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February 28, 2002

The TED Conference: 3 Days in the Future

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN

MONTEREY, Calif., Feb. 23 — What preternatural power can prompt Rupert Murdoch, Jeffrey Katzenberg, Richard Dawkins, Neil Simon, Art Buchwald, Frank Gehry and Quincy Jones to sit for hours in a hot room contemplating the nano-sized split ends on gecko toes?

It can only be the TED conference, the three-and-a-half day, \$4,000-a-pop annual roundup of brains and glitter in which deep wisdom and technological derring-do are served up on an intellectual pu pu platter by 70 speakers and performers.

This year's conclave, the 17th and the swan song of TED's founder, the impresario Richard Saul Wurman, was billed as "Simply the Greatest Design Conference There Ever Was" (modesty not being one of Mr. Wurman's many attributes). TED stands for Technology Entertainment and Design, a synergy the 66-year-old Mr. Wurman, probably best known for his Access series of travel guides, detected quite early when he dreamed up the conference in 1984.

Lake Wobegon it isn't. In the self-referential utopian



Peter DaSilva for The New York Times

The Raspyni Brothers juggle beanbag chairs at the TED conference.

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community that is TED, even the juggler has a MacArthur fellowship and the neighbors, if not good-looking, are brilliant, fascinating and sometimes astonishingly rich.

Where else but at TED would Mr. Katzenberg, standing Armani-deep in sawdust with Spirit, his stallion and the namesake of his new animated film, be upstaged by Rex, a biologically inspired robot with springy legs and gecko-like feet capable of navigating the outer reaches of the Amazon — specifically, the leg of the Amazon.com founder, Jeff Bezos, a longtime Tedster?

It can get deep. Very deep. Steven Pinker, the eminent cognitive psychologist, found himself deep in conversation with the singer Naomi Judd about the role of the amygdala, the part of the brain that colors memory with emotion; something, he aptly noted, "that would not happen at the meeting of the Cognitive Neuroscience Society."

It happened here one night last week over chicken and polenta at the annual private dinner, given by the New York literary agent John Brockman, formerly called the Millionaires' and Billionaires' Dinner after the rich techies who traditionally flocked to TED. There were still a few members of that endangered species scattered about, among them Nathan Myhrvold, the retired Microsoft chief technology officer, who gave an electrifying discourse at the 1997 TED about dinosaur sex, and Jeffrey Epstein, a financial adviser to billionaires, who flew a bunch of Tedsters to Monterey in his Boeing 727, outfitted with mink and sable throws and a high-altitude lunch catered by Le Cirque 2000.

The formidable galaxy of stars and "deep-headsters," as the brainiest Tedsters are called, however, is eclipsed by the gravitational pull of the event itself. Mr. Wurman, a larger-than-life figure who dresses in white with Missoni scarves, ensures that TED's sweep is vast. Although the presenters included the designers of the Aeron chair and the Audi TT roadster, Mr. Wurman defines design broadly, as the design of life, embracing music, sensuality, understanding and humor. Beneath the zaniness — at one point, Mr. Wurman was swaddled in a musical sumo wrestling costume by the comic Raspyni Brothers — TED is really about the design of creativity and what it means to be human (except when Keith Bellows, editor in chief of National Geographic Traveler, discussed what it means to be a camel).



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It is about the inner life of people and things. From the micro (nano-aluminum particles one-50,000th the width of a human hair) to the macro (the design of a country — Afghanistan), this year's TED concerned the search for "common rhythms," as the cellist Yo-Yo Ma, who came with eight musicians, put it to a packed crowd in describing the Mongolian fiddle and other exotic instruments from the Silk Road, "the Internet of antiquity."

Presenters whose normal fees often run to tens of thousands of dollars speak for free. They are simply told to tell the truth. "Their groin is unprotected," as Mr. Wurman put it (correctly, since only 3 out of 70 presenters were women). At times, the confab resembled a mass confessional presided over by an overbearing father figure. "It's about what you've overcome," said Rick Smolan, a photographer. "What people want to hear about is how you screwed up."

TED has become a place, perhaps the only place, where, nestled in the warm bosom of fellow elites, luminaries bare their deepest passions and innermost souls. Kary Mullis, the Nobel Prize-winning chemist, spoke of his childhood dreams of launching a frog into orbit, and how he figured out how to do it in his backyard. Josef Penninger, an immunologist and genetic researcher, confessed that the reason he became a geneticist may have had to do with an adolescent mouse phobia. Niels Diffrient, the legendary chair designer, admitted that as a society, "we shouldn't be sitting."

Thus ensues the cult of TED. "He gets all of us to stand up there naked and hope for the best," said Mr. Katzenberg, who resisted going to TED for years. "Inspirational moments are few and far between in any of our lives. When they happen they tend to fuel you in ways you don't even understand."

As always, there was mind-blowing news from the technological front. Over the years, TED has become a sort of global show and tell for the Next Big Idea (the first TED included the public unveiling of the Macintosh computer and the Sony compact disc; later, TED helped hatch the M.I.T. Media Lab and Wired magazine). Among this year's most talked-about devices were the biologically inspired robots being developed by Robert J. Full at his laboratory at the University of California at Berkeley, modeled on the movement of geckos, cockroaches and other creatures.

An amazing piece of interactive software by Keyhole Inc.

displayed by Daniel Lubno, a producer for CBS News, brings spy technology to the PC. It uses satellite digital imagery to let you zoom in from space to any point on the earth's surface, from the summit of Mount Everest to your neighbor's hot tub.

Amory Lovins, a founder of the Rocky Mountain Institute, wowed the crowd with the Hypercar, a swoopy-looking aerodynamic vehicle powered by fuel cells running on tanks of compressed gaseous hydrogen fuel. David Kelley, the founder of Ideo, showed off the Spyfish Submarine Telepresence Vehicle, an underwater device that allows you to visually scuba dive without getting wet.

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Dean Kamen could be found gliding through the corridors like some nerdy Fred Astaire on his famous Segway, the gyroscopic human transport scooter he hopes will revolutionize urban transportation. The most amazing "segue," however, was not Mr. Kamen's. That occurred when, after more than an hour of spellbinding music by Yo-Yo Ma and company during a session exploring the design of sensuality, the stage gave way to Christie Hefner talking about Playboy.



Peter DaSilva for The New York Times

The Raspyni Brothers juggle beanbag chairs at the TED conference.

As might be expected after Sept. 11, there was more introspection than in the days when TED was a dot-com zillionaires' love-in. David Rockwell, the New York designer, for instance, talked about his viewing platform at ground zero. Daniel Dennett, the cognitive scientist, spoke of American memes, or self-replicating ideas, spreading around the world, including fringe memes like pornography that, he said forebodingly, "are a big deal to other cultures, viewed as a dire threat to their favorite memes." Dr. Dennett also shared the secret of happiness. "Find something more important than you are and dedicate your life to it," he said.

Not everyone was so grounded. Perhaps the most soulless moment came when a straight-faced Frank Nuovo of Nokia hawked a new \$25,000 crystal-faced platinum cellphone.

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The weird stew of people and points of view, including a rather strange campaign by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins to create an advocacy group for American atheists, reflects Mr. Wurman's own passions. The design of TED itself could be the subject of a Ph.D. thesis. An organizer and mapper of complex streams of information, on subjects from cities to hats, Mr. Wurman obsessively designs the conference down to the tiniest detail, including name tags with the schedule on them (color-coded to reflect the wearer's status), the bookstore (his own 80 books are most prominent) and the 70 posters of presenters created by Stefan Sagmeister, a noted graphic designer, reflecting Mr. Wurman's philosophy of "never shop retail" ("Do you know what you'd have to pay him for this?").

A protégé of the architect Louis Kahn, Mr. Wurman even designed teddy-bear-stuffed goody bags, bestowing upon Herbie Hancock, Rupert Murdoch and 950 or so other conferees the look of having just returned from a 4-year-old's birthday party.

Mr. Wurman, who bursts into tears onstage occasionally, knows how extraordinary his creation is. "If this was Harvard, nobody would come," he said. "Harvard would never be able to get the people I get."

The question of the future of TED, which Mr. Wurman sold last year to a foundation run by Chris Anderson, a British publisher, for an eight-figure sum, continues to have a soap-operatic undercurrent. Mr. Wurman, who lives in what he calls a Jewish Renaissance manse in Newport, R.I., made a fortune when he sold Access Press to HarperCollins in 1990, and has made another one on TED. His volatile personality — he has banished people from the conference — has nevertheless been the charismatic glue holding TED together.

Mr. Anderson, 45, an Oxford philosophy major and former publishing magnate who wears black to Mr. Wurman's white, plans to preserve the TED spirit while bringing in his own innovations, including a scholarship program. Conference proceeds will go to the Sapling Foundation, which finances medical, technological and educational projects in the third world, he said.

Of course, TED wouldn't be TED without psychodrama. Mr. Wurman has started a new conference on the East Coast

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called TEDMED, which will deal with "medicine, well-being and digital society." To longtime Tedsters, there is the distinct possibility of a bicoastal rivalry akin to feuding Afghan warlords.

As he talks about his new venture, Mr. Wurman's expectant blue eyes take on the cast of a newborn eyeing a nipple.

"It will be better than this," he said, looking around. "My timing is perfect."

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