

SILENT RUNNING

Following part one of our interview with Douglas Trumbull last issue, in which he talked about his film *Silent Running*, *Starburst* takes a closer look at the film that marked Trumbull's debut as a director.

THERE are flowers in the forest. And rabbits and frogs and snails and tinkling music and people with no legs. It's a lush, colourful world which connects the ultimate trip of 2001 with the ultimate space-battle of *Star Wars*.

Douglas Trumbull is, perhaps, the world's most famous visual effects supervisor. He gained his reputation by creating the 'Corridors of Light' sequence at the end of 2001. Then he made his first and, so far,

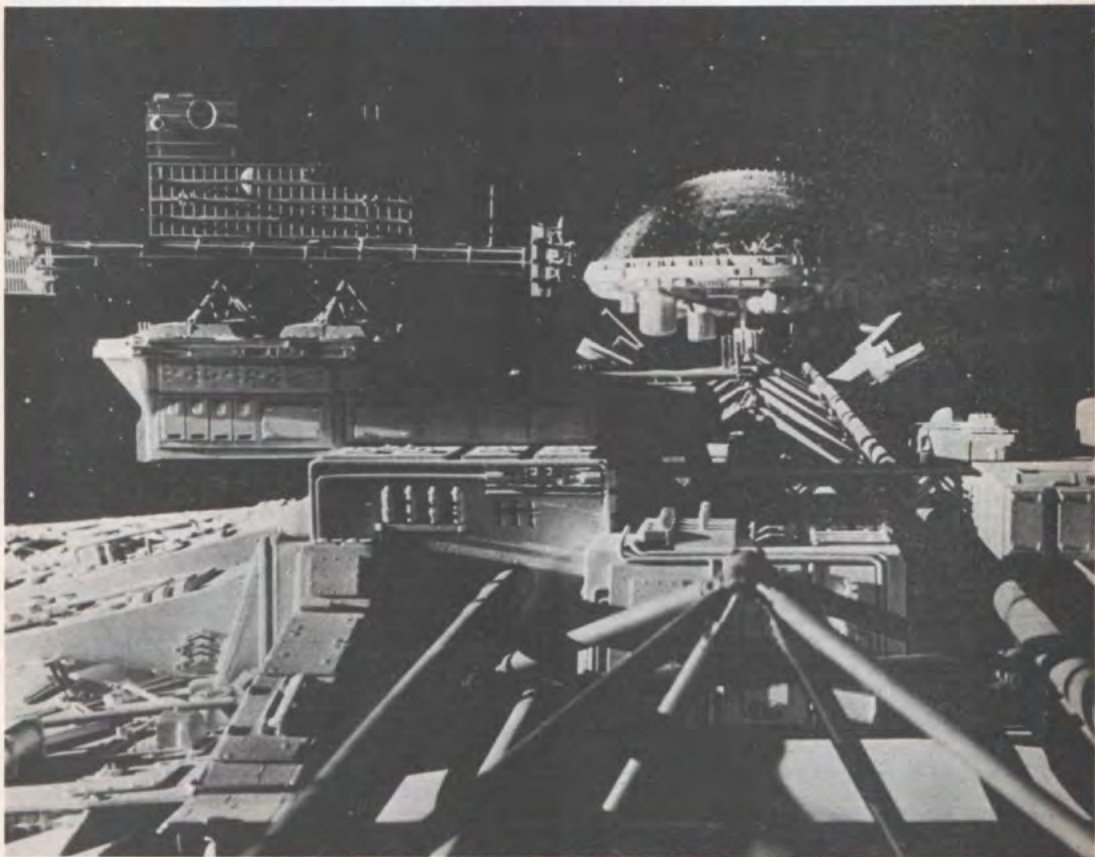
Review by John Fleming

only feature as director of *Silent Running*. Working with him on that film were Jim Rugg, a special effects man for 16 years (3 on *Star Trek*) and visual effects man John Dykstra (who had worked with Trumbull on *The Andromeda Strain*). Dykstra went on to supervise effects on *Star Wars*. Trumbull went on to handle effects for *Close Encounters of the Third*

Kind. But what made Trumbull create the little-screened *Silent Running*?

"I had seen a movie called *Freaks* by Tod Browning. One of them was a guy without any legs. He could stand on one hand and drink from a cup held in the other. And, I thought, you could make a robot that way. You could put a robot body on a guy like that and nobody would be able to figure out how it was done."

The squat, waddling result is a little like



A close-up of the excellent Valley Forge model, showing the highly detailed surface.

R2-D2 in the later *Star Wars*. But you can imagine a dwarf inside R2-D2. You can't imagine anything human inside *Silent Running's* drones.

Research, design and construction for these robot creatures took six months, with two legless Vietnam veterans acting as consultants. Each 20-30 lb. plastic suit had a remote-controlled manipulator arm on the front (with manual over-ride). The arm was designed and made by Trumbull's father Don, so that the robot drones could weed the garden, play cards and perform surgery, as required in the plot. Four young 'bi-lateral amputees' were then employed to walk on their hands inside the suits. "It's a fascinating kind of motion," said Trumbull at the time, "and a purely human one."

To humanise the drones even more, they were given little human traits, like tapping a foot impatiently and nudging each other when the film's 'hero' arrives.

The plot is simple. The year is 2001. The remnants of Earth's forests have been sent into space, enclosed in huge geodesic domes carried by a fleet of American Airlines Space Freighters. Aboard one of the ships, the *USS Valley Forge*, the four crew members have little to do except take part in motorised buggy-races in the vast storage area, play pool with an automatic machine, play cards with each other and have arguments. One of the quartet is a conservationist freak: Freeman Lowell (Bruce Dern). After eight years in space, he feels sure that the Authorities on Earth are bound to re-create the parks and forests system with him as Supervisor.

"It's been too long, Lowell," says one of his crewmates: "People have got other things to do now."

But Lowell is obsessed. He has no family; all he cares about are the forests. On Earth, everywhere you go, the temperature is 75°F, there is hardly any disease and no unemployment. Fine, agrees Lowell. Except that there is no beauty; there are no new frontiers to conquer. If the forests do not return from space, no little girl will ever again be able to see "the simple wonder of a leaf in her hand".

Silent Running has been criticised for being "sci-fi with the soul of an editorial" (*The New Yorker*). The main criticism is that the plot has been tacked on to a simplistic ecological sermon. But Trumbull claims: "The ecology aspect was secondary. What I started with was the relationship between a man and two drones and the growth of that relationship."

His original intention was to have the drones as comic figures. But star Bruce Dern persuaded him to play their scenes relatively 'straight'. This film was Dern's big chance to become a major star. Trumbull had been lucky. He had never before directed a film and never before worked with actors. But it was the *Easy Rider* period when all the major Hollywood studios were prepared to give a chance to



Douglas Trumbull (right) and Bruce Dern (left) deep in discussion on the set of *Silent Running*.

new, untried talent. MGM's 2001 had been a success, so Universal gave 29-year-old Trumbull the opportunity to direct. And, for the central role, he cast Bruce Dern.

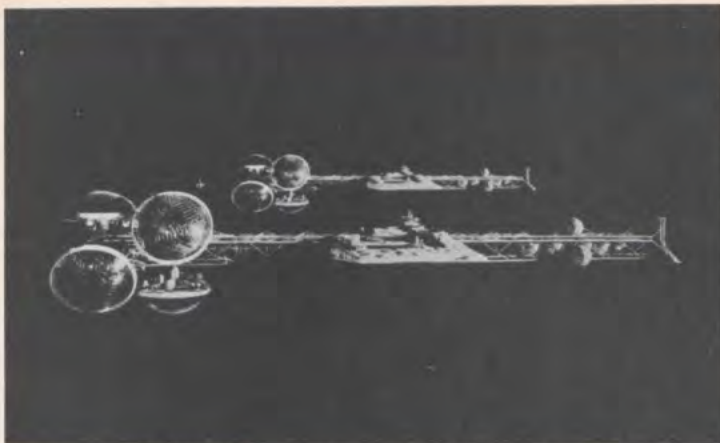
"I've been 14 years an actor," said Dern at the time, "and I've always eaten babies or played some sick goddam guy in everything I've done."

Dern saw the character he played as a sympathetic part. But Freeman Lowell is not exactly a well-balanced person. In fact,

he is pretty psychotic. The astronauts receive a message from Earth. A voice tells them to "abandon and nuclear destruct" all the forests and return to Earth so that the freighters can be returned to commercial use. Lowell, who has been praising 'real' food and flowers since the film began, is not happy. To emphasise the point and make the audience empathise with him, Joan Baez's voice bursts onto the soundtrack singing about "Fields of children running wild . . . in the Sun . . ."



Freeman Lowell (Bruce Dern) flanked by the 'droids' takes one of his "turns" while bathing.



Two of the space ships cruise silently through the black void of space.

The other crew members are not interested in the forests: "If anyone had been interested, something would have been done a long time ago."

Lowell's staring eyes become more paranoid. One of the *Valley Forge's* three forest domes is jettisoned and destroyed. But, when one of the crew members tries to enter another dome, he is confronted by Lowell, who is holding a spade. In the ensuing fight, our conservationist hero is injured in the leg and kills his crewmate with the spade, pressing the handle down into the man's windpipe. Meanwhile, the other two astronauts are setting the nuclear bomb in the third forest dome. Lowell jettisons the dome and detonates the bomb, killing both men. Now he is alone in the vast ship, cruising through space.

The 26 ft. long model used for filming exteriors took 30 people over 8 months to build and was so fragile that it could not be moved without pieces falling off. Surface details were added using parts from 650 or 850 (memories vary) Japanese model kits for Second World War German tanks. The over-all look of the ship was based on an observation and communication tower built for the 1970 Osaka World Fair in Japan (but turned on its side, of course). "Our ship here," said Trumbull, "is like the one in *2001* in some ways. Very long and slender. I did a lot of the supervision of the models in that movie and got involved in some of the basic design." *Silent Running* includes one sequence that had been abandoned in *2001* as too complex. The 'ultimate trip' in *2001* had been intended to be a journey through the rings of Saturn; but this was changed to a trip through the 'stargate' of Jupiter.

In *Silent Running*, Lowell tells the rest of the space fleet that he has technical problems on board the *Valley Forge* and premature explosions have killed the other crew members. The three drones supervise the disposal of debris supposedly from these

explosions. 'Silent Running' is a term in submarine warfare: a desperation manoeuvre in which all engines and machinery are turned off and debris is jettisoned to convince the enemy that the ship has been hit. Lowell then heads his supposedly-crippled ship towards Saturn's rings, knowing the fleet will not follow him because no one has ever survived a trip through the rings. The space fleet promises to send a rescue ship "the long way round" to find him (if he survives). But this will be like looking for a needle in a haystack. The *Valley Forge* enters the gaseous rings.

This sequence took about a week to film, with multi-coloured clouds rushing towards the camera and force-waves buffeting the

entire ship. The clouds were created by a streak photography process similar to the slit-scan process that Trumbull had invented and used in the *2001* Corridors of Light sequence. But the effect is visibly cheaper and much less spectacular. "I felt," said Trumbull, "that the beauty and majesty of *2001* were super-stylised and super-smooth. I wanted a more rough-and-ready, almost documentary, look."

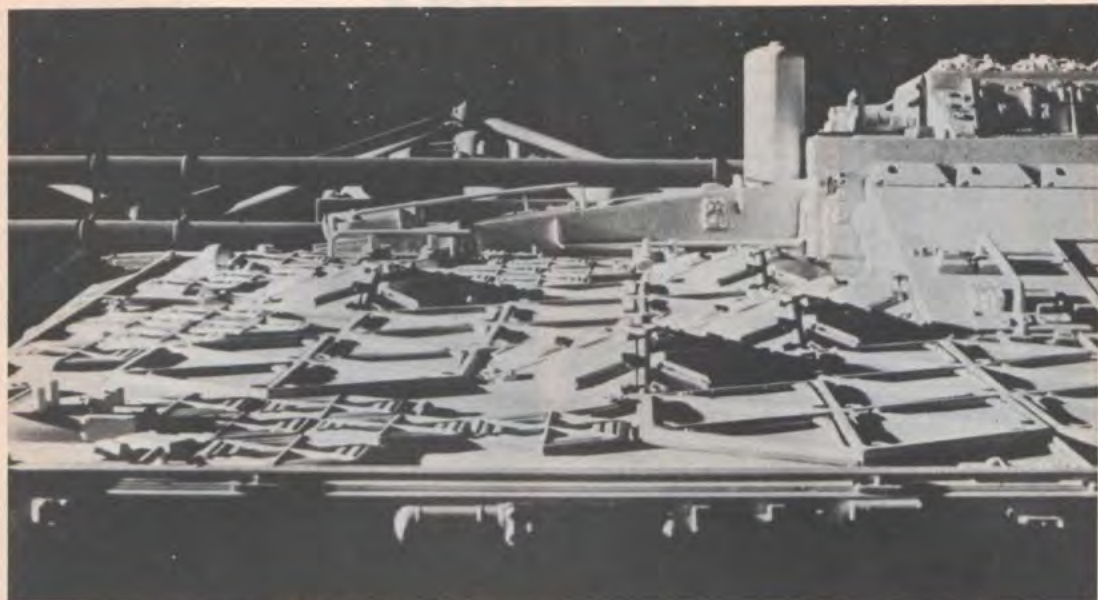
His whole concept of *Silent Running* was to have a documentary feel, even in the interior of the spaceship: "We wanted to go counter to what I had done in *2001*, which was a slick, well-organised spaceship. We wanted to give the raw technical appearance that you get inside a real naval ship." So that is just what he did: he rented a real US Navy ship.

For the interior shots, he used an old aircraft carrier, the real *USS Valley Forge*, decommissioned from the Navy a year earlier and waiting to be stripped for the scrap heap. The main location shooting was done in the ship's Combat Information Centre (CIC), between the hangar and flight decks, where there were about 30 rooms of various sizes. Trumbull ripped out the ceilings to reveal ducts and wires, modernised the door frames and repainted walls in warmer colours. He used vacuum-formed plastic for detailing. The naval ship's former Air Combat Intelligence Headquarters became the spaceship's main control room. And the vast hangar deck was used for the buggy racing sequences in the spaceship's storage area.

Near the start of the film, the three other crew members were seen racing round this vast storage area, laughing and enjoy-



Douglas Trumbull (right) directs Bruce Dern (left) during the buggy scene in *Silent Running*.



The space ship models were constructed using parts from plastic hobby kits that can be bought in any toy shop.

ing themselves. Now, completely alone, Lowell, drives around the same area. But he has no one to race with. And no one to talk to, except the drones. There were three of the little robots. But one was ripped apart as the ship tore through the rings of Saturn. Lowell now names his two mechanical companions Huey and Dewey; and their lost comrade Louie (after Donald Duck's nephews).

He re-programmes them so that they can operate on his injured leg, play cards with him, tend the gardens with him and (apparently) talk silently to each other through their air vents. He himself wanders around in his off-white gown looking like St. Francis of Assisi, watering the flowers and trees, looking at Earth through a telescope and thinking about his dead comrades: "I don't think I'll ever be able to excuse what I did. But I had to do it." On the soundtrack, Joan Baez sings: "Earth between my toes and a flower I will wear when he returns . . ." In other words, nothing much is happening.

And this is the film's weakness. It is well-meaning; it is technically well-made; but nothing much happens. There are three credited scripters one of whom, Mike Cimino, also co-scripted *Magnum Force* and went on to direct *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* and *The Deer Hunter*. But, says Trumbull, "The screen writers didn't get what I wanted. Much of what they produced was too violent, vicious and unfeeling. I ended up re-writing two-thirds of the script myself." Talking about why he made the film, he explained:

"It isn't that I'm interested in science-fiction, rather I'm interested in technology

and the technical ways of making film. In high school, I was interested in architecture and art, and used to read some science-fiction—Heinlein and Bradbury and so on—but never really very much of it." In fact, he admits: "I never had any ambition to be a director. I wanted to be an illustrator." That is the problem with *Silent Running*. It is brilliantly illustrated but the storyline and dramatic structure are fatally weak. Trumbull succeeded in his aim of showing "machines as a tool that must and can remain under the control of human beings, not as a lurking, malevolent force". But that is not a storyline in itself. Live-action shooting on the film took 37 days; creating the special effects took 7 months. And this is a fair reflection of the result on the screen.

The forest scenes were shot at an aircraft hangar in Van Nuys, California. Real soil, shrubs, flowers, trees and animals were used. The geodisic dome seen in the background was created by front projection (a complex process explained simply in John Brosnan's book *Movie Magic*). This technique had been used successfully in *2001* but, for *Silent Running*, Trumbull designed a smaller, more mobile unit. Front projection also helped him make the 35 to 40 ft. diameter forest look, in Trumbull's words, "enormous" (though this is a matter of opinion).

What happens to the forests in the film? One day Lowell and the drones find the plants and trees dying and defoliated, affected by some unknown force. Then, in an accident, Lowell crashes his buggy into Huey and, even after operating on him, the drone does not fully recover. To

make matters worse, the fleet rescue ship finds *Valley Forge*. It has come to 'save' him. Lowell suddenly realises why the forests are dying and realises there is only one way out . . .

Douglas Trumbull succeeded in what he set out to do: "I was looking for a way to make a picture of the magnitude of *2001* on a reasonable budget. I knew that by using what I had earned on *2001* and some new ideas I had that wouldn't require terribly expensive experimentation, I could do *Silent Running* for a given price (\$1,350,000) and in a given amount of time." He succeeded, but people don't pay to see directors succeed in their self-appointed tasks. They pay to be entertained. (Universal were reportedly reluctant to release the film.)

He wanted to make a special effects film and the story was of secondary importance: a fatal mistake. The *Village Voice* was right when it said *Silent Running*, with its superb technical effects and heavy, meaningful message, "falls somewhere between Stanley Kubrick and Stanley Kramer."

Silent Running (1971)

Bruce Dern (as *Freeman Lowell*), Cliff Potts (*Wolf*), Ron Rifkin (*Barker*), Jesse Vint (*Keenan*), Mark Persons, Steven Brown, Cheryl Sparks and Larry Whisenhunt (*Drones*).

Directed by **Doug Trumbull**, Screenplay by **Deric Washburn**, Mike Cimino and **Steven Bocho**, Visual Effects by **Doug Trumbull**, **John Dykstra** and **Richard Yuricich**, Produced by **Michael Gruskoff**.

Time: 89 mins

Cert: U