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Electrifying genius

Inventor Nikola Tesla energized your world

By Stanley A. Miller II of the Journal Sentinel

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Chris Winters

Andy North portrays the great inventor Nikola Tesla in a theatrical presentation at Discovery World.

If You Go

What: "Tesla Lives"
When: 1 p.m. Friday, 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. Saturday, 2:30 p.m. Sunday (Check Web site for future times).
Where: Discovery World at Pier Wisconsin, 500 N. Harbor Drive
Cost: \$8 for adults, \$7 for children 6 and older
Information: (414) 765-9966 and www.discoveryworld.org
Running time: 55 minutes

Exciting events always have a little electricity in the air, but at the "Tesla Lives" show at Discovery World, there really is electricity in the air: 20 million screaming volts surging from the stage.

"Tesla Lives" is a history lesson, some science experiments and a standup comedy routine sewn together, put on a table and shocked with lightning levels of power.

The mad scientist concoction that lurches to life is a fun, fast-paced, intelligent and interactive biography of "the godfather of the 21st century": Nikola Tesla.

If you don't know who Tesla was before this show, you certainly will afterward. He was a Serbian inventor and engineer whose designs and theories in electricity and magnetism built the foundation of today's alternating current power.

"He's mysterious, and he was a person who didn't follow the status quo," said Paul Krajniak, Discovery World's executive director. "Tesla was a showman, and a mathematician, but he also built things with his hands. He is symbolic of the creativity and innovation that we inspire here at Discovery World."

The show, which launched last month, feels a bit like a training class. The session is led by actor Andy North, who assumes the role of both a quirky professor and later Tesla during a re-creation of the scientist's pitch session at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.

"Professor" North calls on the audience to answer some questions, and a few members are asked to join him on stage to help illustrate Tesla's ideas on energy and magnetic fields.

North in his Tesla persona beams out the style and showmanship that helped the charismatic scientist wow the crowds at the Chicago World's Fair.

The show also delves into the history of Tesla's scientific explorations and accomplishments, including his clash with his former employer, famous inventor Thomas Edison. Tesla's alternating current standard, which was backed by businessman George Westinghouse, beat out Edison's direct current technology in the late 19th century, one of the few defeats of Edison's career.

"Tesla Lives" also shows and tells the audience how Tesla was the first to come up with wireless communication, radio technology, X-rays, neon lighting and how his crowning achievement was to design a system to generate free wireless electricity.

The show culminates in the ear-splitting activation of two lightning machines, which safely arc out bolts about 15 feet long. Still, these Tesla coils are loud enough that they might frighten very young children, so Discovery World insists those in the audience be 6 years old or older.

And although the show is charged to capacity with science and history, viewers shouldn't feel overwhelmed by the facts or the speedy way they are presented.

"It's not about the information, it's about the experience," Krajniak says. "We are trying to motivate people to learn more. It's not what you know, it's what you do with what you know."

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