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NEWS OF THE WEIRD

BY CHUCK SHEPHERD

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Cultural diversity

- While European and American TV and film producers take care to have dialogue dubbed into foreign languages using voices that are appropriate for each actor, the dubbing in Poland continues to be done by "lektors" — males with smoking-seasoned voices who speak the dialogue of all the characters in a story in the same pitch. The trick, according to an October Wall Street Journal dispatch, is "speaking so smoothly that viewers forget that Paris Hilton sounds like a Polish Johnny Cash." One experiment using six different actors for the cast of an episode of "Friends" bombed with viewers, and the next week, the lektor returned.
- In November, an association of Ugandan activists of Rwandan descent complained to the Ugandan Parliament that the government was discriminating against its women, in that passport-application officials single them out to verify their Ugandan nationality based on whether their derrieres and

legs are sufficiently large. According to a columnist for the newspaper East African, "Uganda is a society that's besotted with women's buttocks like few other places are." (Immigration officials denied that they "profile.")

- Jacob Zuma, a flamboyant Zulu activist since his teen years, was elected president of the African National Congress in December and is a presumed shoo-in to become president of South Africa in 2009, despite a 2005 rape trial (at which he was acquitted). Zuma had testified that the sex was consensual, that "(i)n Zulu culture, you cannot leave a woman if she is ready. To deny her sex, that would have been tantamount to rape." He also said that he had not bothered with a condom even though he knew she was HIV-positive, cheerfully explaining, "I had a shower afterward." (The rate of HIV infection in Zuma's KwaZulu-Natal province is about 40 percent.) ■

Names in the news

Killed by early-morning gunshots in a club in Greensboro, N.C., in December: Mr. Born God Supreme Thompson. Arrested and charged with groping two women in Springfield, Ill., in December: Larry Letcher, 24.

The loser of a Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruling in December that sought to suppress child pornography found on his computer by a Circuit City repair technician: Kenneth Sodomy. ■

Latest religious messages

- More than 5,000 Christians have joined the Hollywood Prayer Network to pray anonymously for the spiritual transformation of certain troubled celebrities, according to a November Chicago Sun-Times report. Also, an "Incognito Prayer Network," whose members wear "90028" bracelets (Hollywood's ZIP code) will assign celebrities to members who are touched by a particular star. Even in the face of criticism, members stand firm. Said one, "I don't know if I could turn off this compassion that I feel (for a particular celebrity). I'm called to do this, so I do."
- In Russia, at least two eccentric Christian sects are in the news: Thirty members of a cult devoted to the mesmerizing, diagnosed-schizophrenic Pyotr Kuznetsov have holed up in a cave in the Penza region since Nov. 7, awaiting the end of the world in May 2008 (though Kuznetsov has asked them

publicly to come out). And a group in the city of Nizhny Novgorod worships outgoing president Vladimir Putin as the incarnation of the Apostle Paul and King Solomon. "We didn't choose Putin," said one devotee. "... God himself has chosen him!"

- Writer David Farley said he is investigating the 1983 disappearance of the "Holy Prepuce," which is a patch of the foreskin of Jesus and supposedly was the only body part he might have left on Earth. Until it went missing, it was the centerpiece of each January's Feast of the Holy Circumcision at the Church of the Most Holy Name of Jesus in Calcutta, Italy. Several theories persist about its disappearance, the most enduring of which is that it was swiped on orders from the Vatican, which was troubled by the attention it had historically received, according to a December Religion News Service dispatch. ■

Questionable judgments

- With the American West seemingly under perpetual threat of drought, developer Richard Mladick is nonetheless preparing to build Waveyard, a massive water theme park, near Mesa, Ariz., which will require 50 million gallons of groundwater to open and as much as 100 million gallons annually. Explained Mladick: "I couldn't imagine raising my kids in an environment (without the opportunity) to grow up being passionate about the same sports that I grew up being passionate about" (that is, kayaking, scuba diving and surfing). Voters approved Wave-

yard overwhelmingly, based on Mladick's promise of jobs and tax revenue.

- In November, Pittsburgh radio station KDKA reported that soldier Jordan Fox had recently been ordered to return \$3,000 of his \$10,000 enlistment bonus because his blindness and back injury from a roadside bomb in Iraq prevented him from fulfilling the final three months of his one-year Army "commitment." Fox was surprised to learn that the give-back is standard, but U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire of Pennsylvania has introduced legislation to change that. ■

Obsessions

At least a half-dozen groups in five countries are seriously engaged in the quest to show that man can fly through the air and land without a parachute, according to a December New York Times report. "All of this is technically possible," said a physics professor, referring to the wing suits fliers are testing. "The thing I'm not sure of is ... safety." Some wing suits

have slowed vertical descent, briefly, to about 30 miles an hour, though the fliers were still moving horizontally at about 75 mph, which is why all testing is done with parachute backup. American Jeb Corliss believes he could land, even at 120 mph, provided that his neck were protected by a sturdy-enough frame on the wing suit. ■

Least competent criminals

- Arthur Cheney, 64, was arrested near Marysville, Calif., in December driving a car that had been spotted at a bank robbery. On the center console of the car, officers found a yellow "sticky" note with a handwritten "Robbery — 100s and 50s only." Said an officer, "We call that a clue."

- Orlando Taylor, 26, was arrested walking in the door of a Bank of America in New York City in December. Police suspected he was up to no good because he had a holdup note in his pocket (and an employee identified him from a prior robbery). ■