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## Scientist's formula to rid Hollywood of mad professors and sci-fi errors

By Roger Highfield, Science Editor  
(Filed: 14/05/2005)

Fed up with the dodgy portrayal of science in films, an Oxford University biochemist has set herself up as a consultant to Hollywood in her quest to do away with errors, misconceptions and nutty professors.



Dr Lizzie Burns, of the university's Department of Biochemistry, has launched Hollywood Math and Science Film Consulting with Prof Jonathan Farley, an award-winning mathematician at Harvard University.

The scientists in *Back to the Future* and *Honey I Shrank the Kids* were potty or clumsy nerds. In *ET* they were heartless monsters who wanted to dissect a cute alien, and in the *Terminator* films they helped develop smart robots that would run amok.

"It's annoying how many films will include a 'mad' scientist," she said. "The portrayal of scientists can be so negative and the science wrong. I'm interested in trying to get the science right and make scientists in films a bit more real."

Dr Burns, the Medical Research Council's artist in residence, met Prof Farley while doing research at Oxford. They hope to capitalise on the success of films with a mathematical or scientific undercoat by setting up the consultancy with the backing of Lennox Farrell, a Toronto businessman.

"We're not science geeks complaining from the sidelines," Prof Farley said. "Film-makers ought to avoid situations that are ludicrously implausible. HMSFC is not just to cure films of bad science but to help film-makers get the culture of science right (or at least not laughably wrong)."

"There's a magic about movies that should not be dulled by technical jargon," said Dr Burns, citing how the explanation for *The Force* in the *Star Wars* films (something to do with "medichlorians") "spoil the movie for me."

They were inspired by *A Beautiful Mind*, Russell Crowe's exploration of the tortured mind of Nobel-prize-winning game theorist John Nash. "We're the first company to provide consulting services for TV shows or films that have a math or science element," said Prof Farley.

The pair have already done consultancy work for the hit US television drama *Numb3rs*, in which an FBI agent recruits his mathematical genius brother to help solve crimes. They visited the set, checked jargon, gave scriptwriters authentic gossip about mathematicians, and made sure the mathematical workings were plausible.

Theatre is also receptive, from Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* and Caryl Churchill's thought-provoking play on cloning, *A Number*, to David Auburn's *Proof*, starring Gwyneth Paltrow.

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