

RENDEZVOUS WITH ARTHUR

by Michael Lennick

(2001 words)

For those of us lucky enough to be kids or young adults in the middle years of the 20th Century, the future was bright and well-defined. As American astronauts and their Soviet counterparts blazed trails towards the moon and beyond, iconic years like 2000 and 2001 flared on the horizon in a compelling mirage – the shiny spot down the road where the future we’d been reading about all our lives would truly kick in. Clues to this exciting new era came from scientist/writers like Wernher von Braun and Willy Ley, but my favorite speculations could be found in the works of Arthur C. Clarke, a brilliant storyteller who wrote like a journalist – as though the utterly-plausible yarns he was spinning had already taken place, and he’d been there to bear witness. Every tale seemed to take you on your own personal tour of the future via that rare emissary who was actually in the know – a guide who not only let you share in the possibilities, but in his spare time was helping to bring them about. (Which was not far from the truth, given his lifelong membership in the British Interplanetary Society and important wartime role in the early deployment of Radar, not to mention a certain 1945 paper describing the geosynchronous communication satellites underpinning so much of today’s technology, culture and civilization.) Arthur was first and foremost a wonderful entertainer, but his stories, even the most lighthearted ones, had genuine mass, impacting with the force of a Chesley Bonestell painting (for those of a certain generation) or the first images from an interplanetary probe (for those of another.) His writings filled our heads, dreams and aspirations from childhood on. They’re in there still.

Meeting so influential a hero can be more than a little intimidating, but when the opportunity presents itself, you jump. And so it was in the fall of the year 2000, that my wife (and co-producer) Shirley and I journeyed to Sri Lanka in order to

interview Arthur C. Clarke for a Discovery Channel documentary on the making of his and Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece, *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

It was a project I'd been dreaming about, one way or another, since the spring of 1968 when our neighborhood grindhouse, the Glendale Theater, finally justified its recent conversion to Cinerama by locking in *2001: A Space Odyssey* for what would be its longest first-release continuous run in the world; nearly three years. I was there for at least 50 Saturday matinees and even the odd evening show – whenever I could goad a friend outfitted with wallet-bearing parents – eighth row back dead center. Thus it felt a bit like a jump-cut thirty-plus years into the future when I found myself convincing the program director of the Canadian Discovery Channel that he should invest in a far costlier ticket – a one-hour special exploring the creation of (and the ideas underlying) Kubrick and Clarke's extraordinary film. Network heads agreed, conditional on an unusually tight deadline. Our next Discovery Channel special, *2001 and Beyond*, would premiere on the fifth of January, 2001 – less than three months away.

So Shirley and I were headed for Sri Lanka - or, with luck, soon would be. There was one other issue to resolve: Stanley Kubrick had died unexpectedly only a few months earlier, making a proper retrospective that much more elusive, while transforming our deal with Discovery into one also conditional on an interview with Arthur C. Clarke, a man I had never met nor corresponded with. Knowing how often those of us who dance in the documentary minefields have to advance reality ever so slightly (some might say lie) in order to get a tricky project rolling, I assured my good friends at Discovery that Sir Arthur was already in the bag.

The great Canadian science-fiction writer (and longtime friend) Robert J. Sawyer was kind enough to provide Arthur's fax number in Sri Lanka. That evening I nervously transmitted one of the most important letters of my career. Arthur responded quickly, providing a mailing address so he could view some of our previous work. A few weeks later we were chatting by email as though we'd

known each other for years (I've since been told by those far closer to Arthur than I that this was a common sensation – if you had his attention he would treat you as the most important person on the planet.) Arthur pointed out what we already knew, that he hadn't left his adopted home of Sri Lanka for well over a decade, and had no further plans to do so. If we wanted to interview him on camera we could either do so via satellite, or meet him at his home. Shirley and I immediately opted for the latter, despite Arthur's warnings that this was an election year on his troubled island, and perhaps not the safest time to travel.

Two weeks and thirty-three in-transit hours later we found ourselves in the rear of an ancient, incredibly vulnerable taxicab, hurtling through the teeming cacophony that is downtown Colombo. The single front seat was the purview of our warm and friendly doctor/cabbie Sanjeewa (though he insisted we call him Sammy), who spent most of his time with head twisted towards the rear, filling us in on the local customs, even as several of them flew past us in a 60mph blur.

Arthur C. Clarke was a huge cultural and scientific presence in the capital of his adopted island home – a fact repeatedly verified as Sammy drove us past some of the buildings and institutes named for him. (It was near his statue in the lobby of our hotel, the venerable old Galle Face, that the concierge advised us there'd be no need to tell our cabbie the address – everyone knew where Mr. Arthur lived.)

That first journey to Arthur's mid-city compound took less than twenty minutes, regularly punctuated by soldiers pulling us over to check our ID (their M-16 rifles poking through the rear windows), or the occasional burst of AK-47 fire a block or two over. The first time that happened we asked Sammy what was going on. He leaned back, smiled conspiratorially and whispered, "Campaigning."

Colombo is one of those cities that can rapidly overwhelm you with your own sense of unworldliness, as your tiny, hollow projectile careens past cars, trucks, oxen, those ubiquitous Southern Asian scooter/van combinations called tuk-tuks,

and even the occasional elephant carrying a huge teak log in his trunk. Between answering our questions and peppering us with hundreds of his own about life in North America, Sammy would frequently determine that we could be going faster, yanking the wheel hard-left to slam us out into the minimally-defined opposing lanes of traffic. We soon recognized a sort of telepathy in play, as Sammy and the driver of whatever vehicle we were now hurtling towards would calculate the precise moment their game of chicken would turn deadly, deeking back into their proper lanes just before impact. We quickly surrendered to the reality that there was nothing Shirley and I could do from the rear seat to ensure our survival, so our best and only option was to sit back and enjoy the movie unspooling through the windshield, complacent in the surety that neither we nor anyone we knew could drive this course without years of training.

The Clarke estate was a modest yet very beautiful compound whose car park separated two near-identical white houses - one residential, the other containing facilities for a small staff, as well as Arthur's work environment. The walk down the length of his office was one of the longest of my life, past rows upon rows of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled with editions of his works in all the many languages they'd appeared. Arthur extended his hand as I approach his desk, and though I struggled to cough up the cleverest remark I or anyone else had ever uttered, I'm afraid what emerged was closer to "I've traveled a very long way for this moment". Arthur immediately tried to put me at ease. "Yes, it's lovely to finally meet you too. I do hope you haven't come all this way to ask me about 2001". As I stood there, trying in vain to draft a response to this unexpected (and unnerving) introduction, he smiled his twinkly smile, adding, "I'm pretty sure it's the only year I'm fated to have to live through twice."

And that was that. We were off on one of the most delightful and awe-inspiring conversations of my life – an experience not unlike finding an unread Arthur C. Clarke novel, only in real time. Arthur suffered from Post-Polio Syndrome and was largely confined to a wheelchair (though he played a truly intimidating game

of Ping Pong when braced against the table), so he could only speak on camera for brief intervals. Of necessity our interview stretched out over the better part of a week – which was certainly fine with me. Our topics ranged from technology to spirituality (both of which he supported in their appropriate roles, though he had scant patience for religion), along with a heavy dose of social commentary, all delivered with his trademark wit. I soon learned that he hadn't been kidding at our first meeting. As much as Arthur admired Kubrick and his work, he still held a few reservations about the final version of the film they'd crafted together, (most of which can be found in his book *The Lost Worlds of 2001*, as well as his subsequent novels *2010: The Second Odyssey*, *2061: The Third Odyssey*, *3001: The Final Odyssey*, and, of course, his original 1968 novel *2001: A Space Odyssey* – the book we all rushed home to read way back when, if only to discover what the movie was about.) Ever the gentleman, Arthur didn't want to denigrate Kubrick or the film in any way – in fact he strove to avoid the topic. Still, mandates are mandates, especially at the network level, which meant I often found myself asking a related question about a design or description in Arthur's screenplay, whenever the conversation veered in close enough. (“So am I correct in assuming that the nuclear pulse rocket the British Interplanetary Society had contemplated would have come in very handy years later while you and Stanley were evaluating propulsion solutions for your interplanetary spacecraft *Discovery*...”) Arthur always knew exactly where I was going. He would smile, roll his eyes, and then provide the wisest, most thorough answer imaginable. Every one of those comments made it into our film *2001 and Beyond*. All we had to do was cut in right after he finished rolling those sharp, twinkling, incredibly thoughtful eyes.

Arthur and I corresponded for many years thereafter – a distant relationship with a much-beloved acquaintance whose recent passing has left a hole in my life I could not have anticipated. Our libraries may hold his stories, his ideas, but there will be no more forthcoming. And dammit, there was still so much to talk about. As I write this it's mid-April, 2008, and we've just learned from the director of

Spaceport America that the good citizens of New Mexico, against all expectations, have overwhelmingly approved a new tax bill that will allow the world's first commercial/civilian spaceport to be born – not too far down the road from the parched desert sands where Robert Goddard launched America, and the world, into the Space Age. The classic dreams Arthur first wrote about in the 1940s are finally coming to pass, just as he always knew they would. What a shame he's not here to see it, let alone take that first ride.

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