

litmuspaper

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Edited by Stet Press

TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS



Ian Banks and Mark Porter
The Man Manual
1-2 pm/Everyman

Mike Goldsmith
Albert Einstein
4-5 pm/Town Hall

Kate Humble, Kathy Sykes,
Jonathan Hare and Mike Leahy
Really Rough Science
7-8 pm/Everyman

Beauty and the Botox: the fairytales revealed

by Sara-Jane Arbury

Judging by the audience that attended the talk about "The Science of Beauty" yesterday, face rejuvenation seems to be primarily a feminine concern. Women of all ages and at varying stages of inevitable epidermal erosion listened attentively to Dr Nicholas Lowe, Clinical Professor of Dermatology, as he peeled off the layers surrounding the secrets of the anti-ageing industry.

After listing the most popular characteristics of an attractive human face (illustrated with pictures of Nicole Kidman and – yes girls – Prince William), Lowe went on to describe how damage occurs.

Unsurprisingly, the main culprit is the sun, with smoking following closely behind. Even gravity exerts



Is this the eye of the beholder?

an ugly force on our physiognomies. Little wonder then that the demand for treatments such as Botox and collagen injections, chemical peels, dermal fillers and face resurfacing is rocketing. Lowe's advice to simply stop smoking and use a daily sunscreen was seconded by Wendy Lewis, *Vogue* journalist and "life-

coach for lifts, lasers and lipo", who took us through a speedy Powerpoint presentation of hot topics in the skin care arena.

According to Lewis, "there's really no excuse not to use a sunscreen", particularly bearing in mind that "once you're past 30, the skin takes on a life of its own." However, if the soundbite-sized helpful hints put forward were to be believed, the future does indeed look bright for skin care science. Just spare a thought for J Kerner, the German professor who first made the discovery that people who contracted botulism poisoning, with its attendant symptom of muscle paralysis, died without wrinkles. Botox manufacturers must be laughing all the way to the bank – and they haven't got the lines to prove it.

Simon Singh slams Brown's scams

by Carolyn Allen

Rarely do you see a speaker of Simon Singh's calibre paying £20 to give a public talk. Singh was demonstrating how probabilities sometimes trick us by playing a gambling game, "Penny Ante", with Ros, a somewhat unwilling audience volunteer. It seemed fair but, as Singh explained, it was actually weighted 3:1 in his favour. Sadly for Singh, the game went against the odds and Ros went away £20 richer.

Singh's highly interactive talk had the audience laughing, yet all the time he was making a serious point; we need to exercise critical thinking when it comes to probabilities in everyday life. Take the O J Simpson trial. Jurors were swayed to acquit O J when defence lawyers told them that only 1:1000 women who are abused by their husbands



Simon Singh preparing to put his money where his mouth is.

are actually killed by them. It's a true statistic, but had the lawyers for the prosecution quoted another true statistic, that 80% of abused women

who are murdered are killed by their abusers, perhaps the trial would have taken a different course.

Critical thinking can help save you from scams. According to Singh, Derren Brown's *Mind Control* series on Channel 4 is just such a scam. Brown claims to be able to read minds using skills based in psychology, but in another interactive demonstration, Singh showed how these "skills" were actually just magician's tricks. And again, Singh is prepared to put his money where his mouth is. In an article published in *The Daily Telegraph* yesterday, he promised to give £1000 to charity if Brown could repeat two of his stunts – "read my childhood thoughts and replicate a drawing that I make". I'm not a gambling person, but after my lesson in critical thinking I'll bet Singh's money is safe this time.

Moody foodies

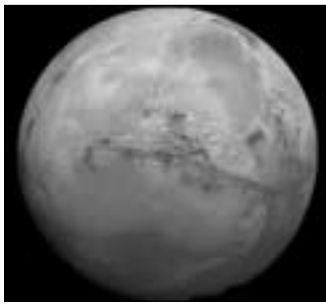
by Michael Chirgwin

Last night's eagerly anticipated event at the Pump Rooms had us salivating like Pavlov's Dogs with the thought of the food to come. "Mood Food", as the name suggests, is food that toys with and changes our emotional states; all cooked by the capable hands of chef Heston Blumenthal.

The mood was further enhanced by the use of music, smell and light bombarding our senses. The food was specially concocted to contain the correct cocktail of chemicals to affect our moods, supposedly making us happier or in the mood for love.

The evening's theme of *Alice in Wonderland* took us on a journey, meeting the Rabbit (second course) and Paul Clayton as the Mad Hatter, who introduced us to each dish.

Did the evening work? Has my libido risen? I'll tell you tomorrow.



Is this the planet where artists and scientists are from?

Science and art: planets apart?

by Adam Horovitz

The Town Hall seethed gently to the sounds of frustration yesterday as the rather tritely titled "Scientists are from Mars, Artists are from Venus" debate came to a close.

It's not that Michael Berkeley, Silvia Wyder, Michael Doser or Mark Lithgow lacked interesting things to say, either. In an attempt to explain their various working practices, this artistic and scientific mixed-bag panel came up with occasional precious insights into their careers, but given the strictures of the hour-long format, with question and answer included, there was not really time to say very much.

What did become clear was that method was as important to a musician as it was to a particle physicist and that hard work eventually pays off. Also clear was that artists and scientists tend to guard their ideas jealously – understandable really – and both disciplines appear to attract people with borderline obsessive, neurotic personalities.

This truism, however, has been locked in the public psyche for decades and it seems futile to argue the toss about it now.

This discussion would have been better served as a series of documentaries on Radio 4. I would have particularly liked the chance to hear Mark Lithgow – who scans brains in Great Ormond Street hospital for a living – expanding on his charming statement that "I know what an octahedron tastes like but I haven't the words to explain." Sounds like the start of a poem – or maybe a song – to me.

And anyway, artists and scientists are from Earth and should be forced to work together.

Sceptics lift off the lid of Apollo

by Jon Andriessen

Marcus Allen and Neil Atkinson are never going to agree on whether or not the Apollo moon landing took place and that's a good thing; the Town Hall wouldn't have been packed out if they did.

Conspiracy theorists sat all squashed up against pro-believers and a small amount of undecided (who went home undecided, wondering whether to have tea or coffee when they got there).

Allen, a trained photographer, argued at length about the "faked" photographic evidence – well he would, wouldn't he – and Atkinson, a geologist, slated the conspiracists for daring to profit from their anti-landing books.

Essentially, Allen is not a total "disbeliever"; his main argument is that the proof doesn't stand up to scrutiny. He illustrated this by asking, "would all of you who believe in psychokinesis, please raise my right arm now?" and up went his arm. Little did he know that I'd done it, but where was the proof?

Atkinson ignored the theatrics; instead he chose to show us a picture of a little Neil Atkinson in shorts, "aged seven, in front of Apollo 11 at the Southport Flower



Giant leap or giant lie for mankind?

Show in 1971." This was apparently his inspiration for becoming a scientist and yes, it was cute and yes it made a connection to space travel, but still it didn't prove that man landed on the moon.

Both speakers were compelling and convincing when allowed to speak unchallenged, but left exposed to the unplanned audience questions they often faltered, but found their feet only to carry on contradicting each other.

I wanted to go to the moon once, but now I've changed my mind. It just seems it would be far too much work convincing everyone else.



MEASURE FOR MEASURE: The National Physics Laboratory have put an end to tall tales. Their Laser Height Gauge "interferometer" ensures you'll never lie about the distance from the soles of your feet to the crown of your head again – and it's all done with mirrors! And honestly, it doesn't hurt. RC

IgNobel science

by Steven Lacey

In an effort to counter the presence at Cheltenham Festival of Science of Paul Nurse, Britain's most recent Nobel Laureate, the Town Hall played host yesterday to the country's latest IgNobel award recipient.

Len Fisher won this honour for his work on the physics and chemistry of biscuit dunking, whilst his compatriot Rob Eastaway has applied his mathematical prowess to the time-worn question of "why buses always come in threes."

Putting them together resulted in the answers to many party-related questions, such as how to open and pour champagne without spillage, how guilty you should feel when you take the last chocolate biscuit, and how to ensure the mixing of guests (the so-called Brownian party, with two focal points to commute between).

These lively subjects, complete with demonstrations and champagne, were enhanced by the presence of the Personal Response System, a *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*-style way of involving the audience, allowing Len and Rob to dispel such myths as "cheaper wine is better value" and "salt is a useful way of clearing up spilt red wine" (white wine is much better; Len collects dregs for this purpose).

If Len or Rob should decide on a career change, party organisation would be a good choice – they know enough about it.

THE DROID

Litmus Paper editors tried out the Time Machine in the Discover Zone today. They can exclusively reveal that the rest of the Festival was fantastic! We enjoyed seeing you all next year.

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A flustered latecomer to the "Science of Beauty" event mistook presenter Wendy Lewis for supermodel Jerry Hall. Perhaps there's something in this skin care game after all.