



AN ARTIST AMONG  
**THE STARS**

Astronomer Jose Francisco Salgado brings the universe closer to the public through his multimedia shows

WORDS Annette Gonzalez AND Christina E. Rodríguez PHOTOS alBerto Treviño

The screen hangs above the musicians. Subtle yet threatening drums roll slowly leading to a brass epiphany. A moving blossom of trumpets marches through the beginning of Gustav Holst's "The Planets." On the screen, astronomical images burst forward, moving with the music.

A back-and-forth conversation between strings and horns ensues in this 2006 performance of the Chicago Sinfonietta. This, "Mars, The Bringer of War," is the first planet in Holst's seven-movement orchestral suite. The images on the screen were produced by astronomer Jose Francisco Salgado of the Adler Planetarium.

When Salgado began working on this presentation of "The Planets" in 2005, he realized this was what he always wanted to do: to intertwine his love for the arts and the skies in multimedia presentations that combine images, sound and science.

The Adler asked Salgado to create a backdrop for this Chicago Sinfonietta performance. The presentation turned into much more than what the planetarium staff was expecting. Instead of the still images of stars and galaxies they were envisioning, Salgado delivered three-dimensional videos and animations of the universe that were nothing short of mind-blowing.

Salgado is an astronomer and science visualizer at the planetarium, though technical terms don't quite catch the essence of what he is. "During the last few years, I've realized [that] from an early age I was an artist," Salgado says, "but I was looking for a way to express myself."

This month, Salgado will present his second audiovisual show for the Adler: "Astronomical Pictures at an Exhibition," a suite of high-definition videos featuring art-like images and scientific visualizations of the cosmos, as well as Salgado's own artwork.

Salgado, 40, is a researcher who gives public lectures and uses scientific data to create stunning 3-D visualizations that allow viewers to virtually travel the galaxy. "It's a scientific tool as well as a communications tool, and an engaging way of showing scientific data to the public," Salgado says.

The Puerto Rico native discovered his interest in astronomy when, as a third-grader, he found a book of his father's about the first man on the moon. The human experience, and the science and technology behind the mission, instantly hooked him.

"From then on, though I considered other careers, my main interest was astronomy," Salgado says. "Back then I didn't even know the word 'astronomy' [existed];

I just knew I wanted to study space."

It also helped that "Star Wars" was a box-office hit in 1977. Carl Sagan's legendary PBS series "Cosmos" and the astronomy books of Isaac Asimov also inspired him.

Salgado earned a bachelor's degree in physics from the University of Puerto Rico, where he will be recognized for his achievements this year. After a year of teaching high school physics and chemistry, he pursued graduate studies at the University of Michigan, where he spoke recently as a guest for the Distinguished Visitors Series.

For two years, Salgado produced the "Nuestra Galaxia" segment for the newscast at Univision's Chicago affiliate, WGBO-TV, during which he explained "our galaxy." "The best thing I learned from the segments was how to explain an astronomical concept in a short amount of time without confusing [the audience]," he says.

He found it rewarding to know that Latino children were watching the news for his segment and hoped that one of those young viewers would be inspired to learn more. "It's a scientist's duty to share the knowledge we are acquiring with the public," Salgado says. "In this country we have a science literacy problem, so we have to make science [more] accessible."

For Salgado, education is key, and because of his fascination with multiple disciplines, he plans to reach as many people as he can. "My motivation is to motivate people to learn more about what I'm presenting," he says. "The more people learn about other places, the more they will respect other people's cultures as well as our planet."

This year has been designated the International Year of Astronomy by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Astronomical Union. As part of an effort to bring astronomy to people around the world, "The Planets" are on a world tour that started in Paris on January during ceremonies launching the astronomy year. The exhibit has visited Spain, Germany, the Czech Republic and Taiwan. It is scheduled to return to the United States this month.

In the last few years, Salgado has realized that the order in which things happened in his life was the way it was supposed to happen. In order for him to have all that he has now, "I had to be an astronomer first," he says. Then, he had to wait for the technology to be developed and proven in order to combine all the disciplines that he works on and enjoys.

"One of my most important interests

## GETTING PERSONAL

### Do you believe in UFOs?

I think the probability of extraterrestrial life is extremely high, but I don't think that aliens are visiting our planet.

### What's your sign?

Pisces.

### What is your favorite celestial body?

The Orion Nebula.

### Who is your favorite science fiction writer?

I prefer non-fiction, mostly biographies, but I enjoyed reading "Brave New World" by Aldous Huxley.

### Favorite science fiction movie?

"Star Wars."

### Favorite artist?

Duran Duran.

### How do you take your café?

With milk and sugar.

## FIVE KEYS TO SUCCESS

- Read and become an autodidact.
- Enjoy your job, or get another one.
- Be as multidisciplinary as possible—combining disciplines that you enjoy, of course.
- Don't lose control over the quality of your projects.
- Always be grateful to God and others around you. It will pay off!

at this point, professionally and artistically, is to communicate science and make people interested in science through art," Salgado says.

One thing he learned at the University of Puerto Rico — and still preaches when he talks to students — is the idea of multidisciplinary work. "Instead of being narrow-minded, I love bringing disciplines together," he says.

He tells students that they should find a career that combines and executes all those things they enjoy.

Salgado sees himself only getting better at what he's doing. "Now I know what I want to do when I grow up," he says, "and it's exactly what I'm doing now." ●