



'The Dish' Puts Australian Slant On Apollo Landing

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Special to *SPACE.com*
posted: 04:12 pm ET
12 October 2000

SYDNEY, Australia - When Neil Armstrong first stepped onto the moon back in July 1969, perhaps no one was more nervous than a small team of technicians at the edge of the Australian Outback.

That's because television signals from the moonwalk were first received at the 64-meter Parkes Observatory radio telescope in New South Wales -- and only then relayed "live" to the world.

The question at the time was whether the locals were up to the task. The foibles of this small cast of extras during one of mankind's most magnificent moments forms the basis of a new Australian film that elevates the tribulations of the team to a comedic epic.

"Broadcasting live back then was pretty remarkable," said Rob Sitch, the Melbourne-based director and co-writer of the film, simply called *The Dish*. "That's especially so when you consider think that today NBC can't even broadcast the Olympics live back to North America."

Sitch recently showed a clip of the film to a press conference on the fringes of the Sydney Olympics, displaying some of his trademark tongue-in-cheek humor. NBC did indeed tape major Olympic events to show later in U.S. prime time television hours -- but for commercial, not technical reasons.

As for *The Dish*, the down-to-earth comedy took second place as the "people's choice" favorite at the Toronto Film Festival and is slated for release in Australia in late October. No North American distribution agreement has yet been announced.

The Australian Space Age

Starring Sam Neill as a professorial leader of a group of endearing locals better accustomed to rural pursuits than handling the major communications event of the Space Age, *The Dish* continues Sitch's focus on the bumbling heroics of life's bit players.

A 1997 film by Sitch's Melbourne-based Working Dog team, *The Castle*, tells the story of a charmingly unsophisticated local homeowner who valiantly fights the powers that be to save his crusty but beloved abode from being demolished to pave the way for a corporate business park.

Interestingly, when it comes to space, Australia resembles one of the characters in a Working Dog film. In the 1960s, the nascent European space program conducted numerous tests of rocket technology in the vast expanses of the South Australian desert --the wide open spaces of the Outback were perfect for the kind of hit-or-miss testing early rocketry entailed.

For a period, the [Woomera rocket range](#) north of Adelaide was one of the busiest centers of the industry, but when the decision makers in Europe's space program later decided to move its operations to [French Guiana](#), the test site -- roughly the size of England -- has since lain fallow, apart from the odd flight or bomb test.

As a result, many Australians believe the country missed the boat on the Space Age despite such a strong beginning.

Shadows of history

In searching for a follow-up film project to *The Castle*, Sitch and co-writers Santo Cilauro, Tom Gleisner and Jane Kennedy were fascinated when they stumbled across the somewhat obscure fact that the Parkes Observatory -- one of the most sophisticated astronomical research facilities in the Southern Hemisphere -- played a crucial communications relay role in the Apollo 11 landing.

The team developed a comedic story line around the event, taking a few liberties here and there to better illustrate humanity's ability to muddle through -- and to generate some laughs.

As Sitch and his team prepared in May 1999 to shoot *The Dish* on location, the crew hoped to locate some of the original equipment to save on their prop budget and provide authenticity. Sitch was surprised when he consulted one of the engineers at the facility who had been there back in 1969.

"He just told me, 'No, we later chain-sawed it into pieces and threw it out the front door'," Sitch said. "To me, this showed how remorselessly un-nostalgic was their view of the event."

It's a good bet *The Dish* eventually will be distributed in North America.

When it does, it should provide U.S. audiences with an imaginatively evocative angle on what could well have gone on behind the scenes as astronaut [Neil Armstrong](#) hopped down the ladder of the Apollo 11 lunar lander and planted his spacesuit boots on the dusty lunar surface on July 21, 1969.

His subsequent words -- carried live to a breathless world -- are etched permanently in the human collective memory.

History might have been different had the Parkes Observatory team not hit the correct switches.

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