

Doc explores fascination with the moon

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January 20, 2009 THE CANADIAN PRESS

MONTREAL - John Curtin remembers the time when he was a kid and he and his brother sat atop the wings of a toy wooden airplane in their parents' backyard, making plans to fly to the moon.

"Like all children, you think you can go to the moon," Curtin said with a laugh. "Kids have the impression it's close enough they could maybe fly up on their own wooden plane."

Older and wiser now, Curtin is turning a journalistic eye to Earth's celestial neighbour in his new documentary "Fly Me To The Moon," which will be broadcast on CBC-TV's "Doc Zone" on Thursday at 9 p.m. (9:30 in Newfoundland and Labrador).

Pegged to the first landing by U.S. astronauts on the moon 40 years ago on July 20, 1969, the film looks at society's relationship to the planet throughout time as well at what the future may hold.

Curtin says he was surprised at some of the things he found out.

"For me, and for probably most other city dwellers, the moon is just like a light bulb hanging up in the sky. You rarely have time to look up there, and occasionally when you're out in the country, you notice how beautiful it is. I had absolutely no idea that it was so influential in man's development."

An interplanetary collision with another planet four billion years ago sent debris from Earth into orbit to form the moon. Gravity has kept the Earth and the moon orbiting together.

The moon has influenced life on Earth since the beginning through gravitation and its effects on the tides. Human mating and women's menstrual cycles are directly connected to the phases of the moon. Some cultures follow lunar calendars.

The moon has loomed large in culture through music and literature as well as history. The unsinkable Titanic rammed an iceberg and plunged to the ocean depths when lookouts on a moonless night didn't see the threat.

Full moons in the Second World War were deemed "bomber's moons" because they lit up targets for aircrew. Even today, police say full moons bring out the lunatics - the word lunacy being derived from the Latin word luna, meaning moon.

But probably its greatest role has been as a unifier of purpose, when people answered the 1962 call of then-U.S. president John F. Kennedy to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade.

Today, the moon is being looked at for its economic and environmental potential. Experts say the moon has materials that man could use to make solar panels to reflect the solar energy back to Earth. Others cite it as a possible jumping-off point for Mars.

One entrepreneur has even been selling plots of land on the moon to mining companies, scientists and actors, including John Travolta, for \$19.99 an acre - plus a lunar tax of \$1.51.

Curtin has managed a successful mix of whimsy and science in the fascinating hour, linking segments through stellar editing and moon-related tunes interpreted on the piano by Quebec entertainer Gregory Charles.

"I did try and make it fun and not get too technical, especially at the end when you're talking about pure science because CBC is not the Discovery Channel," Curtin said. "It's meant for a more general audience."

While Curtin chuckled that he is "kind of allergic" to science, he said he was fascinated by some of the practical applications being considered for the moon.

"It makes you think there are a lot of possibilities that we rarely think of when we envisage all these environmental catastrophes," he said. "There are things out there that might be done."

And that, he added, is one of the messages of the film.

"Kennedy set some incredibly high goals for America which it achieved very quickly. We have all these problems in the world today but in a sense it's just a matter of turning our minds to them and maybe some of the biggest crises of our day could be solved."