

THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL

Director of the new *Star Trek* movie, Robert Wise was also responsible for one of the earliest of the "alien from space" movies, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Continuing our Starburst SF Classics series, Phil Edwards looks back at this milestone of science fiction cinema.

The robot, Gort (Lock Martin), Helen Benson (Patricia Neal) and the alien, Klaatu (Michael Rennie), descend the ramp of the flying saucer.



"I am leaving you soon and you will forgive me if I speak bluntly. The Universe grows smaller every day and the threat of aggression by any group, anywhere, can no longer be tolerated. Your choice is simple—join us and live in peace or pursue your present course and face obliteration. We should be waiting for your answer. The decision rests with you."

With these parting words, Robert Wise closed his 1951 production, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. The words still have as potent a meaning in today's troubled world as when Klaatu uttered them so forcefully all those years ago.

In the October 1940 issue of *Astounding* magazine, author Harry Bates published his story *Farewell to the Master*, the basis for *The Day the Earth*

The robot is to be a guardian of Earth's peace.

Stood Still. It told of a benign visitor to Earth, who brings with him a giant robot, Gnut, to steer Earth away from its path of self-destruction. Other beings in other galaxies are concerned with the violent nature of man and decide to send Klaatu as an emissary of peace. Gnut is both the master and a kind of robot policeman, capable of incredible strength and power. He is to be the guardian of the Earth's peace. But both are greeted with violence and treachery.

In the winter of 1949, producer Julian Blaustein became aware of the growing popularity of science fiction magazines and began a search for a suitable story for a screen treatment. He limited himself to *Earth-bound* stories, aware of the costs of producing a film story set in outer space. He was attracted to the Bates story by one particular image—that of a visitor from another planet emerging with his arm raised in a sign of universal peace, only to be shot down by the military. He saw it as a clash and a misunderstanding between cultures and the desire in man to destroy that which he does not understand. At the time, he was developing a similar theme in his production *Broken Arrow*, one of the first films to treat the

Author Harry Bates was never consulted about the film.

American Indian in a sympathetic light, within the confines of an almost formula Western.

Blaustein approached the production chief of Twentieth Century-Fox, Darryl Zanuck, with the story. Zanuck was not impressed so much with Bates' story as he was with the same image that had attracted Blaustein. Impressed by this and Blaustein's previous successes and the current interest in UFOs, he gave the producer the go-ahead to begin negotiations with the publishers, Street and Smith. Blaustein payed a thousand dollars for the screen rights. Apparently,

Harry Bates, who had been *Astounding's* first editor, from January 1930 to March 1933, was never consulted about this transaction and received five hundred dollars as his share. He remained bitter about this for many years.

Film writer Edmund North was contracted to write the screen treatment and commenced work on July 7, 1950. Within a month North had produced a 35 page outline as well as written sketches of the major characters. Blaustein and North became concerned about the HUAC hearings which were then beginning, as well as the Korean War in which the United States had become involved. They both had reservations about the project, feeling that their timing may no longer have been right for a film about Universal peace and understanding. Despite their reservations, they went ahead and presented the treatment to Zanuck. Zanuck believed in the project as a good piece of solid entertainment and saw in it a ready-made vehicle to run in the Science Fiction rally which was sweeping Hollywood.

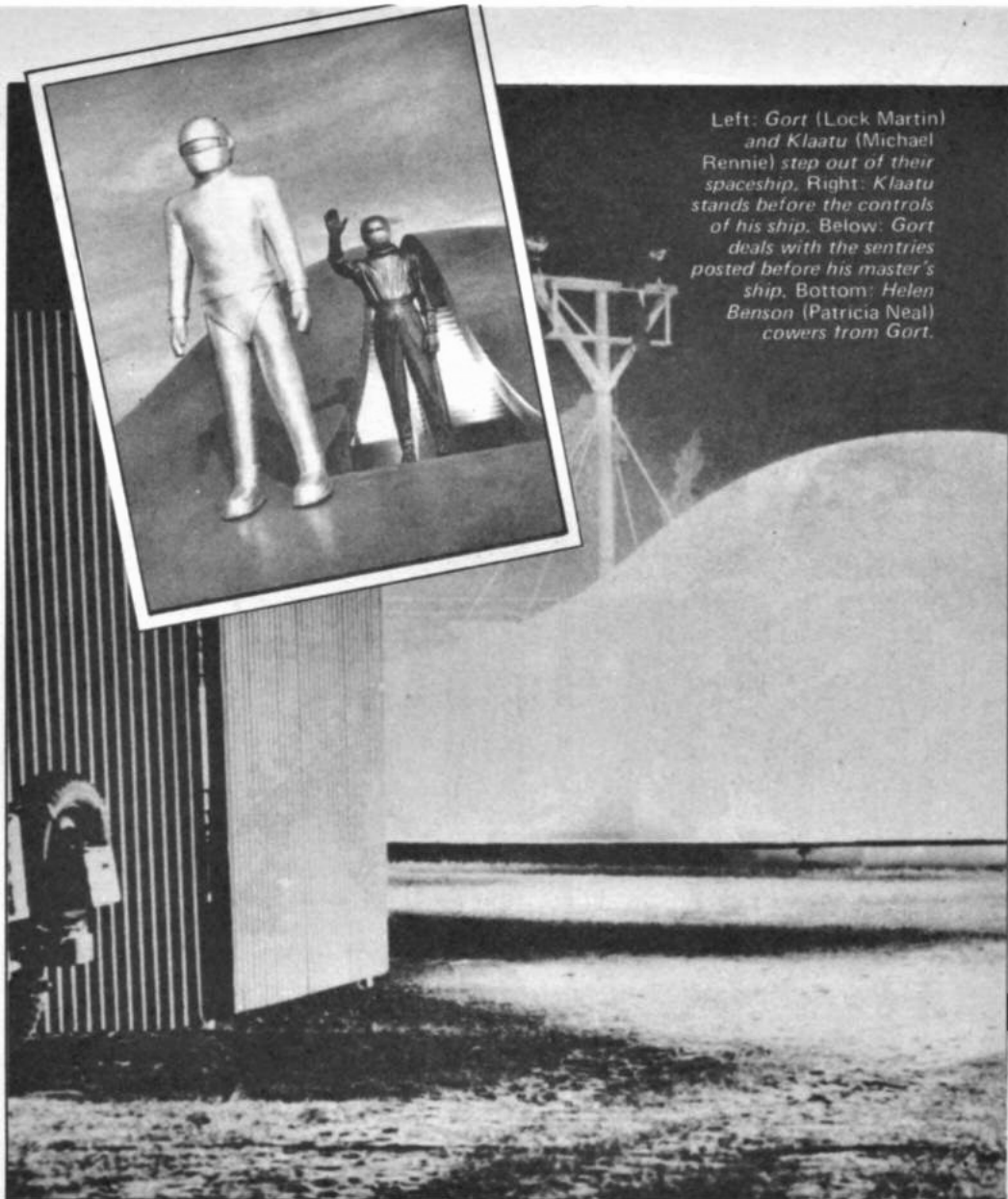
With a script completed, *Day the Earth Stood Still* went into production on April 9, 1951, with a budget of just under a million dollars. At this time, the

Robert Wise was chosen to direct the movie.

film's title was *Journey to the World*, but during production, it was changed to its present title, to emphasise the key scene in the film, where Klaatu demonstrates his powers by stopping time for half an hour, thereby causing the Earth to literally stand still.

Robert Wise was chosen to direct for several reasons. He had recently completed the Fox film *The House on Telegraph Hill*, which he had brought in *under* budget. He had also been one of the key personnel working on the Val Lewton horror unit at RKO in the forties, first as an editor and then as a director. His work on *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is quite remarkable, handling the religious allegory sensitively, although Wise has maintained that he was never aware of these elements in North's screenplay. His handling of the night scenes in Washington, although shot on the set in Hollywood, are particularly effective. They are reminiscent of his work for Lewton and are in the finest traditions of the *film noir* style of the forties. This is most apparent in the scenes where Klaatu is hunted through the rain soaked streets of Washington, culminating in the sequence where he is shot down.

Though most of the film was shot in Hollywood, Wise's second unit director, Bert Leeds, had filmed several location shots and establishing scenes in Washington. Optical effects were later added to these resulting in such scenes as the landing of Klaatu's saucer on the baseball



Left: Gort (Lock Martin) and Klaatu (Michael Rennie) step out of their spaceship. Right: Klaatu stands before the controls of his ship. Below: Gort deals with the sentries posted before his master's ship. Bottom: Helen Benson (Patricia Neal) cowers from Gort.

field.

Casting presented some problems. Spencer Tracy was the first actor considered to portray Klaatu, the feeling being that the part required someone of stature and dignified presence. However, Tracy was still under contract to MGM and was unavailable. The second choice was Claude Rains, but he, too, was unavailable. Fox turned to their own stable of contract actors. Blaustein was impressed by English actor Michael

The original Gort was similar in appearance to The Hulk.

Rennie, who had made his American debut in the Fox film, *The Black Rose*, in 1950. His fine-boned features and refined, yet firm, accent made him an obvious choice for the messenger of peace. In retrospect it seems difficult to envisage Trace in the role, or even Rains, so perfect was Rennie for the part.

Patricia Neal, who had just signed a contract with Fox, was selected to play Helen Benson, the war widow who is the only person to fully understand Klaatu's mission and help him. Her self-centred fiance is played by Hugh Marlowe, who

would later battle Ray Harryhausen's aliens in *Earth Versus the Flying Saucers* in 1956. Noted character actor, Sam Jaffe, was signed as Professor Jacob Barnhardt, who tries to arrange the meeting with the world's leaders and is the instigator of Klaatu's demonstration of power. Neal's son was played by Billy Gray. Further credibility and reality was added to the production by using known radio broadcasters of the time as themselves. These were Drew Pearson and Elmer Davis of the ABC Network, H.V. Kaltenborn of NBC and Gabriel Heatter of Mutual.

The other pivotal role in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was that of Gort who, along with Robby the Robot, Maria from *Metropolis* and C3PO, has gone into movie mythology. In Bates' original story, Gort (or Gnut), was a gigantic robot with basically human physical characteristics, though covered with a green metallic skin. His description in the story is not too far away from that of *The Incredible Hulk*. For the film, however, the concept was re-designed by art directors Lyle Wheeler and Addison Hehr. Two suits were made of foam



rubber, with a head piece made of metal. One suit had lacing joints at the front and one had them at the back, achieving a seamless, fluid-metal look whether the suit was filmed from the front or the back. A search was begun to find an actor of suitable height to portray Gort. Robert Wise remembered that the doorman of Grauman's (now Mann's) Chinese Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard was a giant of a man, Lock Martin, standing seven feet six inches. Martin, who would later play one of the Martian mutants in the William Cameron Menzies production of *Invaders From Mars* (see *Starburst 13*) was persuaded to appear as Gort. Despite Martin's height, he was not a particularly strong man and the hot, claustrophobic confines of the robot suit made it impossible for him to bend down and pick up Rennie and Neal as the script required. He was aided in these sequences by wires manipulated by off-camera technicians. In the scenes where he is seen carrying them towards the saucer, lightweight dummies were substituted for the actors. The disintegrating ray which is fired from the visor in Gort's helmet was added later optically, by Wheeler and

Hehr.

To add scientific credibility to the production, Dr Samuel Herrick, an associate professor of astronomy at the University of California at Los Angeles, was added to the production team. Working with the designers and Wise, he helped design the interior of Klaatu's saucer, making it as other-wordly and alien as possible by *not* incorporating any recognisable terrestrial knobs and dials to the controls.

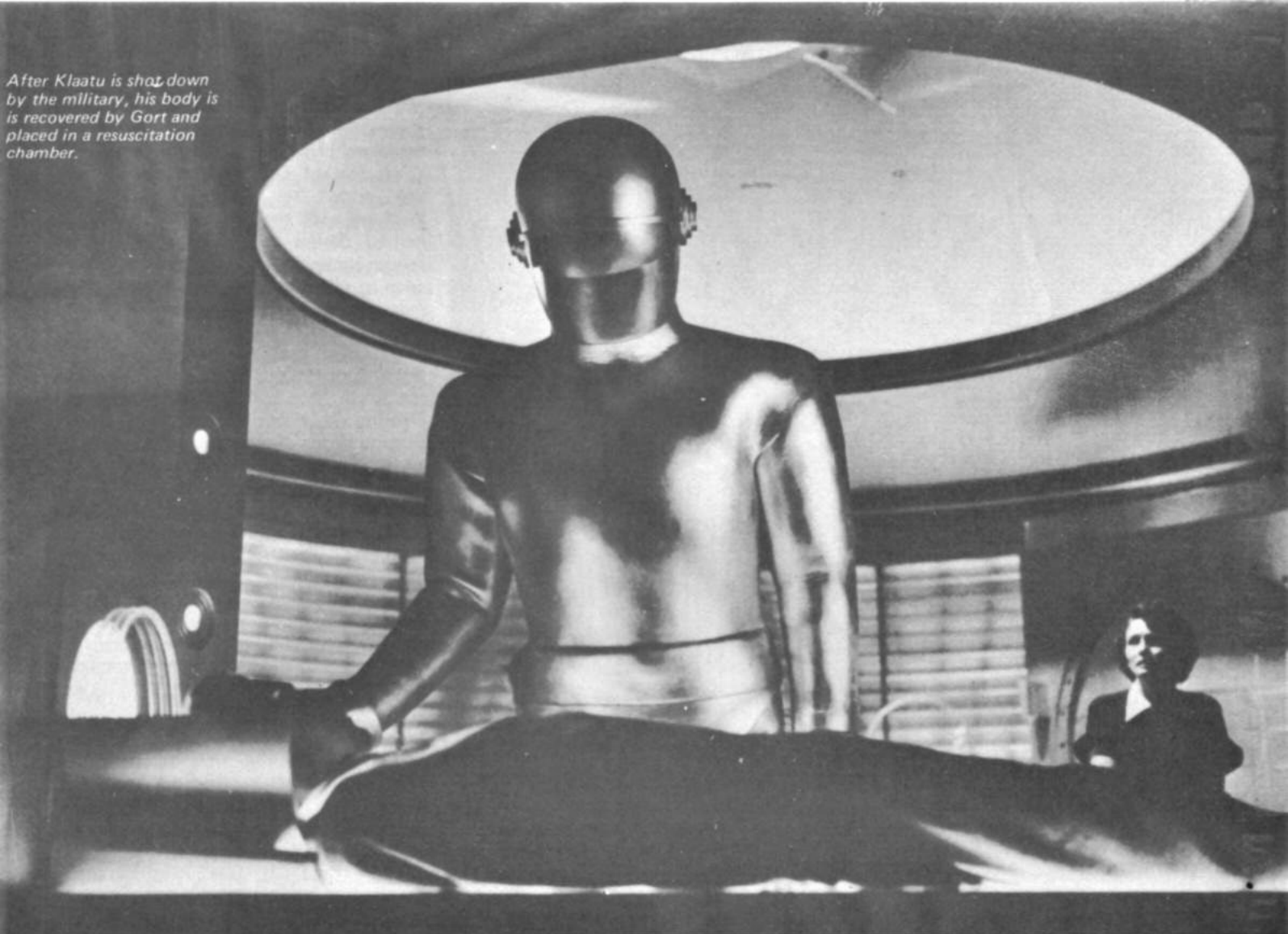
However, the real strength of the film rests with North's screenplay. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is still as potent a warning as when it was first shown. Despite Wise's disclaimer that he was not aware of the religious aspects of the story, it is these very elements which give the film its power. Klaatu is a Christ-like figure descending from the skies with a message of universal peace and warning of obliteration by the forces which mankind was manipulating in the name of science. Further adding to this illusion was the name which Klaatu adopted on Earth—Mr

The film is not a special effects bonanza.

Carpenter. He has the ability to work "miracles"—stopping time to justify the film's title. Gort has the power to raise Klaatu from the dead after he has been shot by the military. This last aspect was heightened unknowingly by the censors of the time. It was routine for a production company to submit a script to the Breen Office for approval, thereby avoiding the possibility that the censors would demand re-shooting and story re-writing, after the film was "in the can". The Breen Office was outraged that Gort had the ability to raise Klaatu from the dead, saying that only God could do that. North rewrote it so that Klaatu lived only a short time after the resurrection then returned to the skies. Another religious element was the betrayal of Klaatu by Hugh Marlowe as a Judas-like figure, doing it for gain in the form of fame. Edmund North later admitted that he deliberately included these devices saying: "they were my little joke".

The film is not a special effects bonanza as was to be the case with so many of the films which followed in its wake. However, what special effects there were, were handled convincingly by Fred Serson's team which included matte artists Ray Kellogg and Emil Rosa, with added contributions by L.B. Abbott. Gort's disintegrating ray and its effect as tanks melted were achieved by means of a series of matte paintings. Three different sized models of Klaatu's ship were constructed: a two foot version for the arrival in Washington (matted into Bert Leeds' location footage), a seven foot model for long shots of the saucer at rest and a three quarter size ship measuring 100 feet long by 25 feet high for the

After Klaatu is shot down by the military, his body is recovered by Gort and placed in a resuscitation chamber.



close ups. This latter set was constructed on the Fox lot. The mechanical parts of the saucer—the door opening, the ramp extending out of it—were operated from behind the mock-up by grips and technicians.

The final touch was added to the film by the contracting of composer, Bernard Herrmann, to write the score. He had composed the score for *Citizen Kane*, for which Wise had been editor.

Herrmann has long been considered one of the most capable composers in the film industry. He wrote several scores for Alfred Hitchcock, perhaps the most admired being those for *Vertigo* and *Psycho*. His music also added strength to several Harryhausen films, including *Jason and the Argonauts* and *Mysterious Island*, among others. Brian De Palma used his fine work in *Blood Sisters* and even ran his rough cut of *Carrie* to Herrmann's music, though his death prevented him carrying out the final scoring to that film. He was probably the most influential composer in Hollywood's second generation, after Korngold and Steiner had blazed the trail for symphonic scoring of films for Warner Brothers in the Thirties. For the Wise film, he used a full orchestra with the addition of electronic violins and basses

as well as using a theremin, an early version of today's synthesizers, which was based on light sensitivity converted to sound waves.

The Day the Earth Stood Still opened in America in September 1951, with a massive advertising campaign which relied heavily on the image of Gort holding Patricia Neal in the classic "monster and the girl" pose, dealing out death and destruction. An added incentive for cinema owners to show the film to best advantage was a contest held by Fox for the best displays and advertising campaigns. The prize totalled a hefty fifteen thousand dollars in US savings bonds. Although these were the days before saturation merchandising, as was the case with *Star Wars* and *Superman*, a few oddments were available to exhibitors to sell at their cinemas. These included die-cut Gort standees, as well as cardboard Gort masks. Fox also made available copies of a fake newspaper called *World News*, with banner headlines "World Threatened With Destruction By Distant Planet". These were distributed in advance of the film's playdates.

The film did well at the box office, though the critics were somewhat less kind to it, particularly in Britain. *The Monthly Film Bulletin* said "The deter-

mination to take the subject seriously reduces the pace and vigour of the film as an adventure story, but it never rises to the level of its own pretensions." *Variety* however, was kinder, saying "... a suspenseful, moralistic entry in the science fiction sweepstakes."

In 1951, audiences could not foresee the number of science fiction films which would follow on the heels of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. It is only in retrospect that we can put this period of activity into perspective and weed out the good from the bad, the genuine masterpieces from the rip-offs. Only a handful of films pass the test of time. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is one of these.

Day the Earth Stood Still (1951)

Michael Rennie (as Klaatu), Patricia Neal (Helen Benson), Hugh Marlowe (Tom Stevens), Sam Jaffe (Prof Barnhardt), Billy Gray (Bobby Benson), Lock Martin (Gort).

Directed by Robert Wise, Screenplay by Edmund H. North from the story *Farewell to the Master* by Harry Bates, Photographed by Leo Tover, Music by Bernard Herrmann, Art direction by Lyle Wheeler and Addison Hehr, Special effects by Fred Sersen, Edited by William Reynolds, Produced by Julian Blaustein.

Time: 92 mins