

# RAY BRADBURY

INTERVIEW BY JOHN BAXTER

**B**reakfast with Bradbury is an event worth remembering. Courtesy of our publishers, coffee and croissants are consumed with the world's most popular living science fiction writer in the plush surroundings of Kensington's Royal Garden Hotel amid lushness enough to make one feel amiable even at eight-thirty in the morning.

Ray Bradbury's cordiality is unflinching. With white thatch, ice-cream suit and immaculate buckskin shoes he doubles for the library-haunting Charles Halloway of *Something Wicked This Way Comes*; he acknowledges that an adolescence of library browsing accounted for all his post-graduate schooling and for his free-wheeling way with ideas.

His enthusiasm for the space programme, for Walt Disney and his dreams, for the worth of science fiction as a fund of concepts and metaphors for society is undimmed by contemporary cynicism. He's still the enthusiast who will deluge a favourite director with his books and invitations to render them into film, who can be awed and elated by watching the Viking lander settle on the surface of Mars. Twenty-five years ago Damon Knight summed-up Bradbury in terms still applicable today; "Bradbury, the grown-up child who still remembers, still believes."

His cinema career is notable more for works unrealised than for definite landmarks; few artists can have expended more effort for less concrete results. He spent months working with Carol Reed on an un-filmed adaptation of his story *And The Rock*

*Cried Out*, about hapless tourists trapped in a hostile South American culture after the Bomb, and even longer doctoring Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* with a much-needed narration. (When asked to find a new ending for the epic, he asked "Have you thought of checking out the Bible?") The producers said, "We still need you.")

But Bradbury continues to believe in the movies, despite decades of rough handling for his works, the latest a three-part TV series of *The Martian Chronicles*, produced by NBC on cut-rate locations in Europe and the Mediterranean. Even the author has been scathing about it; I decided to begin on film projects prudently further from home.

**Starburst:** *It's a paradox that you're still best-known in sf film circles for two films that gave you very little credit: The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms and It Came from Outer Space both made in 1953.*

**Ray Bradbury:** *The Beast was a weird kind of accident. I went to see the producer about a script he'd written but wanted me to revise. He sent me into a room to read it. When I came out I said "It's interesting". And he said "Will you revise it for us?" I said "Well, perhaps. It's very like a short story of mine that was in the Saturday Evening Post a year or so back called The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms". (My title was The Fog Horn. I never approved of theirs.) He had a funny look on his face, and I realised that, inadvertently - I guess - he'd taken my idea, put it in the script - and called me in to revise it!*

There was no fight or anything, and no accusations, but the next day he sent me a cable saying "We want to buy the rights" and they bought them. I had no control over the script though. The best part of the film is Ray Harryhausen's animation.

On *It Came from Outer Space*, they called me in because they wanted to do a science fiction film. William Alland had an idea I didn't much care for, and we had a few friendly arguments. I finally said "Look, I'll write two scripts. I'll spend two weeks, and I'll do the first thirty pages of my version and the first thirty pages of yours. But then you've got to make up your mind between the two within forty-eight hours". I did a very nice version of their idea, but I did a better one of mine, of course, and, by God, they went my way and let me finish my script.

But like a fool I gave them a ninety-five page outline treatment. That was the whole screenplay, and they got it for \$3000. The Harry Essex came in to write it and got the credit. I was foolish.

*The film stands up very well. A lot of the lines are recognisably your work.*

Well, three years ago, the night after the first preview of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, I called Steven Spielberg, whom I didn't know. I'd just written a review of the film, and I said "I just have to meet you and tell you what a genius you are and give you a copy of this review". So I ran over to the studio and walked into his office and he said "Well, how do you like your film?" I said "What do you mean?" He said, "If you hadn't done *It Came*



"I've written a new play version of *Fahrenheit* which was in LA eight months ago. It's the best stage work I've ever done."



"I have the rights to *The Illustrated Man* back again and I'm going to remake it eventually. So help me, I will."



"Now we're waiting for Stephen Spielberg to do *Something Wicked this Way Comes*. He's promised to do it sometime next year."



From *Outer Space*, I would never have done this."

One of the best things I ever saw covering your work was a black and white tv episode on David Wolper's *The Story of...series*.

Yes. *The Story of a Writer*. Beautiful. I wanted to show how the idea for a story is born and develops in the writer's mind. Wolper gave me a young director and I sat with him for two or three days, at which point I was embarrassed. Finally, I leaned forward and said "Hey, I want to ask you something. Have you ever read anything of mine?"

"Uh, well no."

"One novel?"

"No."

"Short story? Two line poem? Maybe my obit?"

"No."

I said "You can't do this then, can you? You haven't done your research. I might as well produce and direct it too. I'm sorry, but I'll have to have you fired". Wolper fired him and brought in Terry Saunders. I worked very closely with him. We had wonderful rapport.

But to end the story, I was at a screening three years ago and this young director came running up to me. He introduced himself and I blushed immediately. He said "The best thing ever happened to me was you firing me. It made me go and study, become a better filmmaker". And he's just finished his first major film.

I'll never forget the beautiful animated film from Joe Mugnaini's drawings; Icarus Montgolfier Wright.

Joe's illustrated eight of my books. We all

**"Truffaut said, 'I can't get backing for The Illustrated Man but let's do Fahrenheit.'"**

worked free on that for two or three years. I love it. If I was doing it over today, I'd cut two or three minutes out of it. Nevertheless, that said, it has some moments that move me immensely, even after all this time.

It was up for an Academy Award in 1962, but I'm a total realist when it comes to these things. I went to screenings at the Academy of all the short subjects and when we came out friends were flocking about saying "Ray, you're gonna get the Oscar". And I said "No way, John Hubley's *The Hole* is going to get it! It's ten years behind the times. It's safe. It's liberal. It's got a black, it's got nuclear power, it's got The Bomb - all those cliches. And ours is set in the future!" (This was before Apollo and everything.)

On the night of the Awards, Joe and I brought our daughters and sent them in with our tickets. And sure enough Hubley's film won. Joe swore all the way home.

Did you know Francois Truffaut before he made *Fahrenheit 451*?

I knew him and his work. We'd had meetings in New York five or six years before he made *Fahrenheit*. We hoped to do a film of short sketches together; we were going to make *Illustrated Man*. But he couldn't get financing for it. I wish he had.

He came back and said "I can't get backing for this, but let's do *Fahrenheit*." He wanted me to write the script, but I'd already done a stage play of it and I knew I couldn't handle a thing twice over such a short period of time. The script is very good. It has a few flaws, which I've told him about. It's a little soft in the middle. There's something wrong with some



Above: The firemen in *Fahrenheit 451* speed on their way to start a fire. The story is set in the future when books are outlawed and are incinerated upon discovery. Below: Richard Carlson comes face to face with two extra-terrestrials in *It Came From Outer Space* (1953).

of those scenes with Julie Christie. When the semi-romance is going on, I thing things get a little over-explained.

But otherwise, gee whizz! A lot of good stuff. The scene of the fire chief talking about the libraries, sweeping the books off. And all the burning scenes.

*Fahrenheit 451* has one of the greatest endings in the history of the cinema. I don't say that because it's my film - that's Truffaut's ending, not mine. Beautiful. I cry every time I see it. It's like the ending of *Citizen Kane*, or *Sunset Boulevard*, where Norma Desmond comes down the stairs into the camera and it cracks your heart.

I've written a new play version of *Fahrenheit* which was in LA eight months ago. It's the best stage work I've ever done. I let my characters write the play, as I do most of my things, and the fire chief came to me one afternoon and said "Ray, you know, we haven't talked for about twenty-six years, and there's a lot about me I didn't tell you when

you wrote the novel".

"Oh, really?" I said, "Let's hear it". And he took over the play. Now he dominates the story; he's really the dark hero. Montag is moved - not back, but to one side. They share the stage.

Do you regard Jack Smight's *Illustrated Man* as a pretty well disastrous experience?

Yes. I have the rights back again and I'm going to remake it eventually. So help me, I will. (I also have the rights to *Fahrenheit* again too.) Some of the framing material is OK, but they start all the stories in the middle. They don't make any sense.

I want to ask you about *The Martian Chronicles*, but I guess you've told that story about two hundred times in the past month. Well, I'll make up something new for you. We're gonna lie a lot this morning! The project's been around for some time, hasn't it?

Back when the book was published, in 1950, John Houseman called me over to MGM - he



WITH GOOD WISHES TO  
THE 'STARBURST'  
READERS! FROM  
RAY BRUBURY





This page: *It Came from Outer Space* (1953). Top: Richard Carlson interrupts the extra-terrestrials as they work on their damaged space-craft. Above left: The true form of the aliens, The Xenomorph. Above right: The poster for *It Came from Outer Space*.

was a producer there then – to talk about the **Chronicles**. He was trying to get Vincente Minnelli interested in directing it. I still don't know why that never happened. People sort of wander off into the sunset.

And then, in 1957, I adapted it as a Broadway musical for David Susskind. I worked on it two or three months with Sidney Carroll, who's a fine American short story writer, and Leonard Rosenman, the composer, who did movie scores like *East of Eden* and *Rebel Without a Cause*. About three months into the project, Susskind called me and said "Let's laugh this up a little. Let's make it funny!"

I said "This isn't a comedy. It's closer to *Carousel*, if you want something to compare it with. Serious musical drama". I realised it was hopeless, so I gave him back his money to get out of the deal.

The Kirk Douglas came along. He owned it for a year. He wanted to make a tv series, but nothing ever happened.

About 1960, I worked on it at MGM for

about six months, writing a screenplay. I predicted that as soon as I turned in the script I'd be fired, and I was. It wasn't a great script, but it was OK.

When Alan Pakula and Bob Mulligan did *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which I loved, I wrote them a letter saying "I think your film is terrific. Let's talk!"

**"NBC said, 'It's time to do something of yours and do it right. We promise you.' Blood oaths!"**

They called me back and said "We've been thinking about *The Martian Chronicles*. Let's do it". So I spent more than a year, on and off, on a script for them. But I handed it in some time in 1962, just as the results of the first viking photo survey of Mars were published. Of course, it showed nothing. No canals. No vegetation. And all the people at the studios when they saw our script said "Why bother

with a dead planet?" It enraged me, but there's nothing you can do with that sort of argument.

So Pakula and Mulligan went away, and in the middle sixties Jean-Louis Barrault showed up, and he decided to put it on stage at L'Odeon in Paris. They had the sets built. They sent me sketches. Ten foot tall marionettes playing the Martians; they looked fantastically good. But this was 1968 and the students invaded L'Odeon. That was the end of all their projects, and Barrault moved out. Several years later it was put on stage in Paris in another version. It ran for the better part of a year.

Finally, in the last few years, I had my own production of the **Chronicles** on stage in America, which turned out very well. We did it in Los Angeles three years ago.

So we wind up, very late in time, with *The Martian Chronicles* on television. NBC came to me four years ago, the day the Viking lander came down on Mars, which was a vulnerable day for me. I'd been up all night, waiting for the final pictures to come in at the





This page: *The Illustrated Man* (1968). Above: The poster artwork for the film. Left: A team of artists work on Rod Steiger using watercolours to achieve the tattooed effect. Below: The tattooed Steiger was used as a link between three weak adaptations of Bradbury short stories.

Jet Propulsion Laboratory, and there was the elation of knowing it was down OK, and functioning.

NBC said "It's time to do something of yours and do it right. We promise you". Blood oaths – that sort of thing. So I went ahead with the project.

*Was it very differently conceived originally?*  
Well, I made them promise to use a friend of mine, Richard Matheson, to do the screenplay. He turned in a very good script. What finally happens is, when a director gets his hands on a script, there are changes made that have nothing to do with the original screenwriter.

Some parts have been left alone. Some parts work remarkably well. There's a wonderful sequence in the second section, about a priest on Mars and a vision of the ghost of Christ – a combination of *The Fire Balloons* and another story of mine, *The Messiah*. It works very well. It's very touching.

The whole thing has just enough beautiful scenes to make you ache around the edges that there weren't ten times more.





### What's the state of play on *Something Wicked This Way Comes*?

I finished the screenplay three years ago, with Jack Clayton working with me, and whom I dearly love. I've known him since *Moby Dick*. We got caught in the crossfire between two heads of Paramount studios, David Picker and Barry Diller, and when you're caught between moguls like that, you'd better leave. Whatever this one likes, the other doesn't.

The script was finished, everyone was happy, and Kirk Douglas, who put up some of the money, was delighted. When everything fell apart, Kirk bought up all the rights, Jack came back to England, almost died from various diseases, but luckily recovered and got involved in other films. Now we're waiting for Steven Spielberg to do *Something Wicked*; he's promised to do it next year some time, and I hope he will. He's a good person for it. There's about six people I'd trust with it — Clayton, Spielberg, and David Lean, if he would only make more films, which I wish he would, because I've seen everything of his twenty times over.

I finally met David Lean in Hollywood, when he was working on *Doctor Zhivago*, and I gave him several of my books: *Something Wicked*, *The Martian Chronicles*. He wrote back a charming little note: "Just not my cup of tea" which broke my heart. But if someone's polite, that's all you ask. And if they're not meant for you, then what a shame. But it's a horrible thought knowing I'll go to the end of my life not working for this man. ●



Above: Francois Truffaut demonstrates the liner points of pole-sliding on the set of *Fahrenheit 451*. Below: Rock Hudson as he appears in *The Martian Chronicles*.

## A VIEW FROM THE TV ZONE

by Tise Vahimagi



Get the feeling that someone should have inserted a Texas-type cattle drive led of course by Dennis Weaver into the colonial goings-on in the three-part *Martian Chronicles*.

The show may then have come closer to what its basic format and theme appeared to, unintentionally, resemble. Centennial, *Martian* style. ●

This three-part mini-series based on the intriguing 1951 Ray Bradbury novel had some curious scenes, some poor visual effects and some very odd and naive characters. Covering the period 1999 to 2007, the stories relate the initial NASA exploration flights to the red planet, the fate of the early explorers, the colonisation of the planet, and the Earth peoples' first encounters with Martians.

The imaginative thoughts, feelings and enthusiasm that probably went into this production may be found lurking somewhere in the 279-odd minutes of the show but the overall result, however, arrives something like a lukewarm dinner — eagerly awaited but eventually disappointing. One suspects that Richard Matheson's teleplay started out good-and-healthy but by the time it had travelled the carnivorous desks of executive producers Charles Fries & Dick Berg and producers Andrew Bonally & Milton Subotsky it had not only aged but withered to the point beyond resuscitation. Only voodoo could have revived it to its original Dick Matheson/Ray Bradbury form.

Some memorable Matheson-esque moments remain, to be sure, but there are also some rather silly and illogical scenes during the show. Pouring acid on screen work is always too easy, and something of a cop-out, so why dwell on giving something bad reviews? (Besides, no one ever set out to write/produce/direct a bad movie, or telefilm. — As those of you with a glimmer of intelligence behind your eyes will already know.

In the good review department there are a few scenes that have taken hold, firmly, in the memory. (1) The *Martian* appearing as the canal-dwelling couple's dead son during the horrendous rainstorm, illuminated eerily by

flashes of lightning (do they get lightning on Mars, though?). (2) Chris Connelly wandering aimlessly through the deserted town, kicking empty cans and tossing away now-worthless money. One can just see the Robert Neville character from Matheson's brilliant *I Am Legend* being reborn on the small-screen.

These are some of the creative and atmospheric Matheson moments, remaining in the mind as rare extracts of Matheson genius as well as being some of *Martian Chronicles'* all-too-rare high spots.

Darren McGavin, one of the most durable and accomplished of teleplayers, presents probably the most colourful and at the same time lunatic character in the show, playing a rhinestone cowboy-hamburger emperor. It's a rather sad situation; McGavin gets himself a flashy, western-style bar-and-grill (plus an enormous land grant from some mysterious Martians) and is just panting for the stampede of space travellers from Earth, when good old third-from-the-sun is suddenly seen blasted to dead rock.

*Martian Chronicles* could have been fun, but it wasn't. Given the space of around six hours it should have been marvellous (in its most literary sense), but it wasn't. All the ingredients were there, like some outer space casserole, but what happened? An *el cheapo* combination of budget-worry (it appeared), a fear of flying (flying into imaginative and amazing film-making), and the paranoia of keeping in tune with the Mickey Mouse soap-opera audience, thus not alienating potential viewer-ratings. If that's the way it also appeared to you, then it's like producing *War and Peace* for a six hour format and translating it into a game of hopscotch in a schoolyard. ●