passionate enthusiasm, this digital-video documentary, directed by Jeffrey Fox Jacobs, which begins a weeklong run today at the Two Boots Pioneer Theater in the East Village, invites viewers to pause for a moment and consider their place in the solar system, the galaxy and the universe.

Mr. Dobson is the inventor of the Dobsonian telescope mount, which revolutionized astronomy by making powerful and inexpensive telescopes available to amateur stargazers. At 89, he spends his days traveling from college lecture halls to astronomy clubs to a convention of telescope makers in Vermont, spreading his gospel of curiosity about the stars.

Mr. Dobson defines himself as a cosmologist rather than an astronomer, noting that he is interested not only in the stars but also in "the whole ball of wax." He is also a kind of spiritual teacher, having spent more than two decades as a monk in a Vedanta monastery of the Ramakrishna order in San Francisco before leaving to start the Sidewalk Astronomers, a worldwide group of hobbyists who build their own telescopes and congregate for "star parties."

Mr. Dobson has a gift for explaining scientific

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concepts in the form of wry one-liners. Noting that our bodies contain the dust of exploded stars, he points to a photograph of a nebula, saying, "If you give this cloud another 10 billion years, it will go to school and chew gum."

Mr. Dobson also holds some beliefs that are unconventional in the astronomy community. He rejects the Big Bang theory, for example, sneering: "You try to persuade some little kid that something came out of nothing. There's no way. He has to graduate from high school before he can possibly be stupid enough to think like that."

As Mr. Dobson philosophizes in voice-over, we see stunningly beautiful images of the planets, stars and galaxies he describes. Unfortunately, the film fails to make clear which of these images come directly from satellite or spacecraft photographs, and which have been enhanced by computer animation. But this quibble aside, "A Sidewalk Astronomer" is an inspiring film about an inspired teacher. It should leave all viewers with an ounce of curiosity eager to hit the streets with Dobsonian telescopes of their own.

A Sidewalk Astronomer  
Opens today in Manhattan.

Produced and directed by Jeffrey Fox Jacobs; director of photography, Mr. Jacobs; edited by Jeanne Vitale; music by John Angier; released by Jacobs Entertainment Inc. At the Two Boots Pioneer Theater, 155 East Third Street, at Avenue A, East Village. Running time: 78 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: John Dobson.