

How Southworth Planetarium became the stage for a new play

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The Southworth Planetarium at University of Southern Maine in Portland will be the venue for “REDshift” by Freeport playwright Chalmers Hardenbergh. The play tells the story of a young woman with autism whose passion leads her to use the Hubble Space Telescope to create the Hubble Deep Field. It’s the first time a play has ever been staged at the planetarium and could open up new possibilities for the space.

Ben McCanna/Portland Press Herald

It was April 2024, and Freeport playwright Chalmers Hardenbergh had been searching for a theater to stage his new work about the Hubble Space Telescope.

Hardenbergh has long been fascinated by space and had recently observed the total solar eclipse. He was reading a story about the event in the Portland Press Herald, which quoted Edward Herrick-Gleason, the longtime director of the Southworth Planetarium at the University of Southern Maine.

The stars aligned.

“I should try to do the play at the planetarium,” Hardenbergh thought.



Chalmers Hardenbergh sits in the Southworth Planetarium during a rehearsal of his play “REDShift.” *Ben McCanna/Portland Press Herald*

This month, the Southworth Planetarium will host four readings of the play, titled “REDshift.” It is likely the first theatrical event ever staged there, and the dome will provide the perfect backdrop for a story that considers the universe beyond the naked eye. John Haley, who succeeded Herrick-Gleason as director in May and has helped Hardenbergh with the projections for “REDshift,” said the reading could introduce new audiences to the planetarium — and the planetarium to potential new uses.

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“All of that just sets us up to be in someone’s mind for, what’s the next big thing that has to do with space and science and storytelling,” Haley said.

Hardenbergh can trace the play’s origin to 1996, when NASA unveiled a new and important image from the Hubble Space Telescope. The Hubble Deep Field showed at least 1,500 galaxies – most of them so faint they had never been seen before. The groundbreaking moment made such a deep impression on Hardenbergh, who studied astronomy as an undergraduate, that he remembered it years later when he started writing plays.



Mark Routhier, right, directs actors during a rehearsal of “REDShift,” by Freeport playwright Chalmers Hardenbergh, in Southworth Planetarium. *Ben McCanna/Portland Press Herald*

He researched the Hubble Deep Field and eventually corresponded with Dr. Bob Williams, director of the Space Telescope Science Institute in Baltimore, who pushed for the experiment that revealed the Hubble Deep Field. Hardenbergh said the two learned they shared the same favorite play “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time” by Simon Stephens, which is based on the novel of the same name by Mark Haddon.

The main character in that story has autism. Williams’ wife is a pediatric psychologist who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of autism disorders, and the couple founded a nonprofit in Baltimore that places adults with autism in the workplace. Hardenbergh said his conversations with Williams shaped the play, including his decision to create a fictional main character who has autism. In “REDShift,” Elisse Roberts’ passion for space leads her to use the Hubble Space Telescope to create the Hubble Deep Field.

“I really started with my own inclinations,” Hardenbergh said. “I was spellbound when I was a teenager and into college years and remain fascinated by the sense of the vastness of space. I wanted Elisse to have that same characteristic, that same curiosity, that same desire to explore.”

Joe Quinn, an actor who lives in Scarborough, will play Williams at the upcoming readings. What struck him about the story, he said, was the scientist's belief in "the inclusivity of knowledge." He said Williams encouraged that the images from the Hubble Space Telescope be shared widely so they could be appreciated by many.



Actors Kim Gordon, left, and Michela Micalizio rehearse "REDShift" in Southworth Planetarium. *Ben McCanna/Portland Press Herald*

"It's not just for one type of person," Quinn said. "You don't have to be a white male astronomer to appreciate this particular field. You can come at it from many different backgrounds, and still you have the intellectual capacity to appreciate it."

The collaboration with the Southworth Planetarium reflects that same spirit. The 360-degree dome hosts about 10,000 visitors every year for astronomy classes, lectures, star tours, shows for all ages, even musical performances and storytelling events. The production will use the dome to project images such as an exploding star or the Hubble Deep Field itself.

"The chance to see the images projected all across the ceiling of the planetarium will give them a better idea of what is at stake for these people, to go from the limited field that could be achieved by ground-based telescopes and the more detailed field that could be obtained by the Hubble," Quinn said.

The upcoming shows are staged readings rather than full-fledged productions, so the actors will use their scripts. But Haley believes it is the first play ever in the planetarium space. It is far from a traditional theater — there is no backstage or curtain — but he hopes the readings show its possibilities.

“It’s one more way that we are bridging the gap between art and science,” he said.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: “REDshift: A play reading under the stars of Southworth Planetarium”

WHERE: Southworth Planetarium at the University of Southern Maine in Portland, 70 Falmouth St.

WHEN: Jan. 10, 11, 17 and 18 at 7:30 p.m.

HOW MUCH: \$12 for adults, \$11 for seniors, \$6 for students. Tickets can be purchased at the door or [at this link](#).

INFO: For more information about the Southworth Planetarium, visit usm.maine.edu/southworth-planetarium or call 207-780-4249.

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