

# THE PUPPET MASTERS

**Walt Disney tackles science fiction by adapting Robert A. Heinlein's shocker.**

*By Michael Beeler*

Last March, on Paramount's back lot, Robert Heinlein's *THE PUPPET MASTERS*, about the alien invasion of Earth, was filmed as a Hollywood Pictures presentation by Life-line Productions. The film represents Walt Disney's first venture into science fiction since the new regime of Michael Eisner and Jeffrey Katzenberg revamped the studio in 1985. The movie opened nationwide in October.

Donald Sutherland (*THE INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS*) stars as Nivens, the tough-minded director of the Office of Scientific Intelligence, who discovers and then battles the silent invasion. Eric Thal (*A STRANGER AMONG US*) portrays Sam Nivens, a jaded OSCI agent and the disaffected offspring of its director. And Julie Warner (*INDIAN SUMMER*) plays Mary, a brilliant and beautiful NASA scientist working with extraterrestrial intelligence.

The trio is sent to a small Iowa town to investigate a UFO sighting and discover small, slug-like, alien creatures that attach themselves to humans and take complete possession by



Stuart Orme directs Donald Sutherland as Andrew Nivens, head of the Office of Scientific Intelligence, Heinlein's forerunner of James Bond, fighting space aliens.

penetrating the brain and nervous system. The slugs of the title hold their human hosts hostages in their own bodies. Rapidly multiplying and spreading beyond the borders of Iowa, the plague of alien parasites poses a threat to national, as well as international security.

*The Puppet Masters*, written by Heinlein in 1951 during the McCarthy era, contains numerous ideas that have been used by countless science fiction films over the years. The James Bond films, *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS*, and even the Borg of *STAR*

*TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION*, to name just a few, owe much of their storylines to Heinlein.

"Anyone who grew up reading science fiction in the 1940s and '50s, the way I did, has to revere Heinlein," said executive producer Michael Engelberg, also a practicing physician in Los Angeles. "He remains the most important science fiction writer since H.G. Wells. *Puppet Masters*, in my opinion, is unquestionably his best book. It certainly is the one that lends itself most readily to cinematic adaptation. It succeeds on many

levels as a thriller as well as an adventure story."

Noted producer Ralph Winter, "This is an attempt to go back and make the original as opposed to all the different movies that have borrowed heavily from Robert Heinlein. In *The Puppet Masters*, the code number for Sam is 007 and he likes his martini stirred and not shaken. Everyone's borrowed from Heinlein. So the trick is to go back to the original but not make it look simply derivative of the other offshoots. We're trying to be faithful to the book as much as possible but it's a story that's certainly wrapped up in the '50s. We want to take some of those elements we think are still interesting, from the '50s, and give it a '90s, 'this could happen today,' kind of feel."

In developing the film the producers decided that it would not be set in the future. Consequently, there are no flying cars, no space station circling the earth, nor any other kind of human-conducted interplanetary travel. The Venusian nine-day fever, which was used to kill off the aliens without killing their human hosts, has been replaced with a more familiar type of earthly disease such as malaria.



Julie Warner as NASA scientist Mary Seton, discovering a plague of alien parasites in an Iowa town, a rapidly spreading threat to national security.

There will be no nudity in the OSCI offices, in order to detect the slugs, as there was in the book. Although, in the book it took a long time before you knew that Nivens and Sam were father and son, in the movie you will know immediately. And the dramatic fight scene in the flying car between father and son now takes place in a helicopter.

The book is set in 2007, more or less, 50 years after it was written," said Engelberg. "To do that in the movie would mean that we would have to create an entire society complete with physical appearance of clothing styles, which is really a distraction from what the story is about. It's fine to do in a book. You know, Heinlein doesn't describe what people are wearing, ever. We have to actually design that for a movie. Flying cars are expensive. And, I don't really think that a flying car adds as much to a picture as its cost would penalize us. It's not a significantly different story just because it takes place in present day."

Also gone are the little elf-like creatures, the Androgynes, who were the slug's hosts, arriving along with the ship they built that brought them all to Earth. They've been replaced with an almost womb-like crea-

ture that literally imbeds itself into a parking structure, where it starts breeding new slugs for the ensuing earth invasion. It's just a biological thing that has come to earth," said art director James Hegedus.

Engelberg, who has been involved with the development of the project for seven or eight years, first read *The Puppet Masters*, as a kid, when it originally appeared in 1951 as a three-part serial in the September, October and November issues of *Galaxy* magazine. He has been a fan of Heinlein's ever since, and noted how he tried very diligently to incorporate the essence of the original book into the film.

"Any screenplay plays different than the book," said Engelberg. "But, I have continued to reread the book as we've generated different generations of the script with different writers because I always keep finding new things in it that we haven't captured."

One of the questions on everybody's mind was whether or not Disney could actually produce a serious science fiction film. "I know that [Engelberg] has been a champion with Michael Eisner for years and years to try to do this," said Winter, who was asked by Disney to get involved with the

**"If you grew up reading science fiction as I did you revere Heinlein," said producer Michael Engelberg, M.D. "He's the most important figure since Wells."**

production because of his experience with effects and big budgets on the STAR TREK movies. "[Engelberg] was friends with Michael Eisner even back at the Paramount days [before Eisner moved to Disney]. I think Eisner definitely wants to get into this science fiction realm and so it was a natural, I think probably, to turn to his friend, Michael Engelberg, and say, 'what have you got, let's see what we can do together,' because they've been friends for years. [Disney] is taking a chance. But, they've had a few good movies, especially the animated ones. So, maybe they can get into it, maybe they can get a feel for it."

In order to help get that feel Stuart Orme, a British filmmaker who had directed, among other things, *THE FEAR*, a five-part serial drama for British television, was asked to direct. "I've always been interested in science fiction and the opportunity to do films like this in England is pretty remote," said Orme. "I came here to look for a project."

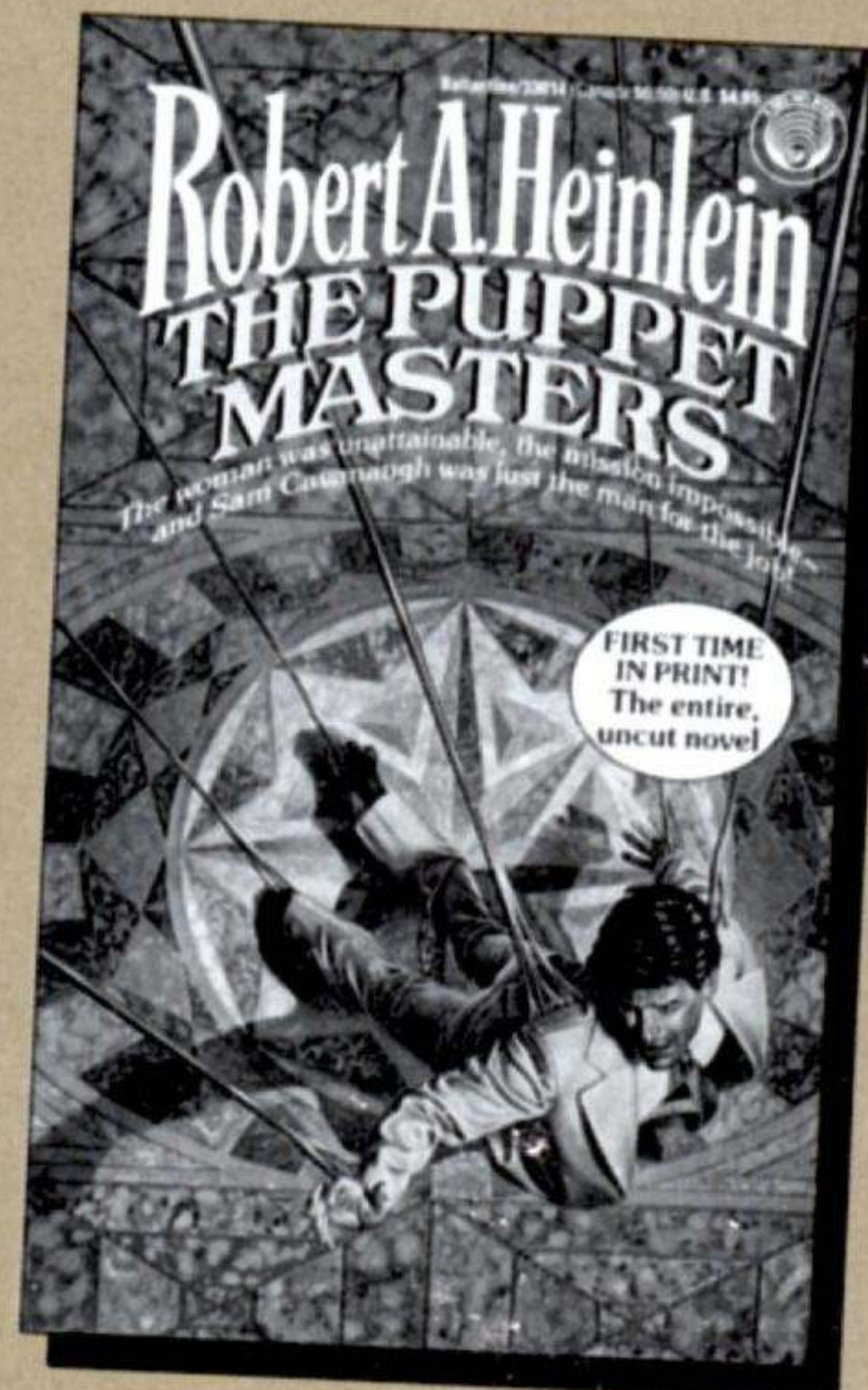
Orme's most recognizable work as a director would probably be the numerous music videos that he both produced and directed during the '80s. He did all of the Genesis and Phil Collins videos up until around 1986. He also produced and directed Whitney Houston's first video along with others for Meatloaf, Level 42, James Taylor and Dave Stewart of the Eurythmics.

With a budget estimated to be little more than \$15 million, Orme was challenged to mount a science fiction story with limited resources. "It was the psychological aspects of the film that were what interested me," said Orme. "We didn't want to fall into the trap of it looking like *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS*."

Orme admitted he was interested in giving the film a much more serious atmosphere than is usually found in Disney products. "I'm more interested in the darker aspect of these things," said Orme. "I suspect that Disney would probably favor a lighter touch. "If you look at something like *ARACHNOPHOBIA*, I think [Disney] would describe it as a sort of comedy-thriller with a bit of horror thrown in. When I read the first [*PUPPET MASTERS*] script, it seemed to be more in the flavor of that and to something of a lesser extent something like *ROCKETEER* than it was towards *ALIEN* or *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS*. Presumably that was one of the reasons I got hired because that's the way we've taken it. Made it a little darker. There are some uncomfortable moments when you see this thing boring into somebody's neck."

The original draft of the script was written by the writing

The latest edition of Heinlein's book, first published in 1951, often imitated but never duplicated.



# ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

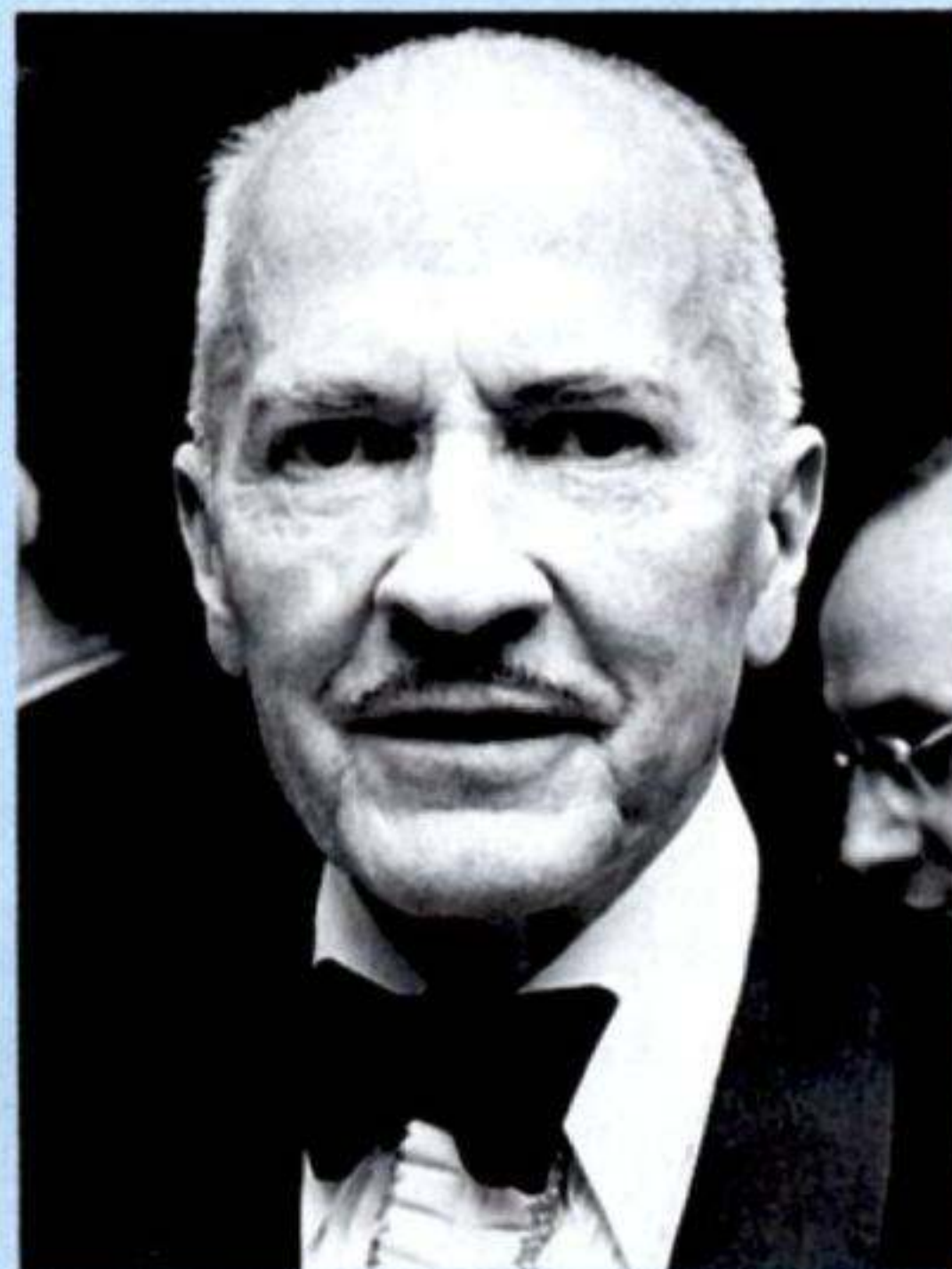
*A towering figure in science fiction,  
often treated badly by Hollywood.*

By Robert T. Garcia

"What makes Mr. Heinlein a part of the American literary tradition is that his characters do prevail. His work reflects the fundamental American optimism that still surprises our friends around the world. As Mr. Heinlein taught us, the individual can and will succeed...[his] most important message to us is that...What we become will be determined not by the tools we hold in our hands, but by the ideals we hold in our minds."

—Tom Clancy

Retired from the Navy because of a bout with tuberculosis, Robert A. Heinlein tried writing and sold his first story "Life-Line" in 1939. It wasn't your normal '30s science fiction tale. The hero-scientist was out to make a buck, and the villains were committees and insurance companies, while the press and the courts were added to the mix, making it a story Ben Hecht would love. Thousands of readers did love it, and Heinlein embarked on a career that would make him the most influential American science fiction author of our time. He brought a very popular and populist vision of the future to the field. His stories gave us individuals who beat the odds, political, social, or natural. And, he did it without ever compromising the scientific underpinnings of his stories, and without dwelling on the intricacies of the science: science fic-



Heinlein, who died in 1988, devised concepts frequently ripped-off, but rarely ever adapted by the movies.

tion for adults.

No one else accomplished what Heinlein did over the years. He wrote political allegories in *The Sixth Column*, *Farnham's Freehold* and *The Puppet Masters*. He gave us astoundingly good science fiction novels for children in *Podkayne of Mars*, *Red Planet* and *The Rolling Stones*, as well as for adults in *The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress*, *Starship Troopers*, and *Door Into Summer*. When his *Stranger In A Strange Land* was published, it set him up as a cultural god, and gave science fiction one of its first best-sellers.

Heinlein always pushed the edge of what adult science fiction could discuss. His work was rife with politics, religion, and eventually sexuality. While his views were not al-

ways politically correct, his often controversial fiction won him four Hugos for Best Novel, as well as the Grand Master Nebula Award for Life Achievement and finally, worldwide acclaim.

Heinlein tried to bring his particular vision to the screen a few times. In 1949, he went to Hollywood to work as technical advisor on George Pal's innocuous *DESTINATION MOON*, which was very loosely based on his *Rocketship Galileo*. Of this stay in Hollywood he concluded: "—it had cost me eighteen months work, my peace of mind, and almost all of my remaining hair. Nevertheless, when I saw the 'rough cut' of the picture, it seemed to have been worth it." The movie created a quick spat of knock-offs, which included *ROCKETSHIP X-M*.

In 1950, Heinlein had "Roads Must Roll" optioned for television, and was involved in a deal with Kellogg with *Tom Corbet*, *Space Cadet*. In that latter deal, Heinlein declined screen credit.

In 1963, Heinlein received a call from Howie Horwitz (*BATMAN*) at Screen Gems, who wanted him to do a pilot script for a television series. Heinlein created *CENTURY XXII*, but after a shakeup at the studio resulting in the firing of studio exec Will Dozier, Horwitz's boss, the show was shelved, leaving Heinlein to write: "if the series is never

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team of Terry Rossio and Ted Elliot, who then went on to write Disney's highly successful *ALADDIN*. The intent was always to try and build a good thriller and adventure that was driven by a solid story.

"They've tried a number of different tacks on it," said Orme. "I don't think they ever envisioned the film as set in the future but they certainly played around with having it set in a confined place, with the whole thing taking place on an air base. There have been a number of incarnations. It's a film about something which you've got to be able to make the audience jump. It's got to make you feel sort of uncomfortable. Balancing that with a lighter tone is tricky. One of the reasons that there were a number of incarnations was that they were trying to get that balance right."

Trying to get that balance right eventually led to bringing in David Goyer, a relatively new writer with a background in the action film arena but a real interest in mystery, science fiction and horror. "Terry and Ted's script, from what I could see, went for a slightly lighter, light-hearted touch to it," explained Orme. "And, David was slightly darker. And, when I got on to the project, the word was let's make it as real and contemporary as we possibly can."

A number of other changes to the script took place as the result of the art department working with storyboards, the writers and the effects crews. The art director, James Hegedus, (*RAINMAN*) felt that even though the script was very specific and visual, that there were a lot of things that the story suggested that weren't written down. With the help of Joe Griffith, story boards were used to brainstorm ideas to help bring about more exciting scenes.

"Scenes that began to be developed early on were how the creature might behave," explained Hegedus. "By storyboarding those in advance it suggested ideas of what the creature might do. Also, the creature suggested things after it was built that weren't visualized earlier.

The New York backlot of

**“Puppet Masters is Heinlein’s best book,” noted Engelberg, “lending itself most readily to cinematic adaptation, a thriller as well as an adventure story.”**

Paramount, built for the short-lived but critically acclaimed BROOKLYN BRIDGE television series, served as Ambrose, Iowa. In order to get the feel of the rural farmlands, the production went on location to Fresno, California for two weeks. According to Winter, this was done largely to lessen the cost of moving the entire production to Iowa and to take advantage of the small-town architecture and a very unique governmental building.

“They have a great city hall!” said Winter. “It looks like a spaceship, it’s wonderful!” Orme mirrored Winter’s enthusiasm for Fresno’s city hall. “It was a real find, because it looked as if it had been designed by aliens,” said Orme. “It really does look almost like a space ship. The man who runs or manages it was a Robert Heinlein fan. So, we were able to persuade him that we should take over the whole place and use the roof, the inside and the underneath.”

Orme was excited about working with an American film icon like Donald Sutherland, even though initially he had some apprehensions. “Most of the films I’ve made have been out of England, where casting is not as high a profile as here.” said Orme. “Working with somebody who’s done 40 or 50 movies, and obviously [Suther-

land] brings that experience, it’s slightly nerve-wracking. You spend the first day or so, even if you’ve met beforehand and talked through the scenes, which we had, sort of testing.

“My apprehension was that sometimes he’s been fantastic and sometimes he’s been not quite so good.”

But, Orme found Sutherland to be very charming, an actor who knew and respected his craft. “He was incredibly professional,” said Orme, “no sense at all that this was one of a number of films. He was completely focused on what he was doing. He made the other actors more professional. He kept the crew on their toes. And, for me, he was more than I ever thought he would be. He’s very dignified on screen. He’s got great presence. He looks better than he ever did, I think. It was a joy. And, I think that he enjoyed it, which is the other thing I wouldn’t have thought he might have done. You know, he might have treated it like, ‘Here’s a genre film, I’ve done it before, I’ll just coast through it.’ But, not at all. I think, he had a really good time.”

Still undecided was whether Disney would use Heinlein’s original title on the film or change it to avoid confusion with Full Moon’s PUPPET MASTER series of direct-to-video horrors. “Some of us feel



Warner and Eric Thal as Nivens’ son find a boy encased by the alien horror.

more strongly about it than others and for different reasons. There is the obvious connection with the original material, which leads you toward saying it should be called the same as [Robert Heinlein’s] book. Then, there’s the fact that it isn’t, like most films, the book transferred to the screen. There have been a number of changes. So, there’s the disadvantage that people will say, ‘You’re calling it Robert Heinlein’s THE PUPPET MASTERS and it’s not.’ But the reason for wanting to say his name with it, is to differentiate it from some of these other things.”

Unfortunately no one’s yet been able to think of a better title for the film. “I think one of the difficulties is that we haven’t come up with a really good alternative,” said Orme. “I think if there was a cracking title sort of sitting here waiting for us to battle with then we would have probably gotten further down the line.”

Orme noted there have been

a few other titles tossed about but none that would really give you goose pimples on a warm day. “There were the obvious things like DOMINION and some were quite interested in calling it WONG—at least I was. Also, THE STRANGERS. A lot of these titles sound like other titles. For better or worse, we’re [stuck] with THE PUPPET MASTERS.”

Ultimately the discussion comes around to the issue of whether or not people are that familiar with Heinlein and his catalog of books. Orme was more than willing to admit that he wasn’t really aware of Heinlein until recently. “I have to confess I was never a great reader of [science fiction], said Orme. “I think I was more interested in the films that have arisen in that era.” The Disney marketing executives felt that there were enough Heinlein fans out there that they should attach his name to the title treatment.

Stripped of much of its science fiction props, it is difficult to say how the fans of Heinlein will react to the contemporary feel of the movie. And although it can be said that the true essence of the book was always that the horror of slavery can only be defeated by those who possess, as Heinlein wrote, “the willingness to do sudden battle, anywhere, anytime, and with utter recklessness,” you just can’t help thinking, “No nudity in the OSCI offices? Come on! Heinlein’s got to be turning in his grave!” □

Nicholas Cascone as Greenberg (r), spreading the slug-like parasite, lodged on his back. Below: Making an autopsy of the alien invader.

