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## Communicating Science has a great coach at SBU

by Elana Glowatz

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Columbia Professor of Mathematics and Physics Brian Greene and actor Alan Alda spoke of and demonstrated communicating science to a nonscientist audience before a packed house at SBU last week. Photo by Elana Glowatz

Alan Alda filled a glass with water to the very top, then asked Howard Schneider, Stony Brook University's dean of the School of Journalism, to carry it across the stage.

"Don't spill a drop, or all the people in your village will die," shouted Alda, star of "M\*A\*S\*H" and host of PBS' "Scientific American Frontiers."

The audience in the packed Staller Center auditorium watched intently as Schneider, staring at the shaking dome of water atop the glass, slowly made his way to a low table about 10 feet away. A few drops of water slid over the lip and shimmered down to the stage, setting off a chorus of murmurs from the onlookers.

The gray-bearded Alda — many years removed from his role as the wise-cracking surgeon "Hawkeye" Pierce in the long-running "M\*A\*S\*H" — pointed out that when someone is engaged in what they are doing, as Schneider was during this experiment, other people become engaged as well. This highlights one of the goals of the new Center for Communicating Science, part of the School of Journalism at Stony Brook University: To teach scientists to captivate those around them in order to help them better understand science.

At CCS' first event of the year on Sept. 23, Alda and Columbia University physicist Brian Greene discussed why communicating science is important in today's world and what the center, the first of its kind in the country, is doing to help.

Both Greene and Alda agreed that modern society is heavily connected to science — even in areas such as legislation — through technology, medicine and more. They said the way to allow everyone to participate is to explain the science in terms all can understand.

"We're not trying to dumb it down," Alda said. "We're trying to clarify the science."

CCS provides workshops to help experts express themselves and their complex work. Alda, on the board of the science center, has led groups in improvisational exercises that aim to teach them to talk in a conversational tone, rather than, he said, stiffly read from an imaginary script hanging in front of their eyes.

Greene looked at the Staller Center audience and put his hand over his heart. "Speak from in here," he said, then moved his fingers to his temples and added, "as opposed to just in here."

For Anne Cooper Ellefson, an oceanographer who participated in one of the workshops, the idea was making her mistakes in that improvisational setting so that when she is later speaking publicly she will feel more comfortable. The exercises taught her that "it's OK to mess up and the world doesn't end."

After Alda and Greene's discussion was a special screening at AMC Loews Stony Brook of the IMAX movie "Hubble 3D," released in March this year. Alda introduced the film, which chronicles the journey of the Hubble Space Telescope and the astronauts who worked to repair it. The movie illustrated Greene's comment from the earlier discussion back on campus that "there's nothing more exciting than the drama of science."

"Hubble 3D" is narrated by Leonardo DiCaprio and includes images taken by the Hubble telescope as well as video footage from the astronauts while in space. It is an example of the kind of expression the Center for Communicating Science is striving to teach: Telling science as a story in a way that is easy to understand.

At the Staller Center, Greene had said that if the story is told well, science doesn't need to be dressed up with bright graphics and explosions in order to get people interested. This was true at least for the crowd that filled the theater on Thursday night.

Those interested in watching the film may visit the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan, where there are several daily showings through mid-January.