

Opera parodies UCSD's spacey look

By John Gregory

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“**S**paceship Earth” is the first biosphere — a self contained, self supporting environment. Then there was Biosphere 2, the isolated, experimental ecosystem in Arizona which contained and supported eight people for two years in the early part of the last decade.

Now, there is “Biospheria” the opera.

“Biospheria” will be performed outdoors on the campus of the University of California, San Diego, with the audience walking from site to site for the various scenes.

It has occurred to more than a few observers, especially students, that the UCSD campus is an island unto itself, isolated and noted for its assortment of space age architecture. “Biospheria,” a piece of performance art parodying this man-made phenomenon, will be set within this very site. But there is a slight twist: the opera utilizes the Biosphere 2 theme, focusing on its Utopian aspirations and the “dynamics of a closed community.”

“We wanted to make a piece about the campus, this weird little controlled environment,” explained Anthony Burr, who along with Steve Ausbury, began creating the opera in 1999. So the two started researching parallel environments such as the Biosphere 2 ex-

PREVIEW

Biospheria

When: 3 p.m. Thursday-March 11 and March 15-18.

Where: Campus of the University of California, San Diego.

Admission: Free, reservations required.

Information: (619) 291-1015.

On the internet: www.crca.ucsd.edu/biospheria

periment. “It was so provocative and weird that it began snowballing,” Burr said.

There was something that drew the two creators into it. They were attracted to the “cross fertilization” of art and science, theater and science, and popular science and Utopia. Although the connection may not seem obvious to some, Burr and Ausbury found a theatrical tie-in to Biosphere 2, what was essentially a monstrous commercialized science experiment. Burr said they found the interesting aspect being “what went wrong” during the two years the eight subjects spent in the giant greenhouse structure of glass and steel. So they focused on the social aspect and the psychological experience. According to Burr, the subjects in Biosphere 2 eventually broke into two teams and worked against each other, “four against four.”

It isn't enough that “Biospheria” is performed outside and the audi-

ence must stride across the campus. Burr and Ausbury had to get the audience more involved in the drama. So, those attending will be put in groups of eight. Each must wear a colored rain type poncho and headphones. The headphones will play sounds of nature and narrative at appropriate times during the performance.

Of course the ponchos, described as a cross between a space suit and a Hazardous Materials coverall, will draw attention to the audience. No one was sure what would happen, so a test rehearsal was conducted with an audience suited up, Burr explained.

“It was pretty interesting. People thought, ‘Oh God, what the hell is going on?’” he said. “The people felt self-conscious, but then they actually enjoyed the attention. The audience became an object of spectatorship. They actually seemed to like it more than we thought they would.”

Approximately 20 performers will be involved, some being dancers and the rest playing “Biospherians.” One final element tops off the experience. A shepherd, complete, with staff, will lead the crowd from scene to scene. Burr would have preferred to take this last detail one more step beyond.

“It would have been great if we could have gotten a monkey to be the shepherd,” he said.