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Sleeper hit film stars local doctor

By Stephanie Innes

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A scientific interest in the nature of consciousness has parlayed into an unexpected film career for a Tucson doctor who is one of the stars of the sleeper hit "What The #\$*! Do We Know!?".

Dr. Stuart Hameroff is also expected to be on the silver screen sharing his knowledge about alternate universes, human consciousness and the mind in two more upcoming flicks - a film about about mysticism produced by Madonna and in an upcoming boxed-set DVD edition of "The Matrix" trilogy of movies. He has already appeared in a BBC special about near-death experiences called "The Day I Died."

Hameroff's work with the University of Arizona's Center for Consciousness Studies has garnered worldwide attention in scientific and spiritual circles. The 56-year-old doctor says added interest from Hollywood is a signal of not only a new genre of film, but of a new era of awareness about science and spirituality.

"The place where science and religion meet is quantum physics," said Hameroff, who calls himself a "Quantum Zen Buddhist."

Quantum physics is hardly an easy topic for anyone to grasp, but Hameroff's speculations on such alluring subjects as near-death experiences, reincarnation and dreams is gathering a following.

He's currently working on a book about the "edge" between the classical world of reality in which we live and the world of quantum physics. The edge, Hameroff says, is consciousness.

By applying hard science to the phenomenon of human consciousness, Hameroff has found that what we as humans see, feel and live each day may be merely a fraction of the world.

Or as the film "What The #\$*! Do We Know!?" suggests, the key to life may not be being in reality, but being in "the mystery." The part-documentary, part-fantasy film stars Oscar-winning actress Marlee Matlin. Hameroff says he was disappointed in the film overall because it "dropped the ball" on the quantum connection and concedes that many scientists he knows have been similarly unimpressed with the movie. But he says the filmmakers deserve praise for bringing the uncertainty of reality into the mainstream.

"When you can connect biology, consciousness and quantum physics, that really makes a connection. I think it's going to become more and more apparent," said Hameroff, a UA professor of anesthesiology and psychology and co-director of the Center for Consciousness Studies, which he helped found in the mid-'90s.

"It kind of peels another layer off the onion, if you will, and the next layer is even more awe-inspiring and almost unfathomable. I've just become more humbled and awestruck."

Some film critics have panned the movie as a disjointed collection of buzz-concepts, but it

clearly has a solid fan base.

At a crowded Thursday night showing of "What The #\$*! Do We Know!?" at the Catalina Theater, 2320 N. Campbell Ave., audience members clapped and cheered. The film, which has earned the nickname "What the Bleep?" has been playing at the Catalina since May 14 and is scheduled to remain there at least until Thursday, though audience enthusiasm could result in an extended stay.

"It's incredibly innovative. It stretches people's minds and hearts in incredible ways," said Bonnie Colby, a UA professor of natural resource economics who brought her whole family, including two teenagers, to see the film. "It's a really fine movie for waking people up."

Steve Swidler, a holistic dentist in Tucson, is telling all of his patients to see "What the Bleep?" Thursday night was his third viewing.

"I plan to own the DVD," he said. "I want to see myself in a reality different to what I was brought up to believe."

Swidler, like others in the audience found similarities between "What the Bleep?" and "The Matrix" movies. In "The Matrix," the life that humanity knows is actually a computer simulation. A computer hacker named Neo discovers that "reality" is a created facade made by cyber-intelligence for the purpose of placating humans while their life essence fuels the Matrix's campaign of domination.

"There actually is a Matrix. The Matrix is real. The Matrix is fundamental space-time geometry," Hameroff said.

Say what?

"At its most basic level, the universe is made of information," he said. "Who or what put it there? Well, that's the question."

Though he doesn't give advice on how to cope with such mind-bending concepts, Hamer-off does believe that connecting to the subconscious is a key to enlightenment and happiness.

For example, he pays attention to his dreams, which he says come from the subconscious. Some art, literature and music also emanate from the subconscious and can be categorized as quantum information, he says. He says quantum information also relates to the Jewish mystical practice of Kabbalah.

"The Kabbalah describes a 1 percent world that we live in of aggravation, chaos, unsatisfactory results and stress, and a 99 percent world of wisdom and enlightenment," Hameroff said. "Consciousness dances on the edge between the two worlds. The 1 percent world is the classical world and the more we're in touch with the 99 percent quantum world - the subconscious, if you will - the more enlightenment will happen."

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